

AN INTERVENTION OF PROVIDENCE.

Eoghan MacDiarmada,

CHAPTER I.



HAD gained a little notoriety in detective work, and, being satisfied with that, had determined to withdraw from the arena. I was growing somewhat old, to be sure.

It was a cold December evening. I sat by the fireside pondering on many things. The postman's knock disturbed my reflections. There were three or four letters, a newspaper, and the final proof-sheets of my "Reminiscences." I looked at the envelope of each letter carefully—that is a habit of mine—then selecting one that I knew was from an especial friend, I opened it and read:

"Mrs. Madeline De Barre will deem it a particular honour if Mr. Robert Jarvis can find a little leisure from his pursuits to present himself at eight o'clock on to-morrow evening at 'The Willows'."

I had to smile at the nice formality of the note; but the underlining of the word "par-

ticular" seemed to indicate that Dame Madeline had something up her sleeve.

Next day I presented myself as requested at Madam De Barre's, and was ushered into the midst of a very juvenile and pleasant party. My hostess made me known to the company, and, by my word, for an old fogey I was not at all badly received.

I found myself seated beside a very pretty little woman who possessed an infinitely sweet face—the tenderest it has ever been my joy to look upon. Two glorious grey eyes smiled on me.

"Excuse me," said I, addressing her, "I did not catch your name, and, you know, an old fellow like me has the right of asking all sorts of impertinent questions."

She smiled and replied—"Beatrice Lipsette."

"I have seen you often before," said I; and perhaps she, too, remembered having seen me, for she blushed prettily. I had met her on more than one occasion during my strolls in St. Michael's Wood. She was always in the company of one who was undoubtedly her sweetheart. "Surely you don't mean to tell me," I resumed, after a



MR BERTRAM BINKLEY CAME OUT

moment's pause—and I glanced around the room—"that you have come without him?"

I smiled pleasantly—or at least I thought I did so. She did not reciprocate my gaiety, but sadly and somewhat hurriedly made reply:

"Oh, Mr. Jarvis, it is of him I wish to speak to you. He has disappeared. It is all a terrible mystery. My heart will break. Oh, Bernard, Bernard!" And the poor little thing broke down utterly.

I waited till she was composed, availing of the interval to glance at the company. I detected that although the party was a talkative and merry one, a dark, keen eye was rivetted on Beatrice and myself. Instinctively I disliked the possessor.

Beatrice dried her tears, and looking up into my face with wonderful tenderness and trust, with a pleading supplication in the splendid eyes, said—

"Mrs. De Barre and my father were old friends, and it was she who suggested that I should meet you here. Oh, she says, you are wonderful, Mr. Jarvis."

"Not at all," said I; "but I'll help you by every means in my power."

I was certainly becoming soft-hearted before the piteous plight of the lovely girl.

"Give me, Miss Lipsette," I asked, "the fullest particulars leading up to your husband's disappearance?"

"My husband!"

"Oh, I mean your fiance. He would, were it not for what has happened, have been your husband by now—isn't that so?"

"Yes. How did you come to know that?"

"Never mind; give me an account of all that happened leading up to Bernard Cuthbert's disappearance."

"But I am interested to find out how you came to know we would have been married only for this awful mystery. You know his name too. Ah, Mrs. De Barre has told you."

"No, my dear," said I. "Look at this card that I've just picked up from the carpet." It was their wedding invitation. She took the card mechanically from me and began:

"Old Sir John Cuthbert, Bernard's uncle, was very rich, but eccentric and reserved. He never married, living alone with the servants at Brook House. His only living relations, so far as I'm aware, were Bernard and another nephew, by name Charles Diggin. Charles was, till he committed himself in some way, the recognised heir to all the old man's wealth. But the offence, whatever it was, must have been pretty heinous in his uncle's eyes, for it entailed Charles's expulsion from Brook House and vicinity. He emigrated with whatever money was given him, travelling, I believe, the world over. But that is not my story.

"Old Sir John, when he felt death near, drew up his will, and asked Bernard, with whom he was on fairly good terms it would seem, to deposit it with his bankers, and obtain a receipt for it. The will was in a strong wrapper, and carefully sealed with the great arms of the Cuthberts—a hare rampant on a white field, and something or other couchant. I'm no hand at heraldry. Oh, all this is wearisome, sir."

"Not at all," I interrupted. "Every detail is of the utmost importance."

Beatrice resumed—"Bernard at about 3 o'clock in the evening of last Thursday set out from Brook House. He certainly arrived at the bank and delivered up the packet with which he was entrusted. The manager has no doubt as to his identity, for he has given, even to the pattern of tie he wore, the fullest particulars, and these agree with Bernard's appearance and what he wore at the time of his leaving for the bank. The will was not to be opened till after the death of Sir John."

"He is dead, is he not?" I asked.

"Yes. He died rather suddenly the night of Bernard's disappearance."

"And the will," said I, "has been read?"

Beatrice nodded.

"Bernard does not benefit; Charles does?" I added.

"That is so," asserted Beatrice quickly.

"But, please, Mr. Jarvis, disabuse your mind of any suspicion it may entertain respecting Mr. Charles Diggin. He is as innocent as I am, and feels acutely the strange unaccountable mystery surrounding his cousin's disappearance. He stayed with my sisters and myself from the time of Bernard's departure till close on midnight, and then, having notified the police and procured assistance, sought diligently high and low."

"Bernard got the will at three o'clock. Did he go direct to the bank with it?" I asked.

"No. On his way from Sir John Cuthbert's he met with his cousin, who said that, as he had some business in the city too, he would accompany him if he would but wait a half-hour or so. Bernard said he would be found at my house till half-past three, at which time punctually Charles Diggin appeared."

"He did not go with Bernard, however?" I queried.

"No," said Beatrice, a little petulantly, for she now saw my drift. "It was a wild, dark night, Mr. Jarvis, and raining heavily. Charles decided to remain till Bernard's return, which would be within an hour, and then we should all go to the theatre."

"Sir John died about half-past three—in fact, some time before that—on the evening of Bernard Cuthbert's disappearance?" said I.

Beatrice pondered for a moment before replying, and then said that that would probably be the time, but was not sure. "Anyway," said she, "it's immaterial."

"You have Bernard's photo?" I asked, with a smile. She had, to be sure, encased in a splendid gold locket. I examined it minutely, asking a few necessary questions. Luckily I had, as already stated, a slight knowledge of the missing one's appearance.

"That will do," said I. "Can you call on me to-morrow morning at, say, nine o'clock?"

She promised; but in doing so gave me not a look of gratitude and confidence, which, to tell the truth, I had not expected, but a painful puzzled look that was half pity—pity, no doubt, for my muddled brain. In fact, my brain was very clear. I had good ground work to go upon.

Mrs. De Barre long afterwards informed me that after I left Beatrice ran out of the room. She followed, and the poor distracted girl threw herself, in a paroxysm of despair and tears, into her arms, crying—"Oh, he is stupid—stupid as a pig! And now there is no hope. Bernard, O, Bernard, you are lost—lost!"

CHAPTER II.



BEFORE the arrival of Beatrice Lipsette next morning I had a busy few hours in piecing together my deductions, and jotting down questions that I intended putting her. I walked up and down the diningroom, as is my wont when in a quandary, sipping every now and then my coffee, and eating absent-mindedly a piece of dry toast. The more I resolved the mysterious disappearance of Bernard Cuthbert in my mind the deeper I sank in the bog. Many of my first assumptions fell to pieces when closely examined. I was angry—I rang the bell sharply and ordered up more coffee. The maid withdrew in terror, and as she returned with a fresh supply of my favourite beverage and placed it on the table she watched me cautiously as though I were a wild beast and might at any moment spring upon her and devour her.

"If the will had been taken from him," said I for the hundredth time, "there might have been some justification for his disappearance. But there's the will safely deposited, receipted; Bernard Cuthbert identified as the man who handed it in, the seal intact, bearing the rampant hare and the rest of the menagerie." I was still up against a thick wall of immense proportions when the arrival of Miss Beatrice Lipsette was announced.

After a few words of the usual commonplace nonsense, not forgetting the eternal weather question, I began abruptly:

"The old rascal—oh, excuse me! I mean Sir John Cuthbert died at a little past three o'clock rather suddenly on December the 4th?"

And the cause of death was?

"Heart disease or some such complaint," answered my visitor.

"Who was with him when he died?"

"No one at the moment. The nurse had just left the room, but on hearing a loud scream quickly returned. Sir John was dead."

"How did the nurse come to leave the room?"

"She was sent for by the housekeeper; such was the information I got."

"No suspicion of foul play?"

"Oh, not at all, sir. How could there?"

"Who witnessed the will?"

"The housekeeper—a Mrs. Deane—and a solicitor's clerk."

"His name?"

"Bertram Blinkly, of the firm of Messrs. Squelch and Robb."

"Mr. Blinkly drafted the will—isn't that so?"

"Yes."

I was beginning to see the light; I was beginning to see more than light. It looked an uglier business than I at first anticipated. Old Sir John was treacherously hurried before his Maker: that I'd swear. But time was pressing, and if no regard was had for the old man neither would any be entertained for Bernard Cuthbert. Perhaps already he was dead. And I was convinced that that will was a forgery.

"Three things," said I, addressing Beatrice, who looked up as I spoke and seemed prettier and gentler than ever, "three things are forced upon my intelligence. To begin with the will produced is not that originally made and signed by Sir John."

"Oh, but the witnesses can swear to their signatures and to the signature of Sir John."

"We'll see to that," said I. "Then there is the second verity: Sir John Cuthbert got a foul death."

"O, my God!" exclaimed the bewildered girl. "You'll say next that Bernard killed him. Say it! say it! But what had he to gain by doing so? Oh, you are a monster!" And the pretty bright-eyed little woman looked decidedly fascinating as the colour rose to her cheeks and the fine grey eyes blazed.

"Hush, hush!" said I kindly, for I like a spirited show of temper, "the matter is far more serious than you think. The third point made clear to me is that Bernard Cuthbert is in safe keeping for the present. I won't say more. Let us hope he may be rescued before it's too late."

I was just in time to catch the slight graceful form in my arms. Beatrice had fainted.

That afternoon I sought out the offices of Messrs. Squelch and Robb and casually asked a gentleman who happened to come out as I reached the door at what time the concern usually closed.

"At five sharp," said he, and at five to five I was in the vicinity again. I kept in hiding. My quarry, Mr. Bertram Blinkly, came out, and, looking cautiously up and down the street, instead of turning either to the left or the right, darted across the roadway and down a narrow lane. I hastened to the entrance just in time to see him take a sharp turn to the right about fifty yards away. Hurrying after him, I with some difficulty kept him in view, at the same time screening myself from observation. Often he turned and looked back, as if expecting someone in pursuit. "Hello!" said I, pleasantly, "this will do." But I was too sanguine. As if the earth had opened and swallowed him, he disappeared.

Next evening, however, I had better luck. Carefully disguised as a loungee of the district, I waited near the spot where on the previous evening he had eluded me. A man of rough, seafaring appearance came along cautiously, closely followed by Charles Diggin and Bertram Blinkly. All three disappeared through the open doorway of a squalid eating-house. I was somewhat chary of entering after them lest Charles Diggin should recognise me, for it was he who gave me that sharp look on the night of my first meeting with Beatrice at the house of Mrs. De Barre, and which so completely placed him at a disadvantage in my estimation. However, my disguise was perfect, withal. I was taking no risks, and addressing a poor, shivering wretch who leant against a publichouse, I asked where it was possible to get a bit to eat. He pointed with a lean, bony finger to the miserable little shop, and giving himself a shrug muttered something almost inaudible.

"You'd have a mouthful yourself, mate" said I.

"Ah, that I would, thank 'e," said he, with glad eyes.

"Come, then," I called, and together we entered, he going first and I following immediately behind, so close that his tall, ragged figure screened me from the sharp gaze of the three conspirators, who sat in the farthest corner of the room from the door. There was a rather dirty, smoking lamp near them; it was the only light in the place. We slouched into a seat in a remote nook from the door on the left, I sitting with my back to the wall. I required no particulars of them. Charles and Bertram were already sufficiently well known to me, and I had carefully noted in my mind the distinguishing peculiarities of the seafaring man.

A dirty, fat-faced woman attended on us. I persuaded my companion to eat both his own share and mine, which he did with a will. I made an excuse that somehow my hunger was gone, saying dejectedly that I was too weak to eat.

"Ah, it's many a time I was like that myself," said he. And reaching over his mouth to my ear whispered, "A drop of spirits, mate, that's what you want, an' Mrs. Pudd has it better than you'd get in any house in town." I realised that I was in a shibeen on hearing this. Two glasses of whiskey—indeed on fasting it proved to be poteen—were ordered by my companion, who was evidently known to the dirty fat-faced old hag who ran the establishment. I paid, of course. Having drunk the greater part of his the old man, giving me a sly wink, informed me that for the last few evenings "the three boyos" there took a fair share of it.

"The two young chaps have something good in hands," said he, "when they go with Captain Spog. Oh, a rum un—a rum un, the same captain."

The "spirits" were telling on my companion. He was in no mood to stir. I made an excuse and went out, for I thought that I detected a move was about being made by the trio. I had, however, a good two hours or more to wait. The first to come out was Spog. An uncouth, powerful, villainous-looking man he seemed as he stood in the dim light of the doorway, evidently well under the influence of drink. Bertram and Charles followed.

Rain fell heavily, and a cold, biting east wind blew gustily. It was pitch dark. Passing a lamp I saw Spog make a few terrible gestures that almost froze my blood. I nerved myself for a final desperate tussle.

All three parted, each going a different direction. I followed Blinky. He had just turned the key in the door of his lodging and was about to step inside when I laid my hand on his shoulder, saying as I did so, "Excuse me."

He was so preoccupied with his own thoughts that he had not heard my footsteps behind him, and now turned upon me a face of terror and ashy paleness.

"What do you want?" said he snappishly. "Who are you? I have nothing to give you." I ignored his questions and pushed my way inside. "Don't raise your voice, Mr. Blinky, if you please," said I. "Lead on, Macbeth!"

He must have realised that obedience was the safer course, for without saying another word he led the way upstairs to a back room. A lighted lamp stood on a small writing table. There was a cheerful fire burning in the grate.

"This is pleasant," I commented. He raised the light and looked at me sharply.

"Explain this intrusion," said he rather courageously; I'll admit.

"Easily done," I replied. "And expedition is the very thing I'm bent on." I looked at him full as I spoke, and was struck at the strange resemblance in many ways that bore to the missing man, Bernard Cuthbert.

"You know Spog," I continued, "I have watched you and Charles Diggin and this rascal to-night. If any harm comes to Bernard Cuthbert the rogues will hang, or I'm not Robert Jarvis. You're clever at the pen, Mr. Blinky. You know something of old Sir John Cuthbert's will—eh? Of two wills of his, in fact—the original and true one and the counterfeit one, in which, of course, Mr. Charles Diggin is not in the least interested. You follow?"

He looked puzzled, wondering how much I knew and how I came to know it. The debate in his mind was as easily read as though it were on paper.

"I'm the upper dog now," said I. "Your schemes are already frustrated. Save your neck. I give you this chance. Lead me to Spog."

"I will," said he, impulsively; and through that drenching, pitiless, murky night he led me on and on for hours. It was a congenial night for the sort of work plotted by these unscrupulous men. We reached the sea coast at a point far from human habitation.

"You see yonder red speck of light?" said Blinky. "That is the brig Susan Miranda."

"Captain Spog?" I added. He nodded, and seemed anxious and willing to put off for the vessel at once. A boat was pulled up on the shingle. I saw the trap, but too late. What chance had I, single-handed, against Spog and Blinky? And yet it was nothing but pride, independence, distrust of others, that left me in this tight corner. Nor was this the first occasion in which I did something equally foolish. At the time such a crisis seemed eminently heroic—in fact, it was the very thing I sought. I set my teeth and took my seat in the boat, Blinky rowing. I quietly shook hands with a trusted friend—a six-chambered revolver—and determined to act the max. It may not be amiss to state that Blinky was unarmed—I took that precaution before setting out with him.

Nearing the brig I saw a form pass under the lamp that hung by the main-mast.

"Keep off!" came the hoarse command. We paid no attention, and next moment a shot whizzed past. I waited, and as if Providence was on my side, the first rays of the rising moon showed me plainly the assailant crouching on the deck. It could be none other than Spog. He hurriedly rose up, taken unawares by the moonlight. I fired and had the satisfaction of seeing him fall.

"He is rising again," said Blinky, directing my attention. Next moment I got a stunning stroke of an oar that sent me tumbling into the sea. I caught hold of the boat and overturned it. Blinky avoided my attentions and reached the Susan Miranda in safety. I was beaten. Already the boat was drifting towards a small rocky islet that lay close by. I reached the barren little spot, which to me at the time was a paradise, and, to my great delight, found the boat bottom upwards, close at hand. I pulled it up on a ledge of rock, and, sitting on it, surveyed the good ship Susan Miranda riding proudly at anchor. I really felt inclined to laugh; my whole proceeding was so utterly mad-brained. And this, too, the crowning act of my long experience! But the tragedy of the affair soon banished the ludicrousness of the situation. There rose up before me the appealing sweet face of Beatrice, and in my ears rang the death-cry of poor Bernard Cuthbert, who lay securely bound in that accursed prison-ship!

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I snook the dripping water from my tramp's rags as I stood up. I walked a little way round the bare island, the better to view the "Susan Miranda." I thought I heard a sigh, as if borne from the ship; but surely I was mistaken. I listened attentively. Yes; there it was easily distinguishable from the innumerable murmurs of the sea. I went towards a large upright stone that formed a sort of door to what, it would seem, a cave in the rocks. Again I listened, and examined it more closely. To my astonishment it was held securely in position on the outside by a rough bar of iron firmly fixed across it. This I hastily removed, and, peering into the cave, called if anyone was there. There came a feeble response. I groped my way forward, and soon laid hands on a warm human face.

"Bernard Cuthbert!" I cried. There was a low "Yes" that seemed terrible in that impenetrable darkness. Catching the doomed man's bonds, I caught him up in my arms. I sought the boat, but of what use was it without oars, and they were nowhere to be seen!

Every moment I feared pursuit, but none came. What if Spog and Blinky, with Charles Diggin's payments for what had been done and was about being done, in their pockets, had agreed to go no farther? I looked towards the mainland and calculated its distance. It was not a quarter of a mile off, and beside the tide was ebbing fast. Catching up the emaciated Bernard Cuthbert in my arms, I stepped boldly into the water. In my then mood of desperation I would have swam with him to shore. It was unnecessary. The water scarcely reached my neck. I thanked God for his intervention.

That morning when I reached home there was a telegram awaiting me. It had come the previous evening. My sister was dying. I warmed myself, changed my clothes, eat a good hearty breakfast, and took the 9.27 o'clock train for Dilworth.

Great was my joy to find that my sister was, after all, past danger. She grew better day by day; but if she did, on the third day of my visit to Dilworth I myself had to lie down. That night's work was too much for an old man. I lay for weeks tossing feverishly on my couch of pain, and it was months before I was fit to go abroad again. Meanwhile Mrs. de Barre had written me what I already knew. With many expressions of admiration and thanks and messages of tearful gratitude from Bernard Cuthbert and Beatrice Lipsette she unfolded such details as shall, however, be given in brief.

Blinky and Spog disappeared. The true will of Sir John Cuthbert was found in Blinky's lodgings on search being made. By it Bernard Cuthbert benefited solely. It was dated December the 3rd, whereas the counterfeit one was dated the 2nd. Blinky had evidently his own motive in this—who knows? He was too clever for even Charles Diggin, who, by the way, absconded from justice.

Bernard Cuthbert's disappearance was brought about by Blinky and Spog, who seized him at a deserted spot on his way to the bank. Blinky, immediately donning Ber-

nard's clothes, and, having substituted the forged will for the true one, set out for the bank, where he readily passed for the captive, whom he somewhat resembled.

The old housekeeper, Mrs. Deane, was in the plot, and would appear to have an inordinate leaning towards the scapegrace, Diggin.

Her master had an overpowering suspicious dread of the fox; perhaps from the fact of his having been a notorious fox-hunter in his early days. Diggin availed himself of this knowledge. He disguised himself so as to appear a huge reynard, with the aid of an old foxskin and head, and then at the moment the nurse was called from the old man's side, stepped through the bedroom window, which had been left insecure by the housekeeper.

The horrible apparition did its fell work on the feeble old Baronet. He died of fright; had he not, Diggin would scarcely have scrupled to put an end to him otherwise. He was a merciless man, wearing as *sauve* and passable an expression as ever graced an alderman, and had had his hand in many a dark deed during his wanderings. Spog and he had met before. He hated his uncle with a malignant hatred, which he, however, never revealed. The animosity was mutual. The love the old uncle once bore him was turned into inveterate dislike.

Charles Diggin, as his uncle gave the awful cry of death, was not unnerved. He quickly seized the old man's seal (which he, however, next day replaced) and decamped, passing it immediately to Blinky, who was in hiding close by, and who used it to what purpose has been shown. Was not Diggin cool to throw off his disguise and quietly walk towards Beatrice Lipsette's home, there to meet her and Bernard Cuthbert with the greatest nonchalance?

On my return to town again the summer had already come. I would have gone to see Bernard and his gentle Beatrice (who, in consequence of Sir John Cuthbert's death, had postponed their nuptials) immediately on my arrival were it not that the next day was a Sunday, and eminently tempting to one in my convalescent state to stroll abroad. I took a solitary, contemplative walk—which has ever been my great delight—in the woods of St. Michael.

I was admiring a lovely blackbird that sang in the bushes, when suddenly on my ear was borne the sound of footsteps. I looked, and there, arm-in-arm, coming towards me, were Beatrice and Bernard!

Beatrice clapped her hands, and uttering a little cry of delight, hurried towards me. She took my hand in her own two warm little ones, and spoke not a word. The big tears ran down her face. Bernard's attempt at thankfulness was little better. Beatrice, however, dried her tears, and, looking slyly with a smile at Bernard, asked, "Shall I?"

"Certainly," said he, laughing, "a thousand!" She threw her two arms round my neck and kissed my old, grey-whiskered face.