

# Weird Tales



March, 1953

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D. McILWRAITH, Editor



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*Reminiscent of "The Pit  
and the Pendulum."*

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# Mrs. Penleath's Stratagem

**BY T. W. SPEIGHT**

**I**T WAS in the dusk of an October afternoon that Austin Goodreeve alighted from an omnibus at Piccadilly Circus. There had been a heavy shower recently, and the pavements were still sloppy. The shops were being lighted up one after another, and minute by minute a lengthening fringe of flame punctuated the semi-darkness of the streets as the lamplighter passed swiftly on his rounds.

Earlier in the afternoon Goodreeve had landed from an Australian liner at Tilbury. After depositing his one small portmanteau in the railway cloak-room, he had set out for the West End, drawn hither by an impulse he was powerless to control; and now, here he was at the well-remembered Circus which he had seen last in the flesh four years before, but had seen many a time since in his waking dreams.

And yet as he stood there for a few moments, debating with himself in which direction he should turn, he hardly looked like a man who had ever been familiar with the West End of London. His frayed serge suit and soft felt hat both bore traces of long service, while his boots were palpably down at heel. He was wearing a white flannel shirt with a small sailor tie. He had clear-cut, regular features, boldly marked eyebrows, and rather fine eyes. One of his first cares

on reaching town had been to have his hair, short beard, and mustache trimmed and attended to.

Mechanically he turned westward, and strolled slowly along. It fell in with his morbid humor to lounge and stare about him, and to be taken by the jostling crowd for the shabby loafer he felt himself to be. Three young men in evening dress, and smoking cigarettes, passed him. They were on their way to look in for an hour at the club before dinner. He glanced after them with a smile which was compounded of bitterness, envy and pity; for only little more than four years before he himself had been one of the gilded youths of the West End, and, in the light of all he had gone through since, what an empty and futile life it seemed; which by no means implied that he did not enjoy it at the time.

At the door of some fashionable tea-rooms he came to an abrupt halt, overcome for the moment by a certain recollection. They were the very rooms to which he had piloted Stella Winston after a theater matinee that afternoon when they met for the last time. And how nice she had been to him that afternoon! Who could have conceived that so fair an exterior hid so mercenary a heart?

In another moment he would have passed

on, when a miniature brougham drew up, from which a fashionably attired young woman alighted, and was on the point of entering the tea-rooms when her glance fell carelessly on Goodreeve, who was standing full in the lamplight, and on the instant she started back, and one hand went up quickly to her heart.

"Surely you are Harry Dacre!" she exclaimed, with a catch in her voice. "Where have you been all this long time?"

"You are under a misapprehension, madam," replied Goodreeve, as he raised his shabby hat. "I am not the person you take me for."

"Is it possible that I have been mistaken? I made sure that in you I had lighted on my Cousin Harry, who disappeared six years ago, and has not been heard of since. Your likeness to him is most extraordinary. I can but ask you to pardon my blunder."

Goodreeve bowed. "There is nothing to pardon," he murmured.

The Unknown did not pass on, but seemed to be taking in his appearance from top to toe.

"I trust you won't be offended," she said, "by my remarking that, for a gentleman, you seem to be in rather low water."

Goodreeve smiled bitterly. "I am in very low water. Three hours ago I landed from an Australian liner with just eighteen and sixpence in my pocket."

"Is that indeed so?" She seemed to consider for a few moments, a finger on her lips. "Your circumstances being unfortunately such as they are, it is possible, Mr.—"

"My name is Austin Goodreeve."

"It is possible, Mr. Goodreeve, that you would not object to do me a slight service in return for a twenty-pound note?"

He was not in the least offended. Why should he be? She evidently regarded him as a poor beggar to whom a twenty-pound note would be a godsend; which it certainly would be. He answered gravely:

"I shall esteem it an honor, madam, to place my services, such as they are, at your disposal."

"How can I thank you sufficiently? But it is impossible to explain here. You must come and dine with me. My flat is not more than a mile away. You will come, will you not?"

As she spoke she crossed to the brougham. For answer Goodreeve opened the door. "Home," she said to the coachman. Then she got in, and Goodreeve followed her without a word, and shut the door. "Adventures are to the adventurous," he told himself. "Happen what may, I will see this thing through."

FOUR years before a lawyer's rascality had robbed Austin Goodreeve of the fifty thousand pounds bequeathed him by his father, and within a week of the fact being made public his promised wife jilted him. Sick of England, he determined, with the wreck of his fortune, to try his luck at the Antipodes.

Well, he did try it, with the unfortunate result that at the end of three and a half years he had just enough funds left to carry him back to Sydney and pay for a steerage passage home.

The brougham drove on through the lamp-lighted streets. Goodreeve felt as if he were enacting a *rôle* in some fantastic dream-drama from which he should presently awake and find himself—he knew not where. The faint, delicious perfume of the Unknown's presence was about him; the magic of her personality held him as with a spell. They had left the bustle and glare of Piccadilly behind them before she broke the silence.

"You have told me your name," she said, "and there is no reason why you should not be told mine, which is Ida Penleath. I am married, but am living apart from my husband. We could not hit it off together, and consequently deemed it wiser to separate—but here we are at my humble domicile."

The brougham came to a stand as she spoke. Goodreeve alighted, and then helped his companion to do the same. He could just make out that he was at the entrance to a large building, which he rightly conjectured to consist of a number of flats. Next moment the door was opened by the janitor, and he followed Mrs. Penleath into the hall. On the far side was a lift, toward which she led the way.

A minute later they stepped out of the lift on to a landing on the third floor.

"My companion has gone to a concert this evening, so that we shall be alone, and can

talk unreservedly," remarked Mrs. Penleath, with a smile.

With that she crossed to one of the doors and pressed the electric button. At once the door was opened by a youth in livery, and Goodreeve followed his conductress into a charmingly furnished apartment, with two other doors opening out of it. "Dinner will be served in three-quarters of an hour," remarked Mrs. Penleath. Then she said something in a low voice to the page, who thereupon disappeared.

Meanwhile, Mrs. Penleath proceeded in leisurely fashion to take off her outdoor things and deposit them on a couch, chatting inconsequentially as she did so, and not seeming to notice her companion's monosyllabic replies. Then the page reappeared. "If you will be good enough to follow Kit," she said, "you will be enabled to arrange your toilet."

By no means loth was Goodreeve to do as he was requested, although, beyond indulging in a welcome ablution, there was not much that he was in a position to do. What, then, was his amazement when, on following the page into an elegantly appointed bedroom the latter, indicating a dress suit, together with sundry other habiliments, laid out on the bed, said, "For your use, sir. When you want me, will you please to ring?" As he arranged his white tie half an hour later Goodreeve could not help feeling that if civilization has its drawbacks it is not without certain solacements not to be found among the back-blocks of Australia.

Mrs. Penleath clapped her hands at sight of him. "A transformation indeed!" she laughingly exclaimed. "Now you look like your proper self. But come. Dinner is laid in the next room. Of course, I need hardly tell you that I have had it brought in from a restaurant, with a man to wait on us."

She was wearing a marvelous confection of black and yellow, which set off her dusky beauty to perfection. Never, to Goodreeve's thinking, had he looked upon a more supremely lovely woman.

In the presence of the waiter and the page, nothing of a private nature could be broached, and it was not till they were left alone that Goodreeve said to himself, "The moment is at hand."

With a smile and a "*Permettez-moi*," Ida helped herself to a cigarette. "I indulge in a mild whiff once and again. I find that it tends to soothe my nerves," she continued; "and, goodness knows, they have needed soothing of late." Then, as she struck a match, "here comes coffee. I think you will find some tolerable Benedictine in the stand, if you care for it."

"Thanks, I'm doing myself to rights," he replied. He felt as comfortable as a man ought to feel after a capital dinner and three or four glasses of sound wine. Still, he was curious to know what she had to say to him.

But it was not till she had finished her cigarette, and had flicked a speck of ash off her dress, that Mrs. Penleath spoke next.

"You know already that I have separated from my husband," she began. "I bore with his treatment as long as I could, but there came a time when I refused any longer to put up with it. When by accident I encountered you this evening, believing you to be my long-lost Cousin Harry, I cannot tell you how glad I felt, because (putting aside other considerations) I stand dreadfully in need of someone willing to go on a private errand for me, and to execute a certain confidential commission in connection therewith."

"As I have already remarked, you may command me in any way that may seem best to you," replied Goodreeve, earnestly.

"Thank you a thousand times! My instincts are rarely at fault, and from the moment I set eyes on you, I felt sure that you would help me in my need. What I should like you to do, first of all, is to convey a letter to a certain address in the suburbs, and to bring the answer back to me."

"How soon do you wish me to start?"

She glanced at the clock. "We can make ourselves comfortable for another hour," she answered, as she lighted a fresh cigarette.

And a very pleasant hour it proved to be so far as Goodreeve was concerned. Although his hostess was married, her dusky beauty had for him an allurements which he found it impossible to resist. But why should he resist it? After tonight he should probably never see her again. He would bask in her presence while he had the privilege of doing so.

But the evening wore on, and when the

clock chimed the half hour past eight, he felt compelled to say, "Is it not about time for me to set out?"

"Whenever you are ready," replied Mrs. Penleath. "I will fetch the note I want you to deliver."

He was standing with his back to the fire when she returned. She gave him the note, which was simply superscribed, "M. Poltykoff," and then pressed an electric button. Five seconds later Kit entered the room, carrying a fur-lined overcoat and an astrakhan traveling-cap.

"It is a wretchedly inclement night," remarked Mrs. Penleath, "and there is no reason why you should not make yourself as comfortable as possible."

It was a remark with which he cordially agreed; so he permitted Kit to help him on with the coat and accepted the cap at his hands. "I will accompany you to the door," remarked Mrs. Penleath. "I don't suppose that Monsieur Poltykoff will detain you many minutes, and of course you will come back direct here. I shall anxiously await your return." Then, in a lower voice, she added, "I can never, never thank you enough for the service you are rendering me!" A hansom was in waiting. Ida held out her hand. "*Au revoir*, and good luck to you," she said, as she gave Austin's fingers a warm squeeze. "The cabman has had his instructions, and has been settled with beforehand."

Hardly had the cab disappeared before two men, who seemed to spring from nowhere, met face to face opposite Riversdale Mansions, exchanged a dozen words, and then vanished again into the darkness. But Mrs. Penleath, watching from the window of a dark room, had been a witness of the coming together of the men, of their brief colloquy, and of their hurried disappearance in company. The moment she lost sight of them a deep sigh broke from her. It was like the sigh of one from whose heart a great burden has been lifted.

Goodreeve took no note of the direction in which he was being driven, and even had he done so he would have been no wiser, his knowledge of London topography being almost exclusively limited to a slice of the West End and to a few of the main city thoroughfares. Through the rain-smear-

window nothing was discernible save now and again a blurred patch of yellow light as, one after another, the street lamps were left behind. But the point was one that had no interest for him. He had partaken of an excellent dinner; his fur-lined coat was deliciously comfortable; the regular beat of the horse's hoofs on the road, together with the monotonous grind of the cab wheels, formed a sort of rude rhythmic symphony not unsoothing to the ear. Goodreeve's eyes had not been five minutes shut before he was fast asleep.

He was awakened by the stoppage of the cab and the jerking up of the window. The driver got down from his perch. "Here we are, sir," he said. "This is the place I was told to drive you to."

GOODREEVE alighted. The rain was over, the clouds were dispersing, and a few watery-looking stars shone wanly in the sky. Staring about him, he could just make out that he was in what looked like a country road, with no house visible save the one opposite the entrance gate of which the cab had come to a stand. As well as he could distinguish, it was a brick-built mansion of considerable size, standing back in its own grounds. Except for a fanlight over the door, the whole front was in darkness.

Goodreeve pushed open the swing-gate and passed into the grounds. A flight of shallow steps led up to the front door. He could perceive no knocker; but there was a bell-pull at which he gave a vigorous tug, which was responded to by a faint tinkle inside the house. Hardly had the sound died away before the door was opened by an elderly man, whose beard reached nearly to his waist. His hair, parted down the middle, fell to his shoulders, while his sole visible garment was a blue gaberdine, which reached from his neck to his ankles.

"Does Monsieur Poltykoff reside here?" queried Austin.

"For the present Gospodin Poltykoff may be found here," was the roundabout reply.

"I am the bearer of a note for him, if you will be good enough to give it into his hands."

The man took the note with a lowly obeisance. "Will not the gentleman enter? He is

expected," he said, speaking with a pronounced foreign accent.

Goodreeve could not repress a start. Expected? How could that be? However, he crossed the threshold, and next moment the big door clashed behind him with an ominous sound. Without another word the man shambled off and disappeared through a door at the opposite end of the hall, which was of considerable size, and was lighted by a solitary lamp.

At the end of a couple of minutes the man reappeared, and beckoning to Goodreeve, said, "Will monsieur please to follow me?"

Thereupon he led the way down a dimly lighted corridor, at the end of which he opened wide a door, and with a low bow, motioned to Goodreeve to enter. After a moment's hesitation, the latter did so, and he was aware of the door being softly shut behind him.

At a first glance round it seemed an ordinary enough apartment in which he now found himself. Behind a big square table, littered with papers, sat a clean-shaven man of mid-age, with a strong, resolute face and very piercing eyes, who, at the moment of Goodreeve's entrance, was busily writing, but who at once put down his pen, and leaning back in his chair, eyed him keenly in silence. He was seated within the circle of light reflected by a shaded lamp in the center of the table.

Immediately behind M. Poltykoff a huge black screen, quite seven feet high, spread itself across the entire width of the floor, and while Goodreeve was staring at it the silence was broken by the sound of some one coughing behind it. A sudden chill ran through him, he could not have told why.

Presently M. Poltykoff spoke. "I am glad, Mr. Penleath—pray be seated—to find that you have seen fit to comply with the summons which, in the exercise of our duty, we have been under the necessity of serving upon you." Only by the faintest foreign accent did he betray that he was not an Englishman. "Doubtless you are prepared to—"

"One moment, sir, if you please," broke in Goodreeve, who had not availed himself of the others' invitation to be seated. "You are evidently laboring under a misapprehen-

sion. I am not Mr. Penleath, who is an entire stranger to me. My name is Austin Goodreeve." At these words, spoken in his clear, incisive tones, there reached him a low murmur of voices from behind the screen.

"Soh!" exclaimed M. Poltykoff, after a momentary pause, in a tone of polite incredulity, and with a lifting of his eyebrows. "If such is indeed the case, may I ask with what object you are here, and how you came into possession of the note—which is simply my summons enclosed in an envelope and readdressed to me—of which you were the bearer?"

"The note was given me by Mrs. Penleath, with a request to bring it here and take the answer back to her. Beyond that, I know nothing whatever of the affair."

"This is most extraordinary," replied the other, with a caustic smile. "Have you anything about you, may I ask, which will serve to verify the accuracy of your statement?"

Oblivious for the moment of the fact that the overcoat he was wearing was not his own, Goodreeve rummaged in the pockets, and from one of them brought forth a tortoise-shell card-case and a silver match-box. For a moment he stared at them in stupefaction, the next he was deftly relieved of them by a man who stepped up behind him and passed the articles on to M. Poltykoff.

The latter examined them in silence. Then, fixing Goodreeve with his keen glance, he said, "You assert that you are not Ivan Penleath, and yet in your possession are found his card-case and a match-box engraved with his monogram. *Vraiment, c'est une chose singulière!*"

"Possibly it seems so to you, and yet it can be readily explained," replied Austin. "This overcoat is Mr. Penleath's property. Being without one of my own, and the weather being such as it is, at his wife's request, I put it on before coming here."

M. Poltykoff pursed out his underlip and shook his head.

Then he took the green shade off the lamp, and opening a drawer, he took out of it a photograph, and for fully half a minute sat silently comparing it with the features of the man on the other side of the table.

It was an ordeal which stung Goodreeve

to the quick. A vague apprehension of some danger as yet unknown began to creep over him.

"Pray be seated, Mr. Penleath; I have something of grave import to say to you," remarked the Russian, presently. With that, he put back the photograph and replaced the shade over the lamp.

"I tell you, sir, as I have told you already, that I am not Ivan Penleath," was Goodreeve's passionate rejoinder.

"Enough of this child's play!" replied the other in low, stern tones. "Your ruse has failed of its purpose, as it deserved to do, and you stand detected as your proper self. Whether you have any suspicion of the reason for which you have been summoned here, of course I do not know, but I think it not unlikely that you may have. However, be that as it may, it is due to you to state as briefly as possible the charge now laid at your door, and to afford you every opportunity of disproving it, should you be in a position to do so."

He ceased, and drawing toward him some of the papers on the table, he began to look over them. Goodreeve now availed himself of the chair which had been placed for him. He was weary both in body and mind. As all protest on his part seemed useless, he would await further enlightenment before saying more.

Presently M. Poltykoff looked up from his papers. "Ivan Penleath," he said, "in the documents now before me it is charged against you, and on evidence which seems incontestable, that six months ago, when our *confrère*, Alexis Bouroffsky, was in Moscow on a secret mission, you basely betrayed him into the hands of the police; as a consequence of which he was arrested, tried, and sentenced to lifelong deportation to the island of Saghaliën. If you have anything to say in refutation of the charge in question, now is your time to say it." No judge could have spoken in tones more even and unimpassioned. Goodreeve began to realize that he was in an extremely awkward fix.

"I can only affirm once more that I am not the man you assume me to be; and that, consequently, I know nothing whatever of the circumstances of which you have just made mention."

"Ivan Penleath, I warn you that you are trifling with my time and your own. Is that all you have to say?"

"What else can I say?"

"You are, of course, aware of the penalty to which, as a traitor to the Cause, you have rendered yourself liable?"

"How is it possible that I should know anything of the sort? How often am I to tell you that—"

The Russian held up his right hand. "The penalty is death!" Gravely and solemnly the words dropped from his lips.

Then from behind the screen came twelve solemn repetitions of the word "Death!" pronounced by as many different voices.

Goodreeve caught his breath with a gasp, sprang to his feet, and then sank limply back into his chair. He felt as if his blood had been turned into water.

"Now you comprehend, if you did not do so before, to what you have rendered yourself liable," resumed Poltykoff. "Do you still persist in your assertion that you are not Ivan Penleath?"

"I do," was the hoarse reply. "I assert most solemnly that Ivan Penleath is an utter stranger to me, and that my name is Austin Goodreeve."

FOR a few moments M. Poltykoff seemed lost in thought. Then he said, "I must ask you to retire for a few minutes while the Council deliberates upon your case." With that he signed to the man behind Austin, who at once advanced and touched the latter on the shoulder. At the touch he started to his feet, and for a moment his eyes looked straight into Poltykoff's. As they did so, he could not repress a shudder, so cold and merciless was the expression he read there.

Then he turned and followed the man. Outside they were joined by another man, and the two led the way down the corridor, at the end of which they turned to the left and traversed another passage till they came to a certain door, which, on being opened, disclosed a small apartment dimly lighted by a swing lamp.

"Enter, monsieur, if you please," said one of the men persuasively, "It will be for a few minutes only."

Instinctively Goodreeve drew back. "What place is this?" he asked.

But scarcely had the words left his lips before he was gently but irresistibly propelled into the room, and ere he could turn the door shut behind him with a click, and he found himself a prisoner.

So sudden and complete had been the surprise, that for a few seconds he felt mentally stunned. But soon his brain cleared, and he set himself to examine his surroundings. His tiny prison was octagonal in shape, and could not have been more than a dozen or fourteen feet in diameter. Its unplastered walls were composed of small bricks closely cemented; its floor was of slate or of some substance which resembled it; while its roof went up to a point, from which, by a chain, was suspended an oil lamp. Of furniture there was not an article of any kind. It was a strange place in which to shut any one up, were it only for the space of a few minutes.

Then came the question, For what purpose had he been shut up? Even if Penleath were the traitor he was alleged to be, that his life would necessarily have to pay the forfeit was something he, Goodreeve, declined to believe. For his part he had always classed three-fourths of what he read about the nihilists and their doings as so much sensational fiction. That in busy London, and at the close of the nineteenth century, any person or persons who might have incurred their resentment could be quietly "removed" without any stir being made about the affair, or without the perpetrators being ultimately run to earth, was what his common-sense refused to credit.

There being nothing to sit upon, he had folded his arms, and was leaning against the wall, awaiting with growing impatience the moment of his release, when he suddenly became aware of a peculiar movement of the floor on which he was standing. At once his wandering thoughts concentrated themselves, and his lounging posture was exchanged for one of tense alertness. And now, staring intently with eyes which would fain have disbelieved their own evidence, he saw that the farther side of the floor was almost imperceptibly but surely receding from the wall into which it had seemed to be firmly built, leaving an ever-widening

space between the two. No sooner did he realize this as a fact than he was seized with a vertigo, which for a minute or more caused him to seek the support of the wall and so keep himself from falling. Still, the same horrible movement of the floor went on, so that the spot on which he had been standing such a little while before had now disappeared.

Then his presence of mind came back to him. It was clear that the floor was being gradually withdrawn inch by inch from under him, and, in obedience to the action of some hidden mechanism, was vanishing into a recess in the wall on a level with itself and constructed purposely to hold it. But what would be found under it when it should wholly have disappeared? The question sent Goodreeve to his knees in the hope of being able to solve it. But when he peered into the opening, which was now nearly a yard in width, he could discern nothing but a black, impenetrable gulf, the depth of which he had no means of testing. Then, while he was still peering into it, there reached his ears the sound of the faint drip-drip of water somewhere far below. He rose to his feet with a shudder. What was there under him? What was he about to be precipitated into? A noisome dungeon, a foul disused well—or what?

Two strides took him to the door, and he flung himself against it with the energy of desperation, but to no purpose. Then he shouted for help again and again, but with little hope that it would come, listening intently between whiles; but the deadly quietude was unbroken by any sound save the slow dripping of the unseen water under his feet. Everything was clear to him now. Poltykoff and those associated with him, in the belief that he was Ivan Penleath, had determined to punish the latter's treachery by inflicting upon him the dread penalty which the laws made and sworn to by themselves prescribed for any one found guilty of a crime such as the one he was charged with.

For him, Austin Goodreeve, the victim of a terrible mistake, there was no hope—none!

Goodreeve was no braver than the majority of men in his place would



have been. It was not that he flinched at the prospect of death as such—probably he would have faced it with tolerable equanimity on either a battlefield or a bed of sickness. It was the horrible nature of the fate which was creeping upon him inch by inch, and would presently overtake him, that appalled him and filled his soul with the blackness of a despair unilluminated by the faintest ray of hope.

With his back planted against the wall, he stood staring with a sort of horrible fascination at the ever-widening gulf in front of him, moving his feet an inch or two at a time as the floor slid little by little from under them. How long would there remain sufficient space for him to stand upon? A quarter of an hour, or, it might be, twenty minutes at the most. And then! Already he tasted the bitterness of death.

A cold, damp air, as if generated by stagnant water, filled his nostrils. Ghostly fingers seemed to clutch at him. A shadowy face seemed to be staring up at him with drowned eyes out of the darkness. He shivered from head to foot. A palsy of fear had laid hold of him.

Tearing his eyes away from the shadowy face, which he yet knew to be no face, he bent them on the dimly-burning lamp overhead. How many tragedies similar to the one now being enacted had it looked down upon? The question put itself vaguely to him, and then his mind passed on to something else. He was losing the power of consecutive thought, mental stagnation was creeping over him.

Then, while his eyes were still fixed on the lamp, he awoke in an instant to a sense of the most vivid life. An inspiration, for it could be termed nothing less, had flashed lightning-like across his brain, and therewith a hope had been born within him.

**H**E HAD been a clever amateur athlete in his time, chiefly in running or leaping contests; but whether he could succeed in doing that which he was now bent upon trying to do was something doubtful. Still, it was his solitary chance, and desperate though it might seem, it must be attempted. So he stripped off his overcoat, which would have been an encumbrance to him, and let

it drop into the gulf which yawned at his feet. After a second or two the sound of a faint, dull splash reached him, and sent a chill down his spine. By this time the whole of the floor had vanished save a space about three feet wide.

But all his faculties, mental and physical, were now concentrated on the task before him. His eyes were fixed on the lamp, or, rather, on the chain from which it hung. Crouching a little in order to give himself an added impetus, he sprang with all his strength into the air, and clutched wildly with both hands at the chain—clutched at it, grasped it, and clung to it. Would it bear his weight? Should it fail to do so, he would but have anticipated his fate by a few brief minutes.

For some seconds the chain, with Goodreeve clinging to it, swung ominously to and fro, but it did not break; and although he knew that he was by no means out of the wood, despair gave place to hope, and life had never seemed sweeter to him than at that moment.

Cautiously and slowly he worked his way upward till he was in a position to twine his legs round the chain and to rest one foot on the cross-piece from which the lamp was suspended. When he had succeeded thus far and next looked down, there was no floor to be seen. It had wholly disappeared, and he was hanging over the void of blackness in which it had been intended that he should find his grave.

But when a few minutes had passed thus he became aware of something which for a moment or two caused a lump to rise in his throat and every nerve in his body to tingle. The floor was beginning to reappear, emerging almost imperceptibly from its mysterious hiding-place, and seeming to Goodreeve's excited fancy as though it were endowed with a half-human intelligence of its own. It had accomplished its murderous task, and was returning to its place as if nothing had happened.

He could not take his eyes off it. Then suddenly, after a last dying flicker, the lamp went out and he was left in darkness deeper than any he had ever experienced before.

How the next half-hour sped with him he could not afterward have told. His mind

was a prey to a confluence of emotions which would have defied analysis. Hope and fear held him in turn, with brief spells of chill indifference, when to live or die seemed a matter of equal consequence. Physically he was cramped and full of aches, owing to his inability to change his position. He told himself that, after waiting a little while longer, he would drop to the floor, which by that time would be back in its place, and there await whatever might happen next.

And so the weary time wore on. Goodreeve was on the point of dropping from his perch when the silence was broken by a faint noise in the corridor outside. Holding his breath, he waited, and next moment the bolt of the door was shot back, and the door itself opened, disclosing the figure of a man carrying in one hand a lighted lantern, who advanced a little way into the cell and peered about him, but without perceiving Goodreeve overhead in the dark. Now was the latter's chance, and at once he seized it. Dropping to the floor just behind the man, he gripped him round the throat with both hands and sent him and his lantern crashing headlong to the floor. A moment later he was out of the cell and had pulled to the door behind him, which shut with a snap of the bolt. Then he sped swiftly along the two corridors, and so reached the entrance hall, where he paused for a couple of seconds to listen, but all was silence the most profound. A few more strides brought him to the front door, which he found locked and bolted as if the house were shut up for the night. He fumbled nervously with the fastenings, in a sweat of fright the while lest his escape should be cut off at the last moment. But presently the door yielded to his efforts, opening on well-oiled hinges, and he gave a great gasp of relief as he sprang across the threshold of that accursed house into the blessed freedom of the starlit night. Down the drive he raced, not without more than one backward glance, and so emerged into the high road. Whether he turned to the right hand or to the left, he could not afterward have told. He ran as if for a wager, and before long he came within the radius of the street lamps, and found himself traversing a road lined with large detached houses, but in what quarter of the

suburbs it was he had not the remotest notion. It was just as well that he did not encounter a policeman in his flight, seeing that he was bareheaded, that his dress was disordered, and that there was a great smear across his shirt-front due to his close embrace of the sooty chain.

AS HE reached the corner of a side street an empty hansom came bowling out of it. Whereupon he hailed the driver, who at once drew up. "I want to be driven, as quickly as possible, to No. 11, Riversdale Mansions," said Goodreeve. "I presume you know them?"

"I know 'em right enough. Jump in, sir, and I'll drive you straight there," replied the man. That his fare was hatless and seemed to have been in a scrimmage of some sort was no concern of his.

It was a long drive, and in the course of it, Goodreeve had time to pull his wits together. Many disquieting questions put themselves to him, not one of which he was in a position to answer, and he was still pondering them when the cab drew up at Riversdale Mansions. "Mrs. Penleath and I will have to have a very straight talk with each other," he said grimly, as he alighted.

The janitor Goodreeve had seen before answered his summons, and stared somewhat at his appearance.

"I presume that Mrs. Penleath is at home? She is expecting me," said Austin, as he stepped into the hall.

"No, sir," replied the man; "both Mr. and Mrs. Penleath are gone. They left an hour and a half ago, taking their luggage with them. They have given up their flat, and have left no address."

For a few seconds Goodreeve was too stupefied to speak. Then he said, "I was under the impression that Mrs. Penleath was living apart from her husband."

"Nothing of the sort, sir. They took flat No. 11 ready furnished, a month ago, and have been living here ever since. Here is a note sir, which Mrs. Penleath asked me to give you."

He took the note, hardly knowing that he did so. His mind was in a whirl, but one fact stood out in clear relief. He had been tricked and befooled. Mrs. Penleath had

made him the scapegoat for her husband, caring little what risks he might run, so long as a door was opened for the latter's escape. Oh, it was monstrous—monstrous!

Crossing to the lamp by the lift, he tore open the envelope, which was addressed, "Austin Goodreeve, Esq." It contained a banknote for twenty pounds, but not a scrap of writing. Had Mrs. Fenleath, then, in happy ignorance of the penalty incurred by her husband, acted in the full belief that he, Goodreeve, would come back safe and sound from the errand she had sent him on? It almost looked as if such were the case.

But the janitor, standing by the open door, was regarding him curiously, and the cabman was waiting. Something must be decided, and

at once. Recrossing the hall, he said to the doorkeeper, "Have you a spare room where you can put me up for the night? I have been set upon by hooligans, and am not fit to go to a hotel."

"Excuse the question, sir, but are you related to Mr. Penleath? I ask on account of the remarkable likeness between you."

"We are cousins," replied Austin, mendaciously.

"His room is vacant, sir, if—"

"The very thing. I will discharge my cabby, and then to bed."

Probably his own clothes were still where he had left them. He would don them again in the morning, thankful that he could call his life his own, the world still before him.