XVIII. A RIDDLE OF FACES

Just behind him stood two other doctors: one, the familiar Dr. Quayle, of the blinking eyes and bleating voice; the other, a more commonplace but much more forcible figure, a stout young doctor with short, well-brushed hair and a round but resolute face. At the sight of the escape these two subordinates uttered a cry and sprang forward, but their superior remained motionless and smiling, and somehow the lack of his support seemed to arrest and freeze them in the very gesture of pursuit.

"Let them be," he cried in a voice that cut like a blade of ice; and not only of ice, but of some awful primordial ice that had never been water.

"I want no devoted champions," said the cutting voice; "even the folly of one's friends bores one at last. You don't suppose I should have let these lunatics out of their cells without good reason. I have the best and fullest reason. They can be let out of their cell today, because today the whole world has become their cell. I will have no more medieval mummery of chains and doors. Let them wander about the earth as they wandered about this garden, and I shall still be their easy master. Let them take the wings of the morning and abide in the uttermost parts of the sea--I am there. Whither shall they go from my presence and whither shall they flee from my spirit? Courage, Dr. Quayle, and do not be downhearted; the real days of tyranny are only beginning on this earth."

And with that the Master laughed and swung away from them, almost as if his laugh was a bad thing for people to see.

"Might I speak to you a moment?" said Turnbull, stepping forward with a respectful resolution. But the shoulders of the Master only seemed to take on a new and unexpected angle of mockery as he strode away.

Turnbull swung round with great abruptness to the other two doctors, and said, harshly: "What in snakes does he mean--and who are you?"

"My name is Hutton," said the short, stout man, "and I am--well, one of those whose business it is to uphold this establishment."

"My name is Turnbull," said the other; "I am one of those whose business it is to tear it to the ground."

The small doctor smiled, and Turnbull's anger seemed suddenly to steady him.

"But I don't want to talk about that," he said, calmly; "I only want to know what the Master of this asylum really means."

Dr. Hutton's smile broke into a laugh which, short as it was, had the suspicion of a shake in it. "I suppose you think that quite a simple question," he said.

"I think it a plain question," said Turnbull, "and one that deserves a plain answer. Why did the Master lock us up in a couple of cupboards like jars of pickles for a mortal month, and why does he now let us walk free in the garden again?"

"I understand," said Hutton, with arched eyebrows, "that your complaint is that you are now free to walk in the garden."

"My complaint is," said Turnbull, stubbornly, "that if I am fit to walk freely now, I have been as fit for the last month. No one has examined me, no one has come near me. Your chief says that I am only free because he has made other arrangements. What are those arrangements?"

The young man with the round face looked down for a little while and smoked reflectively. The other and elder doctor had gone pacing nervously by himself upon the lawn. At length the round face was lifted again, and showed two round blue eyes with a certain frankness in them.

"Well, I don't see that it can do any harm to tell you know," he said. "You were shut up just then because it was just during that month that the Master was bringing off his big scheme. He was getting his bill through Parliament, and organizing the new medical police. But of course you haven't heard of all that; in fact, you weren't meant to."

"Heard of all what?" asked the impatient inquirer.

"There's a new law now, and the asylum powers are greatly extended. Even if you did escape now, any policeman would take you up in the next town if you couldn't show a certificate of sanity from us."

"Well," continued Dr. Hutton, "the Master described before both Houses of Parliament the real scientific objection to all existing legislation about lunacy. As he very truly said, the mistake was in supposing insanity to be merely an exception or an extreme. Insanity, like forgetfulness, is simply a quality which enters more or less into all human beings; and for practical purposes it is more necessary to know whose mind is really trustworthy than whose has some accidental taint. We have therefore reversed the existing method, and people now

have to prove that they are sane. In the first village you entered, the village constable would notice that you were not wearing on the left lapel of your coat the small pewter S which is now necessary to any one who walks about beyond asylum bounds or outside asylum hours."

"You mean to say," said Turnbull, "that this was what the Master of the asylum urged before the House of Commons?"

Dr. Hutton nodded with gravity.

"And you mean to say," cried Turnbull, with a vibrant snort, "that that proposal was passed in an assembly that calls itself democratic?"

The doctor showed his whole row of teeth in a smile. "Oh, the assembly calls itself Socialist now," he said, "But we explained to them that this was a question for men of science."

Turnbull gave one stamp upon the gravel, then pulled himself together, and resumed: "But why should your infernal head medicine-man lock us up in separate cells while he was turning England into a madhouse? I'm not the Prime Minister; we're not the House of Lords."

"He wasn't afraid of the Prime Minister," replied Dr. Hutton; "he isn't afraid of the House of Lords. But----"

"Well?" inquired Turnbull, stamping again.

"He is afraid of you," said Hutton, simply. "Why, didn't you know?"

MacIan, who had not spoken yet, made one stride forward and stood with shaking limbs and shining eyes.

"He was afraid!" began Evan, thickly. "You mean to say that we----"

"I mean to say the plain truth now that the danger is over," said Hutton, calmly; "most certainly you two were the only people he ever was afraid of." Then he added in a low but not inaudible voice: "Except one--whom he feared worse, and has buried deeper."

"Come away," cried MacIan, "this has to be thought about."

Turnbull followed him in silence as he strode away, but just before he vanished, turned and spoke again to the doctors.

"But what has got hold of people?" he asked, abruptly. "Why should all England have gone dotty on the mere subject of dottiness?"

Dr. Hutton smiled his open smile once more and bowed slightly. "As to that also," he replied, "I don't want to make you vain."

Turnbull swung round without a word, and he and his companion were lost in the lustrous leafage of the garden. They noticed nothing special about the scene, except that the garden seemed more exquisite than ever in the deepening sunset, and that there seemed to be many more people, whether patients or attendants, walking about in it.

From behind the two black-coated doctors as they stood on the lawn another figure somewhat similarly dressed strode hurriedly past them, having also grizzled hair and an open flapping frock-coat. Both his decisive step and dapper black array marked him out as another medical man, or at least a man in authority, and as he passed Turnbull the latter was aroused by a strong impression of having seen the man somewhere before. It was no one that he knew well, yet he was certain that it was someone at whom he had at sometime or other looked steadily. It was neither the face of a friend nor of an enemy; it aroused neither irritation nor tenderness, yet it was a face which had for some reason been of great importance in his life. Turning and returning, and making detours about the garden, he managed to study the man's face again and again--a moustached, somewhat military face with a monocle, the sort of face that is aristocratic without being distinguished. Turnbull could not remember any particular doctors in his decidedly healthy existence. Was the man a long-lost uncle, or was he only somebody who had sat opposite him regularly in a railway train? At that moment the man knocked down his own eye-glass with a gesture of annoyance; Turnbull remembered the gesture, and the truth sprang up solid in front of him. The man with the moustaches was Cumberland Vane, the London police magistrate before whom he and MacIan had once stood on their trial. The magistrate must have been transferred to some other official duties--to something connected with the inspection of asylums.

Turnbull's heart gave a leap of excitement which was half hope. As a magistrate Mr. Cumberland Vane had been somewhat careless and shallow, but certainly kindly, and not inaccessible to common sense so long as it was put to him in strictly conventional language. He was at least an authority of a more human and refreshing sort than the crank with the wagging beard or the fiend with the forked chin.

He went straight up to the magistrate, and said: "Good evening, Mr. Vane; I doubt

if you remember me."

Cumberland Vane screwed the eye-glass into his scowling face for an instant, and then said curtly but not uncivilly: "Yes, I remember you, sir; assault or battery, wasn't it?--a fellow broke your window. A tall fellow--McSomething--case made rather a noise afterwards."

"MacIan is the name, sir," said Turnbull, respectfully; "I have him here with me."

"Eh!" said Vane very sharply. "Confound him! Has he got anything to do with this game?"

"Mr. Vane," said Turnbull, pacifically, "I will not pretend that either he or I acted quite decorously on that occasion. You were very lenient with us, and did not treat us as criminals when you very well might. So I am sure you will give us your testimony that, even if we were criminals, we are not lunatics in any legal or medical sense whatever. I am sure you will use your influence for us."

"My influence!" repeated the magistrate, with a slight start. "I don't quite understand you."

"I don't know in what capacity you are here," continued Turnbull, gravely, "but a legal authority of your distinction must certainly be here in an important one. Whether you are visiting and inspecting the place, or attached to it as some kind of permanent legal adviser, your opinion must still----"

Cumberland Vane exploded with a detonation of oaths; his face was transfigured with fury and contempt, and yet in some odd way he did not seem specially angry with Turnbull.

"But Lord bless us and save us!" he gasped, at length; "I'm not here as an official at all. I'm here as a patient. The cursed pack of rat-catching chemists all say that I've lost my wits."

"You!" cried Turnbull with terrible emphasis. "You! Lost your wits!"

In the rush of his real astonishment at this towering unreality Turnbull almost added: "Why, you haven't got any to lose." But he fortunately remembered the remains of his desperate diplomacy.

"This can't go on," he said, positively. "Men like MacIan and I may suffer unjustly all our lives, but a man like you must have influence."

"There is only one man who has any influence in England now," said Vane, and his high voice fell to a sudden and convincing quietude.

"Whom do you mean?" asked Turnbull.

"I mean that cursed fellow with the long split chin," said the other.

"Is it really true," asked Turnbull, "that he has been allowed to buy up and control such a lot? What put the country into such a state?"

Mr. Cumberland Vane laughed outright. "What put the country into such a state?" he asked. "Why, you did. When you were fool enough to agree to fight MacIan, after all, everybody was ready to believe that the Bank of England might paint itself pink with white spots."

"I don't understand," answered Turnbull. "Why should you be surprised at my fighting? I hope I have always fought."

"Well," said Cumberland Vane, airily, "you didn't believe in religion, you see--so we thought you were safe at any rate. You went further in your language than most of us wanted to go; no good in just hurting one's mother's feelings, I think. But of course we all knew you were right, and, really, we relied on you."

"Did you?" said the editor of The Atheist with a bursting heart. "I am sorry you did not tell me so at the time."

He walked away very rapidly and flung himself on a garden seat, and for some six minutes his own wrongs hid from him the huge and hilarious fact that Cumberland Vane had been locked up as a lunatic.

The garden of the madhouse was so perfectly planned, and answered so exquisitely to every hour of daylight, that one could almost fancy that the sunlight was caught there tangled in its tinted trees, as the wise men of Gotham tried to chain the spring to a bush. Or it seemed as if this ironic paradise still kept its unique dawn or its special sunset while the rest of the earthly globe rolled through its ordinary hours. There was one evening, or late afternoon, in particular, which Evan MacIan will remember in the last moments of death. It was what artists call a daffodil sky, but it is coarsened even by reference to a daffodil. It was of that innocent lonely yellow which has never heard of orange, though it might turn quite unconsciously into green. Against it the tops, one might say the turrets, of the clipt and ordered trees were outlined in that shade of veiled violet which tints the tops of lavender. A white early moon was hardly traceable upon that delicate yellow. MacIan, I say, will remember this tender and

transparent evening, partly because of its virgin gold and silver, and partly because he passed beneath it through the most horrible instant of his life.

Turnbull was sitting on his seat on the lawn, and the golden evening impressed even his positive nature, as indeed it might have impressed the oxen in a field. He was shocked out of his idle mood of awe by seeing MacIan break from behind the bushes and run across the lawn with an action he had never seen in the man before, with all his experience of the eccentric humours of this Celt. MacIan fell on the bench, shaking it so that it rattled, and gripped it with his knees like one in dreadful pain of body. That particular run and tumble is typical only of a man who has been hit by some sudden and incurable evil, who is bitten by a viper or condemned to be hanged. Turnbull looked up in the white face of his friend and enemy, and almost turned cold at what he saw there. He had seen the blue but gloomy eyes of the western Highlander troubled by as many tempests as his own west Highland seas, but there had always been a fixed star of faith behind the storms. Now the star had gone out, and there was only misery.

Yet MacIan had the strength to answer the question where Turnbull, taken by surprise, had not the strength to ask it.

"They are right, they are right!" he cried. "O my God! they are right, Turnbull. I ought to be here!"

He went on with shapeless fluency as if he no longer had the heart to choose or check his speech. "I suppose I ought to have guessed long ago--all my big dreams and schemes--and everyone being against us--but I was stuck up, you know."

"Do tell me about it, really," cried the atheist, and, faced with the furnace of the other's pain, he did not notice that he spoke with the affection of a father.

"I am mad, Turnbull," said Evan, with a dead clearness of speech, and leant back against the garden seat.

"Nonsense," said the other, clutching at the obvious cue of benevolent brutality, "this is one of your silly moods."

MacIan shook his head. "I know enough about myself," he said, "to allow for any mood, though it opened heaven or hell. But to see things--to see them walking solid in the sun--things that can't be there--real mystics never do that, Turnbull."

"What things?" asked the other, incredulously.

MacIan lowered his voice. "I saw her," he said, "three minutes ago--walking here

in this hell yard."

Between trying to look scornful and really looking startled, Turnbull's face was confused enough to emit no speech, and Evan went on in monotonous sincerity:

"I saw her walk behind those blessed trees against that holy sky of gold as plain as I can see her whenever I shut my eyes. I did shut them, and opened them again, and she was still there--that is, of course, she wasn't---- She still had a little fur round her neck, but her dress was a shade brighter than when I really saw her."

"My dear fellow," cried Turnbull, rallying a hearty laugh, "the fancies have really got hold of you. You mistook some other poor girl here for her."

"Mistook some other----" said MacIan, and words failed him altogether.

They sat for some moments in the mellow silence of the evening garden, a silence that was stifling for the sceptic, but utterly empty and final for the man of faith. At last he broke out again with the words: "Well, anyhow, if I'm mad, I'm glad I'm mad on that."

Turnbull murmured some clumsy deprecation, and sat stolidly smoking to collect his thoughts; the next instant he had all his nerves engaged in the mere effort to sit still.

Across the clear space of cold silver and a pale lemon sky which was left by the gap in the ilex-trees there passed a slim, dark figure, a profile and the poise of a dark head like a bird's, which really pinned him to his seat with the point of coincidence. With an effort he got to his feet, and said with a voice of affected insouciance: "By George! MacIan, she is uncommonly like----"

"What!" cried MacIan, with a leap of eagerness that was heart-breaking, "do you see her, too?" And the blaze came back into the centre of his eyes.

Turnbull's tawny eyebrows were pulled together with a peculiar frown of curiosity, and all at once he walked quickly across the lawn. MacIan sat rigid, but peered after him with open and parched lips. He saw the sight which either proved him sane or proved the whole universe half-witted; he saw the man of flesh approach that beautiful phantom, saw their gestures of recognition, and saw them against the sunset joining hands.

He could stand it no longer, but ran across to the path, turned the corner and saw standing quite palpable in the evening sunlight, talking with a casual grace

to Turnbull, the face and figure which had filled his midnights with frightfully vivid or desperately half-forgotten features. She advanced quite pleasantly and coolly, and put out her hand. The moment that he touched it he knew that he was sane even if the solar system was crazy.

She was entirely elegant and unembarrassed. That is the awful thing about women--they refuse to be emotional at emotional moments, upon some such ludicrous pretext as there being someone else there. But MacIan was in a condition of criticism much less than the average masculine one, being in fact merely overturned by the rushing riddle of the events.

Evan does not know to this day what particular question he asked, but he vividly remembers that she answered, and every line or fluctuation of her face as she said it.

"Oh, don't you know?" she said, smiling, and suddenly lifting her level brown eyebrows. "Haven't you heard the news? I'm a lunatic."

Then she added after a short pause, and with a sort of pride: "I've got a certificate."

Her manner, by the matchless social stoicism of her sex, was entirely suited to a drawing-room, but Evan's reply fell somewhat far short of such a standard, as he only said: "What the devil in hell does all this nonsense mean?"

"Really," said the young lady, and laughed.

"I beg your pardon," said the unhappy young man, rather wildly, "but what I mean is, why are you here in an asylum?"

The young woman broke again into one of the maddening and mysterious laughs of femininity. Then she composed her features, and replied with equal dignity: "Well, if it comes to that, why are you?"

The fact that Turnbull had strolled away and was investigating rhododendrons may have been due to Evan's successful prayers to the other world, or possibly to his own pretty successful experience of this one. But though they two were as isolated as a new Adam and Eve in a pretty ornamental Eden, the lady did not relax by an inch the rigour of her badinage.

"I am locked up in the madhouse," said Evan, with a sort of stiff pride, "because I tried to keep my promise to you."

"Quite so," answered the inexplicable lady, nodding with a perfectly blazing smile, "and I am locked up because it was to me you promised."

"It is outrageous!" cried Evan; "it is impossible!"

"Oh, you can see my certificate if you like," she replied with some hauteur.

MacIan stared at her and then at his boots, and then at the sky and then at her again. He was quite sure now that he himself was not mad, and the fact rather added to his perplexity.

Then he drew nearer to her, and said in a dry and dreadful voice: "Oh, don't condescend to play the fool with such a fool as me. Are you really locked up here as a patient--because you helped us to escape?"

"Yes," she said, still smiling, but her steady voice had a shake in it.

Evan flung his big elbow across his forehead and burst into tears.

The pure lemon of the sky faded into purer white as the great sunset silently collapsed. The birds settled back into the trees; the moon began to glow with its own light. Mr. James Turnbull continued his botanical researches into the structure of the rhododendron. But the lady did not move an inch until Evan had flung up his face again; and when he did he saw by the last gleam of sunlight that it was not only his face that was wet.

Mr. James Turnbull had all his life professed a profound interest in physical science, and the phenomena of a good garden were really a pleasure to him; but after three-quarters of an hour or so even the apostle of science began to find rhododendrus a bore, and was somewhat relieved when an unexpected development of events obliged him to transfer his researches to the equally interesting subject of hollyhocks, which grew some fifty feet farther along the path. The ostensible cause of his removal was the unexpected reappearance of his two other acquaintances walking and talking laboriously along the way, with the black head bent close to the brown one. Even hollyhocks detained Turnbull but a short time. Having rapidly absorbed all the important principles affecting the growth of those vegetables, he jumped over a flower-bed and walked back into the building. The other two came up along the slow course of the path talking and talking. No one but God knows what they said (for they certainly have forgotten), and if I remembered it I would not repeat it. When they parted at the head of the walk she put out her hand again in the same well-bred way, although it trembled; he seemed to restrain a gesture as he let it fall.

"If it is really always to be like this," he said, thickly, "it would not matter if we were here for ever."

"You tried to kill yourself four times for me," she said, unsteadily, "and I have been chained up as a madwoman for you. I really think that after that----"

"Yes, I know," said Evan in a low voice, looking down. "After that we belong to each other. We are sort of sold to each other--until the stars fall." Then he looked up suddenly, and said: "By the way, what is your name?"

"My name is Beatrice Drake," she replied with complete gravity. "You can see it on my certificate of lunacy."