CLASSICS TO GO

THE SHADOW OF THE ROPE

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She had recoiled into the narrow hall, driven by an uncontrollable revulsion.

"I will!" she answered through her teeth—and she swept past him out of the room.

"I'll tell you who I thought it was at first," said he, heartily.

CHAPTER I

THE END OF THEIR LIFE

"It is finished," said the woman, speaking very quietly to herself. "Not another day, nor a night, if I can be ready before morning!"

She stood alone in her own room, with none to mark the white-hot pallor of the oval face, the scornful curve of quivering nostrils, the dry lustre of flashing eyes. But while she stood a heavy step went blustering down two flights of stairs, and double doors slammed upon the ground floor.

It was a little London house, with five floors from basement to attic, and a couple of rooms upon each, like most little houses in London; but this one had latterly been the scene of an equally undistinguished drama of real life, upon which the curtain was even now descending. Although a third was whispered by the world, the persons of this drama were really only two.

Rachel Minchin, before the disastrous step which gave her that surname, was a young Australian lady whose apparent attractions were only equalled by her absolute poverty; that is to say, she had been born at Heidelberg, near Melbourne, of English parents more gentle than practical, who soon left her to fight the world and the devil with no other armory than a good face, a fine nature, and the pride of any heiress. It is true that Rachel also had a voice; but there was never enough of it to augur an income. At twenty, therefore, she was already a governess in the wilds, where women are as scarce as water, but where the man for Rachel did not

breathe. A few years later she earned a berth to England as companion to a lady; and her fate awaited her on board.

Mr. Minchin had reached his prime in the underworld, of which he also was a native, without touching affluence, until his fortieth year. Nevertheless, he was a travelled man, and no mere nomad of the bush. As a mining expert he had seen much life in South Africa as well as in Western Australia, but at last he was to see more in Europe as a gentleman of means. A wife had no place in his European scheme; a husband was the last thing Rachel wanted; but a long sea voyage, an uncongenial employ, and the persistent chivalry of a handsome, entertaining, self-confident man of the world, formed a combination as fatal to her inexperience as that of so much poverty, pride, and beauty proved to Alexander Minchin. They were married without ceremony on the very day that they arrived in England, where they had not an actual friend between them, nor a relative to whom either was personally known. In the beginning this mattered nothing; they had to see Europe and enjoy themselves; that they could do unaided; and the bride did it only the more thoroughly, in a sort of desperation, as she realized that the benefits of her marriage were to be wholly material after all.

In the larger life of cities, Alexander Minchin was no longer the idle and good-humored cavalier to whom Rachel had learned to look for unfailing consideration at sea. The illustrative incidents may be omitted; but here he gambled, there he drank; and in his cups every virtue dissolved. Rachel's pride did not mend matters; she was a thought too ready with her resentment; of this, however, she was herself aware, and would forgive the more freely because there was often some obvious fault on her side before all was said. Quarrels of infinite bitterness were thus patched up, and the end indefinitely delayed.

In the meantime, tired of travelling, and impoverished by the husband's follies, the hapless couple returned to London, where a pure fluke with some mining shares introduced Minchin to finer gambling than he had found abroad. The man was bitten. There was a fortune waiting for special knowledge and a little ready cash; and Alexander Minchin settled down to make it, taking for the nonce a furnished house in a modest neighborhood. And here it was that the quarrelling continued to its culmination in the scene just ended.

"Not another day," said Rachel, "nor a night—if I can be ready before morning!"

Being still a woman with some strength of purpose, Mrs. Minchin did not stop at idle words. The interval between the slamming of doors below and another noise at the top of the house was not one of many minutes. The other noise was made by Rachel and her empty trunk upon the loftiest and the narrowest flight of stairs; one of the maids opened their door an inch.

"I am sorry if I disturbed you," their mistress said. "These stairs are so very narrow. No, thank you, I can manage quite well." And they heard her about until they slept.

It was no light task to which Rachel had set her hand; she was going back to Australia by the first boat, and her packing must be done that night. Her resolve only hardened as her spirit cooled. The sooner her departure, the less his opposition; let her delay, and the callousness of the passing brute might give place to the tyranny of the normal man. But she was going, whether or no; not another day—though she would doubtless see its dawn. It was the month of September. And she was not going to fly empty-handed, nor fly at all; she was going deliberately away, with a trunk containing all that she should want upon the voyage. The

selection was not too easily made. In his better moods the creature had been lavish enough; and more than once did Rachel snatch from drawer or wardrobe that which remained some moments in her hand, while the incidents of purchase and the first joys of possession, to one who had possessed so little in her life, came back to her with a certain poignancy.

But her resolve remained unshaken. It might hurt her to take his personal gifts, but that was all she had ever had from him; he had never granted her a set allowance; for every penny she must needs ask and look grateful. It would be no fault of hers if she had to strip her fingers for passage-money. Yet the exigency troubled her; it touched her honor, to say nothing of her pride; and, after an unforeseen fit of irresolution, Rachel suddenly determined to tell her husband of her difficulty, making direct appeal to the capricious generosity which had been recalled to her mind as an undeniably redeeming point. It was true that he had given her hearty leave to go to the uttermost ends of the earth, and highly probable that he would bid her work her own way. She felt an impulse to put it to him, however, and at once.

She looked at her watch—it at least had been her mother's—and the final day was already an hour old. But Alexander Minchin was a late sitter, as his young wife knew to her cost, and to-night he had told her where he meant to sleep, but she had not heard him come up. The room would have been the back drawing-room in the majority of such houses, and Rachel peeped in on her way down. It was empty; moreover, the bed was not made, nor the curtains drawn. Rachel repaired the first omission, then hesitated, finally creeping upstairs again for clean sheets. And as she made his bed, not out of any lingering love for him, but from a sense of duty and some consideration for his comfort, there was yet

something touching in her instinctive care, that breathed the wife she could have been.

He did not hear her, though the stairs creaked the smallness of the hour—or if he heard he made no sign. This discouraged Rachel as she stole down the lower flight; she would have preferred the angriest sign. But there were few internal sounds which penetrated to the little study at the back of the dining-room, for the permanent tenant was the widow of an eminent professor lately deceased, and that student had protected his quiet with double doors. The outer one, in dark red baize, made an alarming noise as Rachel pulled it open; but, though she waited, no sound came from within; nor was Minchin disturbed by the final entry of his wife, whose first glance convinced her of the cause. In the professor's armchair sat his unworthy successor, chin on waistcoat, a newspaper across his knees, an empty decanter at one elbow. Something remained in the glass beside the bottle; he had tumbled off before the end. There were even signs of deliberate preparations for slumber, for the shade was tilted over the electric light by which he had been reading, as a hat is tilted over the eyes.

Rachel had a touch of pity at seeing him in a chair for the night; but the testimony of the decanter forbade remorse. She had filled it herself in the evening against her husband's return from an absence of mysterious length. Now she understood that mystery, and her face darkened as she recalled the inconceivable insult which his explanation had embraced. No, indeed; not another minute that she could help! And he would sleep there till all hours of the morning; he had done it before; the longer the better, this time.

She had recoiled into the narrow hall, driven by an uncontrollable revulsion; and there she stood, pale and quivering with a disgust that only deepened as she looked her last upon the shaded face and the inanimate frame in

the chair. Rachel could not account for the intensity of her feeling; it bordered upon nausea, and for a time prevented her from retracing the single step which at length enabled her to shut both doors as quietly as she had opened them, after switching off the light from force of habit. There was another light still glowing in the hall, and, again from habit, Rachel put it out also before setting foot upon the stairs. A moment later she was standing terror-stricken in the dark.

It was no sound from the study, but the tiniest of metallic rattles from the flap of the letter-box in the front door. The wind might have done it, for the flap had lost its spring; and, though the noise was not repeated, to the wind Rachel put it down, as she mounted the stairs at last in a flutter that caused her both shame and apprehension. Her nerve was going, and she needed it so! It should not go; it should not; and as if to steady it, she opened the landing window, and spent some minutes gazing out into the cool and starry night. Not that she could see very far. The backs of houses hid half the stars in front and on either hand, making, with the back of this house and its fellows, a kind of square turned inside out. Miserable little gardens glimmered through an irregular network of grimy walls, with here and there a fair tree in autumnal tatters; but Rachel looked neither at these nor at the stars that lit them dimly. In a single window of those right opposite a single lamp had burnt all night. It was the only earthly light that Rachel could see, the only one of earth or heaven upon which she looked; and she discovered it with thanksgiving, and tore her eyes away from it with a prayer.

In time the trunk was packed, and incontinently carried downstairs, by an effort which left Rachel racked in every muscle and swaying giddily. But she could not have made much noise, for still there was no sign from the study. She

scarcely paused to breathe. A latchkey closed the door behind her very softly; she was in the crisp, clean air at last.

But it was no hour for finding cabs; it was the hour of the scavenger and no other being; and Rachel walked into broad sunlight before she spied a solitary hansom. It was then she did the strangest thing; instead of driving straight back for her trunk, when near the house she gave the cabman other directions, subsequently stopping him at one with a card in the window.

A woman answered the bell with surprising celerity, and a face first startled and then incensed at the sight of Mrs. Minchin.

"So you never came!" cried the woman, bitterly.

"I was prevented," Rachel replied coldly. "Well?"

And the monosyllable was a whisper.

"He is still alive," said the woman at the door.

"Is that all?" asked Rachel, a catch in her voice.

"It is all I'll say till the doctor has been."

"But he has got through the night," sighed Rachel, thankfully. "I could see the light in his room from hour to hour, even though I could not come. Did you sit up with him all night long?"

"Every minute of the night," said the other, with undisguised severity in her fixed red eyes. "I never left him, and I never closed a lid."

"I am so sorry!" cried Rachel, too sorry even for renewed indignation at the cause. "But I couldn't help it," she continued, "I really could not. We—I am going abroad—very suddenly. Poor Mr. Severino! I do wish there was anything I

could do! But you must get a professional nurse. And when he does recover—for something assures me that he will—you can tell him—"

Rachel hesitated, the red eyes reading hers.

"Tell him I hope he will recover altogether," she said at length; "mind, altogether! I have gone away for good, tell Mr. Severino; but, as I wasn't able to do so after all, I would rather you didn't mention that I ever thought of nursing him, or that I called last thing to ask how he was."

And that was her farewell message to the very young man with whom a hole-and-corner scandal had coupled Rachel Minchin's name; it was to be a final utterance in yet another respect, and one of no slight or private significance, as the sequel will show. Within a minute or two of its delivery, Rachel was on her own doorstep for the last time, deftly and gently turning the latchkey, while the birds sang to frenzy in a neighboring garden, and the early sun glanced fierily from the brass knocker and letter-box. Another moment and the door had been flung wide open by a police officer, who seemed to fill the narrow hall, with a comrade behind him and both servants on the stairs. And with little further warning Mrs. Minchin was shown her husband, seated much as she had left him in the professor's chair, but with his feet raised stiffly upon another, and the hand of death over every inch of him in the broad north light that filled the room.

The young widow stood gazing upon her dead, and four pairs of eyes gazed yet more closely at her. But there was little to gather from the strained profile with the white cheek and the unyielding lips. Not a cry had left them; she had but crossed the threshold, and stopped that instant in the middle of the worn carpet, the sharpest of silhouettes against a background of grim tomes. There was no swaying

of the lissome figure, no snatching for support, no question spoken or unspoken. In moments of acute surprise the most surprising feature is often the way in which we ourselves receive the shock; a sudden and complete detachment, not the least common of immediate results, makes us sometimes even conscious of our failure to feel as we would or should; and it was so with Rachel Minchin in the first moments of her tragic freedom. So God had sundered whom God had joined together! And this was the man whom she had married for love; and she could look upon his clay unmoved! Her mind leapt to a minor consideration, that still made her shudder, as eight eyes noted from the door; he must have been dead when she came down and found him seated in shadow; she had misjudged the dead, if not the living. The pose of the head was unaltered, the chin upon the chest, the mouth closed in death as naturally as in sleep. No wonder his wife had been deceived. And yet there was something unfamiliar, something negligent and noble, and all unlike the living man; so that Rachel could already marvel that she had not at once detected this dignity and this distinction, only too foreign to her husband as she had learnt to know him best, but unattainable in the noblest save by death. And her eyes had risen to the slice of sky in the upper half of the window, and at last the tears were rising in her eyes, when they filled instead with sudden horror and enlightenment.

There was a jagged hole in the pane above the hasp; an upset of ink on the desk beneath the window; and the ink was drying with the dead man's blood, in which she now perceived him to be soaked, while the newspaper on the floor beside him was crisp as toast from that which it had hidden when she saw him last.

"Murdered!" whispered Rachel, breaking her long silence with a gasp. "The work of thieves!"

The policemen exchanged a rapid glance.

"Looks like it," said the one who had opened the door, "I admit."

There was a superfluous dryness in his tone; but Rachel no more noticed this than the further craning of heads in the doorway.

"But can you doubt it?" she cried, pointing from the broken window to the spilled ink. "Did you think that he had shot himself?"

And her horror heightened at a thought more terrible to her than all the rest. But the constable shook his head.

"We should have found the pistol—which we can't," said he. "But shot he is, and through the heart."

"Then who could it be but thieves?"

"That's what we all want to know," said the officer; and still Rachel had no time to think about his tone; for now she was bending over the body, her white hands clenched, and agony enough in her white face.

"Look! look!" she cried, beckoning to them all. "He was wearing his watch last night; that I can swear; and it has gone!"

"You are sure he was wearing it?" asked the same constable, approaching.

"Absolutely certain."

"Well, if that's so," said he, "and it can't be found, it will be a point in your favor."

Rachel sprang upright, her wet eyes wide with pure astonishment.

"In my favor?" she cried. "Will you have the goodness to explain yourself?"

The constables were standing on either side of her now.

"Well," replied the spokesman of the pair, "I don't like the way that window's broken, for one thing, and if you look at it you'll see what I mean. The broken glass is all outside on the sill. But that's not all, ma'am; and, as you have a cab, we might do worse than drive to the station before more people are about."

CHAPTER II

THE CASE FOR THE CROWN

It was years since there had been a promise of such sensation at the Old Bailey, and never, perhaps, was competition keener for the very few seats available in that antique theatre of justice. Nor, indeed, could the most enterprising of modern managers, with the star of all the stages at his beck for the shortest of seasons, have done more to spread the lady's fame, or to excite a passionate curiosity in the public mind, than was done for Rachel Minchin by her official enemies of the Metropolitan Police.

Whether these gentry had their case even more complete than they pretended, when the prisoner was finally committed for trial, or whether the last discoveries were really made in the ensuing fortnight, is now of small account —though the point provided more than one excuse for acrimony on the part of defending counsel during the hearing of the case. It is certain, however, that shortly after the committal it became known that much new evidence was to be forthcoming at the trial; that the case against the prisoner would be found even blacker than before; and that the witnesses were so many in number, and their testimony so entirely circumstantial, that the proceedings were expected to occupy a week.

Sure enough, the case was accorded first place in the November Sessions, with a fair start on a Monday morning toward the latter end of the month. In the purlieus of the mean, historic court, it was a morning not to be forgotten, and only to be compared with those which followed throughout the week. The prisoner's sex, her youth, her high

bearing, and the peculiar isolation of her position, without a friend to stand by her in her need, all appealed to the popular imagination, and produced a fascination which was only intensified by the equally general feeling that no one else could have committed the crime. From the judge downward, all connected with the case were pestered for days beforehand with more or less unwarrantable applications for admission. And when the time came, the successful suppliant had to elbow every yard of his way from Newgate Street or Ludgate Hill; to pass three separate barriers held by a suspicious constabulary; to obtain the good offices of the Under Sheriff, through those of his liveried lackeys; and finally to occupy the least space, on the narrowest of seats, in a varnished stall filled with curiously familiar faces, within a few feet of the heavily veiled prisoner in the dock, and not many more from the red-robed judge upon the bench.

The first to take all this trouble on the Monday morning, and the last to escape from the foul air (shot by biting draughts) when the court adjourned, was a white-headed gentleman of striking appearance and stamina to match; for, undeterred by the experience, he was in like manner first and last upon each subsequent day. Behind him came and went the well-known faces, the authors and the actors with a semi-professional interest in the case; but they were not well known to the gentleman with the white head. He heard no more than he could help of their constant whisperings, and, if he knew not at whom he more than once had occasion to turn and frown, he certainly did not look the man to care. He had a well-preserved reddish face, with a small mouth of extraordinary strength, a canine jaw, and singularly noble forehead; but his most obvious distinction was his full head of snowy hair. The only hair upon his face, a pair of bushy eyebrows, was so much darker as to suggest a dye; but the eyes themselves were black as midnight, with

a glint of midnight stars, and of such a subtle inscrutability that a certain sweetness of expression came only as the last surprise in a face full of contrast and contradiction.

No one in court had ever seen this man before; no one but the Under Sheriff learnt his name during the week; but by the third day his identity was a subject of discussion, both by the professional students of the human countenance, who sat behind him (balked of their study by the prisoner's veil), and among the various functionaries who had already found him as free with a sovereign as most gentlemen are with a piece of silver. So every day he was ushered with ceremony to the same place, at the inner end of the lowest row; there he would sit watching the prisoner, a trifle nearer her than those beside or behind him; and only once was his attentive serenity broken for an instant by a change of expression due to any development of the case.

It was not when the prisoner pleaded clearly through her veil, in the first breathless minutes of all; it was not a little later, when the urbane counsel for the prosecution, wagging his pince-nez at the jury, thrilled every other hearer with a mellifluous forecast of the new evidence to be laid before them. The missing watch and chain had been found; they would presently be produced, and the jury would have an opportunity of examining them, together with a plan of the chimney of the room in which the murder had been committed; for it was there that they had been discovered upon a second search instituted since the proceedings before the magistrates. The effect of this announcement may be conceived; it was the sensation of the opening day. The whole case of the prosecution rested on the assumption that there had been, on the part of some inmate of the house, who alone (it was held) could have committed the murder, a deliberate attempt to give it the appearance of the work of thieves. Thus far this theory rested on the bare

facts that the glass of the broken window had been found outside, instead of within; that no other mark of foot or hand had been made or left by the supposititious burglars; whereas a brace of revolvers had been discovered in the dead man's bureau, both loaded with such bullets as the one which had caused his death, while one of them had clearly been discharged since the last cleaning. The discovery of the missing watch and chain, in the very chimney of the same room, was a piece of ideal evidence of the confirmatory kind. But it was not the point that made an impression on the man with the white hair; it did not increase his attention, for that would have been impossible; he was perhaps the one spectator who was not, if only for the moment, perceptibly thrilled.

Thrilling also was the earlier evidence, furnished by maid-servants and police constables in pairs; but here there was no surprise. The maids were examined not only as to what they had seen and heard on the night of the murder—and they seemed to have heard everything except the fatal shot—but upon the previous relations of their master and mistress—of which they showed an equally extensive knowledge. The constables were perforce confined to their own discoveries and observations when the maids had called them in. But all four witnesses spoke to the prisoner's behavior when shown the dead body of her husband, and there was the utmost unanimity in their several tales. The prisoner had exhibited little or no surprise; it was several minutes before she had uttered a syllable; and then her first words had been to point out that burglars alone could have committed the murder.

In cross-examination the senior counsel for the defence thus early showed his hand; and it was not a strong one to those who knew the game. A Queen's Counsel, like the leader for the Crown, this was an altogether different type of lawyer; a

younger man, with a more engaging manner; a more brilliant man, who sought with doubtful wisdom to blind the jury with his brilliance. His method was no innovation at the Old Bailey; it was to hold up every witness in turn to the derision and contempt of the jury and the court. So both the maids were reduced to tears, and each policeman cleverly insulted as such. But the testimony of all four remained unshaken; and the judge himself soothed the young women's feelings with a fatherly word, while wigs were shaken in the well of the court. That was no road to the soft side of a decent, conscientious, hard-headed jury, of much the same class as these witnesses themselves; even the actors and authors had a sound opinion on the point, without waiting to hear one from the professional gentlemen in the well. But the man in front with the very white hair—the man who was always watching the prisoner at the bar—there was about as much expression of opinion upon his firm, bare face as might be seen through the sable thickness of her widow's veil.

It was the same next day, when, for some five hours out of a possible five and a half, the attention of the court was concentrated upon a point of obviously secondary significance. It was suggested by the defence that the watch and chain found up the study chimney were not those worn by the deceased at the time he met his death. The contention was supported by photographs of Alexander Minchin wearing a watch-chain that might or might not be of another pattern altogether; expert opinions were divided on the point; and experts in chains as well as in photography were eventually called by both sides. Interesting in the beginning, the point was raised and raised again, and on subsequent days, until all were weary of the sight of the huge photographic enlargements, which were handed about the court upon each occasion. Even the prisoner would droop in her chair when the "chain photograph" was

demanded for the twentieth time by her own unflagging counsel; even the judge became all but inattentive on the point, before it was finally dropped on an intimation from the jury that they had made up their minds about the chains; but no trace of boredom had crossed the keen, alert face of the unknown gentleman with the snowy hair.

So the case was fought for Mrs. Minchin, tooth and nail indeed, yet perhaps with more asperity than conviction, and certainly at times upon points which were hardly worth the fighting. Yet, on the Friday afternoon, when her counsel at last played his masterstroke, and, taking advantage of the then new Act, put the prisoner herself in the witness-box, it was done with the air of a man who is throwing up his case. The truth could be seen at a glance at the clean-cut, handsome, but too expressive profile of the crushing cross-examiner of female witnesses and insolent foe to the police. As it had been possible to predict, from the mere look with which he had risen to his feet, the kind of cross-examination in store for each witness called by the prosecution, so it was obvious now that his own witness had come forward from her own wilful perversity and in direct defiance of his advice.

It was a dismal afternoon, and the witness-box at the Old Bailey is so situated that evidence is given with the back to the light; thus, though her heavy veil was raised at last, and it could be seen that she was very pale, it was not yet that Rachel Minchin afforded a chance to the lightning artists of the half-penny press, or even to the students of physiognomy behind the man with the white hair. This listener did not lean forward an inch; the questions were answered in so clear a voice as to render it unnecessary. Yet it was one of these questions, put by her own counsel, which caused the white-headed man to clap a sudden hand to his ear, and to incline that ear as though the answer

could not come without some momentary hesitation or some change of tone. Rachel had told sadly but firmly of her final quarrel with her husband, incidentally, but without embarrassment, revealing its cause. A neighbor was dangerously ill, whom she had been going to nurse that night, when her husband met her at the door and forbade her to do so.

"Was this neighbor a young man?"

"Hardly more than a boy," said Rachel, "and as friendless as ourselves."

"Was your husband jealous of him?"

"I had no idea of it until that night."

"Did you find it out then?"

"I did, indeed!"

"And where had your husband been spending the evening?"

"I had no idea of that either—until he told me he had been watching the house—and why!"

Though the man was dead, she could not rid her voice of its scorn; and presently, with bowed head, she was repeating his last words to her. A cold thrill ran through the court.

"And was that the last time you saw him alive?" inquired counsel, his face lightening in ready apprehension of the thrill, and his assurance coming back to him on the spot, as though it were he who had insisted on putting his client in the box.

But to this there was no immediate answer; for it was here that the white-haired man raised his hand to his ear; and the event was exactly as he seemed to have anticipated.

"Was that the last time you saw your husband alive?" repeated Rachel's counsel, in the winning accents and with the reassuring face that he could assume without an effort at his will.

"It was," said Rachel, after yet another moment's thought.

It was then that the white-headed man dropped his eyes for once; and for once the thin, hard lines of his mouth relaxed in a smile that seemed to epitomize all the evil that was in his face, and to give it forth in one sudden sour quintessence.

CHAPTER III

NAME AND NATURE

The prisoner's evidence concluded with a perfectly simple if somewhat hesitating account of her own doings during the remainder of the night of her husband's murder. That story has already been told in greater detail than could be extracted even by the urbane but deadly cross-examiner who led for the Crown. A change had come over the manner in which Rachel was giving her evidence; it was as though her strength and nerve were failing her together, and henceforth the words had to be put into her mouth. Curiously enough, the change in Mrs. Minchin's demeanor was almost coincident with the single and rather sinister display of feeling upon the part of the white-haired gentleman who had followed every word of the case. On the whole, however, her story bore the stamp of truth; and a half-apologetic but none the less persistent cross-examination left it scarcely less convincing than before.

There was one independent witness for the defence, in addition to the experts in photography and chains. The landlady of the house at which Rachel called, in the early morning, on her way home with the cab, was about five minutes in the witness-box, but in those five minutes she supplied the defence with one of its strongest arguments. It was at least conceivable that a woman who had killed her husband might coolly proceed to pack her trunk, and thereafter fetch the cab which was to remove herself and her effects from the scene of the tragedy. But was it credible that a woman of so much presence of mind, to whom every minute might make the difference between life and death,

would, having found her cab, actually drive out of her way to inquire after a sick friend, or even a dying lover, before going home to pick up her luggage and to ascertain whether her crime was still undetected? Suppose it were a lover, and inquire one must: would one not still leave those inquiries to the last? And having made them, last or first; and knowing the grim necessity of flight; would one woman go out of her way to tell another that she "had to go abroad very suddenly, and was going for good?"

"Inconceivable!" cried the prisoner's counsel, dealing with the point; and the word was much upon his lips during the course of a long and very strenuous speech, in which the case for the Crown was flouted from beginning to end, without, perhaps, enough of concentration on its more obvious weaknesses, or of respect for its undoubted strength. For the prisoner's proceedings on the night of the murder, however, supposing she had committed it, and still more on the morning after, it would have been difficult to find a better epithet; the only drawback was that this one had seen service in the cause of almost every murderer who ever went to the gallows—as counsel for the prosecution remarked in his reply, with deadly deference to his learned friend.

"On the other hand," he went on, wagging his eyeglasses with leisurely deliberation, and picking his words with a care that enhanced their effect, after the unbridled rhetoric of the defence—"on the other hand, gentlemen, if criminals never made mistakes, inconceivable or not as we may choose to consider them—if they never made those mistakes, they would never stand in that dock."

It was late on the Saturday afternoon when the judge summed up; but a pleasant surprise was in store for those who felt that his lordship must speak at greater length than either of the counsel between whom he was to hold the

scales. The address from the bench was much the shortest of the three. Less exhaustive than the conventional review of a complicated case, it was a disquisition of conspicuous clearness and impartiality. Only the salient points were laid before the jury, for the last time, and in a nutshell, but with hardly a hint of the judge's own opinion upon any one of them. The expression of that opinion was reserved for a point of even greater import than the value of any separate piece of evidence. If, said the judge, the inferences and theory of the prosecution were correct; if this unhappy woman, driven to desperation by her husband, and knowing where he kept his pistols, had taken his life with one of them, and afterwards manufactured the traces of a supposititious burglary; then there was no circumstance connected with the crime which could by any possibility reduce it from murder to manslaughter. The solemnity of this pronouncement was felt in the farthest corner of the crowded court. So they were to find her guilty of wilful murder, or not guilty at all! Every eye sped involuntarily to the slim black figure in the dock; and, under the gaze of all, the figure made the least little bow—a movement so slight and so spontaneous as to suggest unconsciousness, but all the more eloquent on that account.

Yet to many in court, more especially to the theatrical folk behind the man with the white hair, the gesture was but one more subtle touch in an exhibition of consummate art and nerve.

"If they do acquit her," whispered one of these wiseacres to another, "she will make her fortune on the stage!"

Meanwhile the judge was dealing at the last with the prisoner's evidence in her own behalf, and that mercifully enough, though with less reticence than had characterized the earlier portions of his address. He did not think it possible or even desirable to forget that this was the

evidence of a woman upon trial for her life. It must not be discredited on that account. But it was for the jury to bear in mind that the story was one which admitted of no corroboration, save in unimportant details. More than that he would not say. It was for them to judge of that story as they had heard it for themselves, on its own merits, but also in relation to the other evidence. If the jury believed it, there was an end of the case. If they had any reasonable doubt at all, the prisoner was entitled to the full benefit of that doubt, and they must acquit her. If, on the other hand, the facts taken together before and after the murder brought the jury to the conclusion that it was none other than the prisoner who had committed the murder—though, of course, no one was present to see the act committed—they must, in duty to their oaths, find her guilty.

During the judge's address the short November day had turned from afternoon to night, and a great change had come over the aspect of the dim and dingy court. Opaque globes turned into flaring suns; incandescent burners revealed unsuspected brackets; the place was warmed and lighted for the first time during the week. And the effect of the light and warmth was on all the faces that rose as one while the judge sidled from the bench, and the jury filed out of their box, and the prisoner disappeared down the dock stairs for the last time in ignorance of her fate. Next moment there was the buzz of talk that you expect in a theatre between the acts, rather than in a court of justice at the solemn crisis of a solemn trial. It was like a class-room with the master called away. Hats were put on again in the bulging galleries; hardly a tongue was still. On the bench a red-robed magnate and another in knee-breeches exchanged views upon the enlarged photographs which had played so prominent a part in the case; in the well the barristers' wigs nodded or shook over their pink blotters and their quill pens; gentlemen of the Press sharpened their