Poirot Investigates *1924*

The Adventure of the Western Star
The Tragedy at Marsdon Manor
The Adventure of the Cheap Flat
The Mystery of Hunter's Lodge
The Million Dollar Bond Robbery
The Adventure of the Egyptian Tomb
The Jewel Robbery at the Grand Metropolitan
The Kidnapped Prime Minister
The Disappearance of Mr. Davenheim
The Adventure of the Italian Nobleman
The Case of the Missing Will

Partners in Crime *1929*

A Fairy in the Flat
A Pot of Tea
The Affair of the Pink Pearl
The Affair of the Sinister Stranger
Finessing the King
The Gentleman Dressed in Newspaper
The Case of the Missing Lady
Blindman's Bluff
The Man in the Mist
The Crackler
The Sunningdale Mystery
The House of the Lurking Death
The Unbreorble Alibi
The Clergyman's Daughter
The Red House
The Ambassador's Boots
The Man Who Was Number 16

The Mysterious Mr. Quin *1930*

The Coming of Mr. Quin
The Shadow on the Glass
At the Bells and Morley
The Sign in the Sky
The Soul of the Croupier

The World's End
The Voice in the Dark
The Face of Helen
The Dead Harlequin
The Bird With the Broken Wings
The Man From the Sea
Harlequin's Lane

The Thirteen Problems (The Tuesday Club Murders) *1932*

The Affair at the Bungalow
The Blood-Stained Pavement
The Blue Geranium
A Christmas Tragedy
The Companion
Death by Drowning
The Four Suspects
The Herb of Death
The Idol House of Astarte
Ingots of Gold
Motive vs. Opportunity
The Thumb Mark of St. Peter
The Tuesday Night Club

The Hound of Death *1933*

The Hound of Death
The Red Signal
The Fourth Man
The Gipsy
The Lamp
Wireless (Where There's a Will)
The Witness for the Prosecution
The Mystery of the Blue Jar
The Strange Case of Sir Arthur Carmichael
The Call of Wings
The Last Séance (The Stolen Ghost)
SOS

Parker Pyne Investigates (Mr. Parker Pyne, Detective) *1934*

The Case of the Middle-Aged Wife
The Case of the Discontented Soldier
The Case of the Distressed Lady
The Case of the Discontented Husband
The Case of the Rich Woman
The Case of the City Clerk
The Pearl of Price
The House at Shiraz
Death on the Nile
The Gate of Baghdad
Have You Got Everything You Want?
The Oracle at Delphi

The Listerdale Mystery *1934*

The Listerdale Mystery (The Benevolent Butler)
Philomel Cottage
The Girl in the Train
Sing a Song of Sixpence
The Manhood of Edward Robinson (The Day of His Dreams)
Accident
Jane in Search of a Job
A Fruitful Sunday
Mr. Eastwood's Adventure (The Mystery of the Spanish Shawl / The Mystery of the Second Cucumber)
The Golden Ball
The Rajah's Emerald
Swan Song

Murder in the Mews (Dead Man's Mirror) *1937*

Dead Man's Mirror (Hercule Poirot and the Broken Mirror)
The Incredible Theft
Murder in the Mews (Good Night for a Murder)
Triangle at Rhodes (Before It's Too Late / Double Alibi)

The Labours of Hercules *1947*

The Nemean Lion
The Lernean Hydra
The Arcadian Deer
The Erymanthian Boar
The Augean Stables
The Stymphalean Birds
The Cretan Bull
The Horses of Diomedes
The Girdle of Hyppolita
The Flock of Geryon
The Apples of the Hesperides
The Capture of Cerberus

Three Blind Mice *1950*

(Only the title story is included here to avoid duplicating)

The Adventure of the Christmas Pudding *1960*

The Adventure of the Christmas Pudding
The Mystery of the Spanish Chest
The Underdog
Four and Twenty Blackbirds (Poirot and the Regular Customer)
The Dream (The Three Strange Points)
Greenshaw's Folly

Poirot's Early Cases (Hercule Poirot's Early Cases) *1974*

The Affair at the Victory Ball
The Adventure of the Clapham Cook
The Cornish Mystery
The Adventure of Johnnie Waverly (At the Stroke of Twelve)
The Double Clue
The King of Clubs
The LeMesurier Inheritance
The Lost Mine
The Plymouth Express
The Chocolate Box

The Submarine Plans (another version of The Incredible Theft)
The Third Floor Flat
Double Sin (By Road or Rail)
The Market Basing Mystery
Wasp's Nest
The Veiled Lady
Problem at Sea (Poirot and the Crime in Cabin 66 / The Quickness of the Hand)
How Does Your Garden Grow?

Miss Marple's Final Cases and Two Other Stories *1979*

Sanctuary (The Man on the Chancel Steps)
Strange Jest
The Tape-Measure Murder
The Case of the Caretaker
The Case of the Perfect Maid
Miss Marple Tells a Story
The Dressmaker's Doll
In a Glass, Darkly

Problem at Pollensa Bay *1991*

Problem at Pollensa Bay
The Second Gong (another version of Dead Man's Mirror)
Yellow Iris
The Harlequin Tea Set
The Regatta Mystery
The Love Detectives
Next To A Dog
Magnolia Blossom

While the Light Lasts *1997*

The House of Dreams
The Actress (A Trap for the Unwary)
The Edge
The Christmas Adventure / The Theft of the Royal Ruby (another version of The Adventure of the Christmas Pudding)
The Lonely God

Manx Gold
Within a Wall
The Mystery of the Baghdad Chest (another version of The Mystery of the Spanish Chest)
While the Light Lasts

Short stories by Agatha Christie have been published in many collections, lots of them duplicating each other. For example, *The Harlequin Tea Set* contains almost all the same stories as *While the Light Lasts*. But a little sorting out has revealed that there are just 15 collections comprising ALL short stories by Agatha Christie without any omission or duplicating.

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The Adventure of the 'Western Star'

I was standing at the window of Poirot's rooms looking out idly on the street below.

'That's queer,' I ejaculated suddenly beneath my breath.

'What is, *mon ami*?' asked Poirot placidly, from the depths of his comfortable chair.

'Deduce, Poirot, from the following facts! Here is a young lady, richly dressed - fashionable hat, magnificent furs. She is coming along slowly, looking up at the houses as she goes. Unknown to her, she is being shadowed by three men and a middle-aged

woman. They have just been joined by an errand boy who points after the girl, gesticulating as he does so. What drama is this being played? Is the girl a crook, and are the shadowers detectives preparing to arrest her? Or are *they* the scoundrels, and are they plotting to attack an innocent victim? What does the great detective say?'

'The great detective, *mon ami*, chooses, as ever, the simplest course. He rises to see for himself.' And my friend joined me at the window.

In a minute he gave vent to an amused chuckle.

'As usual, your facts are tinged with your incurable romanticism. That is Miss Mary Marvell, the film star. She is being followed by a bevy of admirers who have recognized her. And, *en passant*, my dear Hastings, she is quite aware of the fact!'

I laughed.

'So all is explained! But you get no marks for that, Poirot. It was a mere matter of recognition.'

'*En vérité!* And how many times have you seen Mary Marvell on the screen, *mon cher*?'

I thought.

'About a dozen times perhaps.'

'And I - once! Yet *I* recognize her, and *you* do not.'

'She looks so different,' I replied rather feebly.

'Ah! *Sacré!*' cried Poirot. 'Is it that you expect her to promenade herself in the streets of London in a cowboy hat, or with bare feet, and a bunch of curls, as an Irish colleen? Always with you it is the non-essentials! Remember the case of the dancer. Valerie Saintclair.'

I shrugged my shoulders, slightly annoyed.

'But console yourself, *mon ami*,' said Poirot, calming down. 'All cannot be as Hercule Poirot! I know it well.'

'You really have the best opinion of yourself of anyone I ever knew!' I cried, divided between amusement and annoyance.

'What will you? When one is unique, one knows it! And others share that opinion - even, if I mistake not, Miss Mary Marvell.'

'What?'

'Without doubt. She is coming here.'

'How do you make that out?'

'Very simply. This street, it is not aristocratic, *mon ami*! In it there is no fashionable doctor, no fashionable dentist - still less is there a fashionable milliner! But there *is* a fashionable detective. *Oui*, my friend, it is true - I am become the mode, the *dernier cri!* One says to another: '*Comment?* You have lost your gold pencil-case? You must go to the little Belgian. He is too marvellous! Everyone goes! *Courez!*' And they arrive! In flocks, *mon ami*! With problems of the most foolish!' A bell rang below. 'What did I tell you? That is Miss Marvell.'

As usual, Poirot was right. After a short interval, the American film star was ushered in, and we rose to our feet.

Mary Marvell was undoubtedly one of the most popular actresses on the screen. She had only lately arrived in England in company with her husband, Gregory B. Rolf, also a film actor. Their marriage had taken place about a year ago in the States and this was their first visit to England. They had been given a great reception. Everyone was prepared to go mad over Mary Marvell, her wonderful clothes, her furs, her jewels, above all one jewel, the great diamond which had been nicknamed, to match its owner, 'The Western Star.' Much, true and untrue, had been written about this famous stone which was reported to be insured for the enormous sum of fifty thousand pounds.

All these details passed rapidly through my mind as I joined with Poirot in greeting our fair client.

Miss Marvell was small and slender, very fair and girlish-looking, with the wide innocent blue eyes of a child.

Poirot drew forward a chair for her, and she commenced talking at once.

'You will probably think me very foolish, Monsieur Poirot, but Lord Cronshaw was telling me last night how wonderfully you cleared up the mystery of his nephew's death, and I felt that I just must have your advice. I dare say it's only a silly hoax - Gregory says so - but it's just worrying me to death.'

She paused for breath. Poirot beamed encouragement.

'Proceed, madame. You comprehend, I am still in the dark.'

'It's these letters.' Miss Marvell unclasped her handbag, and drew out three envelopes which she handed to Poirot.

The latter scrutinized them closely.

'Cheap paper - the name and address carefully printed. Let us see the inside.' He drew out the enclosure.

I had joined him, and was leaning over his shoulder. The writing consisted of a single sentence, carefully printed like the envelope. It ran as follows:

'The great diamond which is the left eye of the god must return whence it came.'

The second letter was couched in precisely the same terms, but the third was more explicit:

'You have been warned. You have not obeyed. Now the diamond will be taken from you. At the full of the moon, the two diamonds which are the left and right eye of the god shall return. So it is written.'

'The first letter I treated as a joke,' explained Miss Marvell. 'When I got the second, I began to wonder. The third one came yesterday, and it seemed to me that, after all, the matter might be more serious than I had imagined.'

'I see they did not come by post, these letters.'

'No; they were left by hand - by a *Chinaman*. That is what frightens me.'

'Why?'

'Because it was from a Chink in San Francisco that Gregory bought the stone three years ago.'

'I see, madame, that you believe the diamond referred to to be - '

'"The Western Star,"' finished Miss Marvell. 'That's so. At the time, Gregory remembers that there was some story attached to the stone, but the Chink wasn't handing out any information. Gregory says he seemed just scared to death, and in a mortal hurry to get rid of the thing. He only asked about a tenth of its value. It was Greg's wedding present to me.'

Poirot nodded thoughtfully.

'The story seems of an almost unbelievable romanticism. And yet - who knows? I pray of you, Hastings, hand me my little almanac.'

I complied.

'*Voyons!*' said Poirot, turning the leaves. 'When is the date of the full moon? Ah, Friday next. That is in three days' time. *Eh bien*, madame, you seek my advice - I give it to you. This *belle histoire* may be a hoax - but it may not! Therefore I counsel you to place the diamond in my keeping until after Friday next. Then we can take what steps we please.'

A slight cloud passed over the actress's face, and she replied constrainedly:

'I'm afraid that's impossible.'

'You have it with you - *hein?*' Poirot was watching her narrowly.

The girl hesitated a moment, then slipped her hand into the bosom of her gown, drawing out a long thin chain. She leaned forward, unclosing her hand. In the palm, a stone of white fire, exquisitely set in platinum, lay and winked at us solemnly.

Poirot drew in his breath with a long hiss.

'*Épatant!*' he murmured. 'You permit, madame?' He took the jewel in his own hand and scrutinized it keenly, then restored it to her with a little bow. 'A magnificent stone - without a flaw. Ah, *cent tonnerres!* and you carry it about with you, *comme ça*!'

'No, no, I'm very careful really, Monsieur Poirot. As a rule it's locked up in my jewel-case, and left in the hotel safe deposit. We're staying at the *Magnificent*, you know. I just brought it along today for you to see.'

'And you will leave it with me, *n'est-ce pas?* You will be advised by Papa Poirot?'

'Well, you see, it's this way, Monsieur Poirot. On Friday we're going down to Yardly Chase to spend a few days with Lord and Lady Yardly.'

Her words awoke a vague echo of remembrance in my mind. Some gossip - what was it now? A few years ago Lord and Lady Yardly had paid a visit to the States, rumour had it that his lordship had rather gone the pace out there with the assistance of some lady friends - but surely there was something more, more gossip which coupled Lady Yardly's name with that of a 'movie' star in California - why! it came to me in a flash - of course it was none other than Gregory B. Rolf.

'I'll let you into a little secret, Monsieur Poirot,' Miss Marvell was continuing. 'We've got a deal on with Lord Yardly. There's some chance of our arranging to film a play down there in his ancestral pile.'

'At Yardly Chase?' I cried, interested. 'Why, it's one of the show places of England.'

Miss Marvell nodded.

'I guess it's the real old feudal stuff all right. But he wants a pretty stiff price, and of course I don't know yet whether the deal will go through, but Greg and I always like to combine business with pleasure.'

'But - I demand pardon if I am dense, madame - surely it is possible to visit Yardly Chase without taking the diamond with you?'

A shrewd, hard look came into Miss Marvell's eyes which belied their childlike appearance. She looked suddenly a good deal older.

'I want to wear it down there.'

'Surely,' I said suddenly, 'there are some very famous jewels in the Yardly collection, a large diamond amongst them?'

'That's so,' said Miss Marvell briefly.

I heard Poirot murmur beneath his breath: 'Ah, *c'est comme ça*!' Then he said aloud, with his usual uncanny luck in hitting the bull's-eye (he dignifies it by the name of psychology): 'Then you are without doubt already acquainted with Lady Yardly, or perhaps your husband is?'

'Gregory knew her when she was out West three years ago,' said Miss Marvell. She hesitated a moment, and then added abruptly: 'Do either of you ever see *Society Gossip*?'

We both pleaded guilty rather shamefacedly.

'I ask because in this week's number there is an article on famous jewels, and it's really very curious - ' She broke off.

I rose, went to the table at the other side of the room and returned with the paper in question in my hand. She took it from me, found the article, and began to read aloud:

' ... Amongst other famous stones may be included The Star of the East, a diamond in the possession of the Yardly family. An ancestor of the present Lord Yardly brought it back with him from China, and a romantic story is said to attach to it. According to this, the stone was once the right eye of a temple god. Another diamond, exactly similar in form and size, formed the left eye, and the story goes that this jewel, too, would in course of time be stolen. "One eye shall go West, the other East, till they shall meet once more. Then, in triumph shall they return to the god." It is a curious coincidence that there is at the present time a stone corresponding closely in description with this one, and known as 'The Star of the West,' or 'The Western Star.' It is the property of the celebrated film star, Miss Mary Marvell. A comparison of the two stones would be interesting.'

I stopped.

'*Épatant!*' murmured Poirot. 'Without doubt a romance of the first water.' He turned to Mary Marvell. 'And you are not afraid,

madame? You have no superstitious terrors? You do not fear to introduce these two Siamese twins to each other lest a Chinaman should appear and, hey presto! whisk them both back to China?'

His tone was mocking, but I fancied that an undercurrent of seriousness lay beneath it.

'I don't believe that Lady Yardly's diamond is anything like as good as mine,' said Miss Marvell. 'Anyway, I'm going to see.'

What more Poirot would have said I do not know, for at that moment the door flew open, and a splendid-looking man strode into the room. From his crisply curling black head, to the tips of his patent-leather boots, he was a hero fit for romance.

'I said I'd call round for you, Mary,' said Gregory Rolf, 'and here I am. Well, what does Monsieur Poirot say to our little problem? Just one big hoax, same as I do?'

Poirot smiled up at the big actor. They made a ridiculous contrast.

'Hoax or no hoax, Mr Rolf,' he said dryly, 'I have advised Madame your wife not to take the jewel with her to Yardly Chase on Friday.'

'I'm with you there, sir. I've already said so to Mary. But there! She's a woman through and through, and I guess she can't bear to think of another woman outshining her in the jewel line.'

'What nonsense, Gregory!' said Mary Marvell sharply. But she flushed angrily.

Poirot shrugged his shoulders.

'Madame, I have advised. I can do no more. *C'est fini*.'

He bowed them both to the door.

'Ah! *la la*,' he observed, returning. '*Histoire de femmes!* The good husband, he hit the nail on the head - *tout de même*, but he was not tactful! Assuredly not.'

I imparted to him my vague remembrances, and he nodded vigorously.

'So I thought. All the same, there is something curious underneath all this. With your permission, *mon ami*, I will take the air. Await my return, I beg of you, I shall not be long.'

I was half asleep in my chair when the landlady tapped on the door, and put her head in.

'It's another lady to see Mr Poirot, sir. I've told her he was out, but she says as how she'll wait, seeing as she's come up from the country.'

'Oh, show her in here, Mrs. Murchison. Perhaps I can do something for her.'

In another moment the lady had been ushered in. My heart gave a leap as I recognized her. Lady Yardly's portrait had figured too often in the Society papers to allow her to remain unknown.

'Do sit down, Lady Yardly,' I said, drawing forward a chair. 'My friend Poirot is out, but I know for a fact that he'll be back very shortly.'

She thanked me and sat down. A very different type, this, from Miss Mary Marvell. Tall, dark, with flashing eyes, and a pale proud face - yet something wistful in the curves of the mouth.

I felt a desire to rise to the occasion. Why not? In Poirot's presence I have frequently felt a difficulty - I do not appear at my best. And yet there is no doubt that I, too, possess the deductive sense in a marked degree. I leant forward on a sudden impulse.

'Lady Yardly,' I said. 'I know why you have come here. You have received blackmailing letters about the diamond.'

There was no doubt as to my bolt having shot home. She stared at me open-mouthed, all colour banished from her cheeks.

'You know?' she gasped. 'How?'

I smiled.

'By a perfectly logical process. If Miss Marvell has had warning letters - '

'Miss Marvell? She has been here?'

'She has just left. As I was saying, if she, as the holder of one of the twin diamonds, has received a mysterious series of warnings, you, as the holder of the other stone, must necessarily have done the same. You see how simple it is? I am right, then, you have received these strange communications also? '

For a moment she hesitated, as though in doubt whether to trust me or not, then she bowed her head in assent with a little smile.

'That is so,' she acknowledged.

'Were yours, too, left by hand - by a Chinaman?'

'No, they came by post; but tell me, has Miss Marvell undergone the same experience, then?'

I recounted to her the events of the morning. She listened attentively.

'It all fits in. My letters are the duplicates of hers. It is true that they came by post, but there is a curious perfume impregnating them - something in the nature of joss-stick - that at once suggested the East to me. What does it all mean?'

I shook my head.

'That is what we must find out. You have the letters with you? We might learn something from the postmarks.'

'Unfortunately I destroyed them. You understand, at the time I regarded it as some foolish joke. Can it be true that some Chinese gang are really trying to recover the diamonds? It seems too incredible.'

We went over the facts again and again, but could get no further towards the elucidation of the mystery. At last Lady Yardly rose.

'I really don't think I need wait for Monsieur Poirot. You can tell him all this, can't you? Thank you so much, Mr - '

She hesitated, her hand outstretched.

'Captain Hastings.'

'Of course! How stupid of me. You're a friend of the Cavendishes, aren't you? It was Mary Cavendish who sent me to Monsieur Poirot.'

When my friend returned, I enjoyed telling him the tale of what had occurred during his absence. He cross-questioned me rather sharply over the details of our conversation and I could read between the lines that he was not best pleased to have been absent. I also fancied that the dear old fellow was just the least inclined to be jealous. It had become rather a pose with him to consistently belittle my abilities, and I think he was chagrined at finding no loophole for criticism. I was secretly rather pleased with myself, though I tried to conceal the fact for fear of irritating him. In spite of his idiosyncrasies, I was deeply attached to my quaint little friend.

'*Bien!*' he said at length, with a curious look on his face. 'The plot develops. Pass me, I pray you, that *Peerage* on the top shelf there.' He turned the leaves. 'Ah, here we are! "Yardly ... 10th viscount, served South African War" ... *tout ça n'a pas d'importance* ... "mar. 1907 Hon. Maude Stopperton, fourth daughter of 3rd Baron Cotteril" ... um, um, um . . ."has iss. two daughters, born 1908, 1910 ... Clubs ... residences." ... *Violà*, that does not tell us much. But tomorrow morning we see this *milord*!'

'What?'

'Yes. I telegraphed to him.'

'I thought you had washed your hands of the case?'

'I am not acting for Miss Marvell since she refuses to be guided by my advice. What I do now is for my own satisfaction - the satisfaction of Hercule Poirot! Decidedly, I must have a finger in this pie.'

'And you calmly wire Lord Yardly to dash up to town just to suit your convenience. He won't be pleased.'

'*Au contraire*, if I preserve for him his family diamond, he ought to be very grateful.'

'Then you really think there is a chance of it being stolen?' I asked eagerly.

'Almost a certainty,' replied Poirot placidly. 'Everything points that way.'

'But how - '

Poirot stopped my eager questions with an airy gesture of the hand.

'Not now, I pray you. Let us not confuse the mind. And observe that *Peerage* - how you have replaced him! See you not that the tallest books go in the top shelf, the next tallest in the row beneath, and so on. Thus we have order, *method*, which, as I have often told you, Hastings - '

'Exactly,' I said hastily, and put the offending volume in its proper place.

II

Lord Yardly turned out to be a cheery, loud-voiced sportsman with a rather red face, but with a good-humoured bonhomie about him that was distinctly attractive and made up for any lack of mentality.

'Extraordinary business this, Monsieur Poirot. Can't make head or tail of it. Seems my wife's been getting odd kind of letters, and that this Miss Marvell's had 'em too. What does it all mean?'

Poirot handed him the copy of *Society Gossip*.

'First, *milord*, I would ask you if these facts are substantially correct?'

The peer took it. His face darkened with anger as he read.

'Damned nonsense!' he spluttered. 'There's never been any romantic story attaching to the diamond. It came from India originally, I believe. I never heard of all this Chinese god stuff.'

'Still, the stone *is* known as "The Star of the East."'

'Well, what if it is?' he demanded wrathfully.

Poirot smiled a little, but made no direct reply.

'What I would ask you to do, *milord*, is to place yourself in my hands. If you do so unreservedly, I have great hopes of averting the catastrophe.'

'Then you think there's actually something in these wild-cat tales?'

'Will you do as I ask you?'

'Of course I will, but - '

'*Bien!* Then permit that I ask you a few questions. This affair of Yardly Chase, is it, as you say, all fixed up between you and Mr Rolf?'

'Oh, he told you about it, did he? No, there's nothing settled.' He hesitated, the brick-red colour of his face deepening. 'Might as well get the thing straight. I've made rather an ass of myself in many ways. Monsieur Poirot - and I'm head over ears in debt - but I want to pull up. I'm fond of the kids, and I want to straighten things up, and be able to live on at the old place. Gregory Rolf is offering me big money - enough to set me on my feet again. I don't want to do it - I hate the thought of all that crowd play-acting round the Chase - but I may have to, unless - ' He broke off.

Poirot eyed him keenly. 'You have, then, another string to your bow? Permit that I make a guess? It is to sell The Star of the East?'

Lord Yardly nodded. 'That's it. It's been in the family for some generations, but it's not entailed. Still, it's not the easiest thing in the world to find a purchaser. Hoffberg, the Hatton Garden man, is on the look-out for a likely customer, but he'll have to find one soon, or it's a washout.'

'One more question, *permettez* - Lady Yardly, which plan does she approve?'

'Oh, she's bitterly opposed to my selling the jewel. You know what women are. She's all for this film stunt.'

'I comprehend,' said Poirot. He remained a moment or so in thought, then rose briskly to his feet. 'You return to Yardly Chase at once? *Bien!* Say no word to anyone - to *anyone*, mind - but expect us there this evening. We will arrive shortly after five.'

'All right, but I don't see - '

'*Ça n'a pas d'importance*,' said Poirot kindly. 'You will that I preserve for you your diamond, *n'est-ce pas*?'

'Yes, but - '

'Then do as I say.'

A sadly bewildered nobleman left the room.

III

It was half-past five when we arrived at Yardly Chase, and followed the dignified butler to the old panelled hall with its fire of blazing logs. A pretty picture met our eyes: Lady Yardly and her two children, the mother's proud dark head bent down over the two fair ones. Lord Yardly stood near, smiling down on them.

'Monsieur Poirot and Captain Hastings,' announced the butler.

Lady Yardly looked up with a start, her husband came forward uncertainly, his eyes seeking instruction from Poirot. The little man was equal to the occasion.

'All my excuses! It is that I investigate still this affair of Miss Marvell's. She comes to you on Friday, does she not? I make a little tour first to make sure that all is secure. Also I wanted to ask of Lady Yardly if she recollected at all the postmarks on the letters she received?'

Lady Yardly shook her head regretfully. 'I'm afraid I don't. It is stupid of me. But, you see, I never dreamt of taking them seriously.'

'You'll stay the night?' said Lord Yardly.

'Oh, *milord*, I fear to incommode you. We have left our bags at the inn.'

'That's all right.' Lord Yardly had his cue. 'We'll send down for them. No, no - no trouble, I assure you.'

Poirot permitted himself to be persuaded, and sitting down by Lady Yardly, began to make friends with the children. In a short time they were all romping together, and had dragged me into the game.

'*Vous êtes bonne mere,*' said Poirot, with a gallant little bow, as the children were removed reluctantly by a stern nurse.

Lady Yardly smoothed her ruffled hair.

'I adore them,' she said with a little catch in her voice.

'And they you - with reason!' Poirot bowed again.

A dressing-gong sounded, and we rose to go up to our rooms. At that moment the butler entered with a telegram on a salver which he handed to Lord Yardly. The latter tore it open with a brief word of apology. As he read it he stiffened visibly.

With an ejaculation, he handed it to his wife. Then he glanced at my friend.

'Just a minute, Monsieur Poirot. I feel you ought to know about this. It's from Hoffberg. He thinks he's found a customer for the diamond - an American, sailing for the States to-morrow. They're sending down a chap to-night to vet the stone. By Jove, though, if this goes through - ' Words failed him.

Lady Yardly had turned away. She still held the telegram in her hand.

'I wish you wouldn't sell it, George,' she said, in a low voice. 'It's been in the family so long.' She waited, as though for a reply, but when none came her face hardened. She shrugged her shoulders, 'I must go and dress. I suppose I had better display "the goods".' She turned to Poirot with a slight grimace. 'It's one of the most hideous necklaces that was ever designed! George has always promised to have the stones reset for me, but it's never been done.'

She left the room.

Half an hour later, we three were assembled in the great drawing-room awaiting the lady. It was already a few minutes past the dinner hour.

Suddenly there was a low rustle, and Lady Yardly appeared framed in the doorway, a radiant figure in a long white shimmering dress. Round the column of her neck was a rivulet of fire. She stood there with one hand just touching the necklace.

'Behold the sacrifice,' she said gaily. Her ill-humour seemed to have vanished. 'Wait while I turn the big light on and you shall feast your eyes on the ugliest necklace in England.'

The switches were just outside the door. As she stretched out her hand to them, the incredible thing happened. Suddenly without any warning, every light was extinguished, the door banged, and from the other side of it came a long-drawn piercing woman's scream.

'My God!' cried Lord Yardly. 'That was Maude's voice! What has happened?'

We rushed blindly for the door, cannoning into each other in the darkness. It was some minutes before we could find it. What a sight met our eyes! Lady Yardly lay senseless on the marble floor, a crimson mark on her white throat where the necklace had been wrenched from her neck.

As we bent over her, uncertain for the moment whether she was dead or alive, her eyelids opened.

'The Chinaman,' she whispered painfully. 'The Chinaman - the side door.'

Lord Yardly sprang up with an oath. I accompanied him, my heart beating wildly. The Chinaman again! The side door in question was a small one in the angle of the wall, not more than a dozen yards from the scene of the tragedy. As we reached it, I gave a cry. There, just short of the threshold, lay the guttering necklace, evidently dropped by the thief in the panic of his flight. I swooped joyously down on it. Then I uttered another cry which Lord Yardly echoed. For in the middle of the necklace was a great gap. The Star of the East was missing!

'That settles it,' I breathed. 'These were no ordinary thieves. This one stone was all they wanted.'

'But how did the fellow get in?'

'Through this door.'

'But it's always locked.'

I shook my head. 'It's not locked now. See.' I pulled it open as I spoke.

As I did so something fluttered to the ground. I picked it up. It was a piece of silk, and the embroidery was unmistakable. It had been torn from a Chinaman's robe.

'In his haste it caught in the door,' I explained. 'Come, hurry. He cannot have gone far as yet.'

But in vain we bunted and searched. In the pitch darkness of the night, the thief had found it easy to make his getaway. We returned reluctantly, and Lord Yardly sent off one of the footmen post-haste to fetch the police.

Lady Yardly, aptly ministered to by Poirot, who is as good as a woman in these matters, was sufficiently recovered to be able to tell her story.

'I was just going to turn on the other light,' she said, 'when a man sprang on me from behind. He tore my necklace from my neck with such force that I fell headlong to the floor. As I fell I saw him disappearing through the side door. Then I realized by the pigtail and the embroidered robe that he was a Chinaman.' She stopped with a shudder.

The butler reappeared. He spoke in a low voice to Lord Yardly.

'A gentleman from Mr Hoffberg's, m'lord. He says you expect him.'

'Good heavens!' cried the distracted nobleman. 'I must see him, I suppose. No, not here, Mullings, in the library.'

I drew Poirot aside.

'Look here, my dear fellow, hadn't we better get back to London?'

'You think so, Hastings? Why?'

'Well' - I coughed delicately - 'things haven't gone very well, have they? I mean, you tell Lord Yardly to place himself in your hands and all will be well - and then the diamond vanishes from under your very nose!'

'True,' said Poirot, rather crestfallen. 'It was not one of my most striking triumphs.'

This way of describing events almost caused me to smile, but I stuck to my guns.

'So, having - pardon the expression - rather made a mess of things, don't you think it would be more graceful to leave immediately?'

'And the dinner, the without doubt excellent dinner, that the *chef* of Lord Yardly has prepared? '

'Oh, what's dinner!' I said impatiently.

Poirot held up his hands in horror.

'*Mon Dieu!* It is that in this country you treat the affairs gastronomic with a criminal indifference.'

'There's another reason why we should get back to London as soon as possible,' I continued.

'What is that, my friend?'

'The other diamond,' I said, lowering my voice. 'Miss Marvell's.'

'*Eh bien*, what of it?'

'Don't you see?' His unusual obtuseness annoyed me. What had happened to his usually keen wits? 'They've got one, now they'll go for the other.'

'*Tiens!*' cried Poirot, stepping back a pace and regarding me with admiration. 'But your brain marches to a marvel, my friend! Figure to yourself that for the moment I had not thought of that! But there is plenty of time. The full of the moon, it is not until Friday.'

I shook my head dubiously. The full of the moon theory left me entirely cold. I had my way with Poirot, however, and we departed immediately, leaving behind us a note of explanation and apology for Lord Yardly.

My idea was to go at once to the *Magnificent*, and relate to Miss Marvell what had occurred, but Poirot vetoed the plan, and insisted that the morning would be time enough. I gave in rather grudgingly.

In the morning Poirot seemed strangely disinclined to stir out. I began to suspect that, having made a mistake to start with, he was singularly loath to proceed with the case. In answer to my persuasions, he pointed out, with admirable common sense, that as the details of the affair at Yardly Chase were already in the morning papers the Rolfs would know quite as much as we could tell them. I gave way unwillingly.

Events proved my forebodings to be justified. About two o'clock, the telephone rang. Poirot answered it. He listened for some moments, then with a brief '*Bien, j'y serai*' he rang off, and turned to me.

'What do you think, *mon ami*?' He looked half ashamed, half excited. 'The diamond of Miss Marvell, it has been stolen.'

'What?' I cried, springing up. 'And what about the 'full of the moon' now?' Poirot hung his head. When did this happen?'

'This morning, I understand.'

I shook my head sadly. 'If only you had listened to me. You see I was right.'

'It appears so, *mon ami*' said Poirot cautiously. 'Appearances are deceptive, they say, but it certainly appears so.'

As we hurried in a taxi to the *Magnificent*, I puzzled out the true inwardness of the scheme.

'That "full of the moon" idea was clever. The whole point of it was to get us to concentrate on the Friday, and so be off our guard beforehand. It is a pity you did not realize that.'

'*Ma foi!*' said Poirot airily, his nonchalance quite restored after its brief eclipse. 'One cannot think of everything!'

I felt sorry for him. He did so hate failure of any kind.

'Cheer up,' I said consolingly. 'Better luck next time.'

At the *Magnificent*, we were ushered at once into the manager's office. Gregory Rolf was there with two men from Scotland Yard. A pale-faced clerk sat opposite them.

Rolf nodded to us as we entered.

'We're getting to the bottom of it,' he said. 'But it's almost unbelievable. How the guy had the nerve I can't think.'

A very few minutes sufficed to give us the facts. Mr Rolf had gone out of the hotel at 11.15. At 11.30, a gentleman, so like him in appearance as to pass muster, entered the hotel and demanded the jewel-case from the safe deposit. He duly signed the receipt, remarking carelessly as he did so: 'Looks a bit different from my ordinary one, but I hurt my hand getting out of the taxi.' The clerk merely smiled and remarked that he saw very little difference. Rolf laughed and said: 'Well, don't run me in as a crook this time, anyway. I've been getting threatening letters from a Chinaman, and the worst of it is I look rather like a Chink myself - it's something about the eyes.'

'I looked at him,' said the clerk who was telling us this, 'and I saw at once what he meant. The eyes slanted up at the corners like an Oriental's. I'd never noticed it before.'

'Darn it all, man,' roared Gregory Rolf, leaning forward, 'do you notice it now?'

The man looked up at him and started.

'No, sir,' he said. 'I can't say I do.' And indeed there was nothing even remotely Oriental about the frank brown eyes that looked into ours.

The Scotland Yard man grunted. 'Bold customer. Thought the eyes might be noticed, and took the bull by the horns to disarm suspicion. He must have watched you out of the hotel, sir, and nipped in as soon as you were well away.'

'What about the jewel-case?' I asked.

'It was found in a corridor of the hotel. Only one thing had been taken - "The Western Star."'

We stared at each other - the whole thing was so bizarre, so unreal.

Poirot hopped briskly to his feet. 'I have not been of much use, I fear,' he said regretfully. 'Is it permitted to see Madame?'

'I guess she's prostrated with the shock,' explained Rolf.

'Then perhaps I might have a few words alone with you, monsieur?'

'Certainly.'

In about five minutes Poirot reappeared.

'Now, my friend,' he said gaily. 'To a post office. I have to send a telegram.'

'Who to?'

'Lord Yardly.' He discounted further inquiries by slipping his arm through mine. 'Come, come, *mon ami*. I know all that you feel about this miserable business. I have not distinguished myself! You, in my place, might have distinguished yourself. *Bien!* All is admitted. Let us forget it and have lunch.'

It was about four o'clock when we entered Poirot's rooms. A figure rose from a chair by the window. It was Lord Yardly. He looked haggard and distraught.

'I got your wire and came up at once. Look here, I've been round to Hoffberg, and they know nothing about that man of theirs last night, or the wire either. Do you think that - '

Poirot held up his hand.

'My excuses! I sent that wire, and hired the gentleman in question.'

'*You* - but why? What?' The nobleman spluttered impotently.

'My little idea was to bring things to a head,' explained Poirot placidly.

'Bring things to a head! Oh, my God!' cried Lord Yardly.

'And the ruse succeeded,' said Poirot cheerfully. 'Therefore, *milord*, I have much pleasure in returning you - this!' With a dramatic gesture he produced a glittering object. It was a great diamond.

'The Star of the East,' gasped Lord Yardly. 'But I don't understand - '

'No?' said Poirot. 'It makes no matter. Believe me, it was necessary for the diamond to be stolen. I promised you that it would be preserved to you, and I have kept my word. You must permit me to keep my little secret. Convey, I beg of you, the assurances of my deepest respect to Lady Yardly, and tell her how pleased I am to be able to restore her jewel to her. What *beau temps*, is it not? Good day, *milord*.'

And smiling and talking, the amazing little man conducted the bewildered nobleman to the door. He returned gently rubbing his hands.

'Poirot,' I said. 'Am I quite demented?'

'No, *mon ami*, but you are, as always, in a mental fog.'

'How did you get the diamond?'

'From Mr Rolf.'

'Rolf?'

'*Mais ouis!* The warning letters, the Chinaman, the article in *Society Gossip*, all sprang from the ingenious brain of Mr Rolf! The two diamonds, supposed to be so miraculously alike - bah! they did not exist. There was only *one* diamond, my friend! Originally in the Yardly collection, for three years it has been in the possession of Mr Rolf. He stole it this morning with the assistance of a touch of grease paint at the corner of each eye! Ah, I must see him on the film, he is indeed an artist, *celui-là*!'

'But why should he steal his own diamond?' I asked, puzzled.

'For many reasons. To begin with, Lady Yardly was getting restive.'

'Lady Yardly?'

'You comprehend she was left much alone in California. Her husband was amusing himself elsewhere. Mr Rolf was handsome, he had an air about him of romance. But *au fond*, he is very businesslike, *ce monsieur*! He made love to Lady Yardly, and then he blackmailed her. I taxed the lady with the truth the other night, and she admitted it. She swore that she had only been indiscreet, and I believe her. But, undoubtedly, Rolf had letters of hers that could be twisted to bear a different interpretation. Terrified by the threat of a divorce, and the prospect of being separated from her children, she agreed to all he wished. She had no money of her

own, and she was forced to permit him to substitute a paste replica for the real stone. The coincidence of the date of the appearance of "The Western Star" struck me at once. All goes well. Lord Yardly prepares to range himself - to settle down. And then comes the menace of the possible sale of the diamond. The substitution will be discovered. Without doubt she writes off frantically to Gregory Rolf who has just arrived in England. He soothes her by promising to arrange all - and prepares for a double robbery. In this way he will quiet the lady, who might conceivably tell all to her husband, an affair which would not suit our blackmailer at all, he will have £50,000 insurance money (aha, you had forgotten that!), and he will still have the diamond! At this point I put my finger in the pie. The arrival of a diamond expert is announced. Lady Yardly, as I felt sure she would, immediately arranges a robbery - and does it very well too! But Hercule Poirot, he sees nothing but facts. What happens in actuality? The lady switches off the light, bangs the door, throws the necklace down the passage, and screams. She has already wrenched out the diamond with pliers upstairs - '

'But we saw the necklace round her neck!' I objected.

'I demand pardon, my friend. Her hand concealed the part of it where the gap would have shown. To place a piece of silk in the door beforehand is child's play! Of course, as soon as Rolf read of the robbery, he arranged his own little comedy. And very well he played it!'

'What did you say to him?' I asked with lively curiosity.

'I said to him that Lady Yardly had told her husband all, that I was empowered to recover the jewel, and that if it were not immediately

handed over proceedings would be taken. Also a few more little lies which occurred to me. He was as wax in my hands!'

I pondered the matter.

'It seems a little unfair on Mary Marvell. She has lost her diamond through no fault of her own.'

'Bah!' said Poirot brutally. 'She has a magnificent advertisement. That is all she cares for, that one! Now the other, she is different. *Bonne mère, très femme!*'

'Yes,' I said doubtfully, hardly sharing Poirot's views on femininity. 'I suppose it was Rolf who sent her the duplicate letters.'

'*Pas du tout*,' said Poirot briskly. 'She came by the advice of Mary Cavendish to seek my aid in her dilemma. Then she heard that Mary Marvell, whom she knew to be her enemy, had been here, and she changed her mind, jumping at a pretext that *you*, my friend, offered her. A very few questions sufficed to show me that *you* told her of the letters, not she you! She jumped at the chance your words offered.'

'I don't believe it,' I cried, stung.

'*Si, si, mon ami*, it is a pity that you study not the psychology. She told you that the letters were destroyed? Oh, *la la*, *never* does a woman destroy a letter if she can avoid it! Not even if it would be more prudent to do so!'

'It's all very well,' I said, my anger rising, 'but you've made a perfect fool of me! From beginning to end! No, it's all very well to try and explain it away afterwards. There really is a limit!'

'But you were so enjoying yourself, my friend. I had not the heart to shatter your illusions.'

'It's no good. You've gone a bit too far this time.'

'*Mon Dieu!* but how you enrage yourself for nothing, *mon ami*!'

'I'm fed up!' I went out, banging the door. Poirot had made an absolute laughing-stock of me. I decided that he needed a sharp lesson. I would let some time elapse before I forgave him. He had encouraged me to make a perfect fool of myself!

The Tragedy at Marsdon Manor

I had been called away from town for a few days, and on my return found Poirot in the act of strapping up his small valise.

'*A la bonne heure*, Hastings. I feared you would not have returned in time to accompany me.'

'You are called away on a case, then?'

'Yes, though I am bound to admit that, on the face of it, the affair does not seem promising. The Northern Union Insurance Company have asked me to investigate the death of a Mr Maltravers who a few weeks ago insured his life with them for the large sum of fifty thousand pounds.'

'Yes?' I said, much interested.

'There was, of course, the usual suicide clause in the policy. In the event of his committing suicide within a year the premiums would

be forfeited. Mr Maltravers was duly examined by the Company's own doctor, and although he was a man slightly past the prime of life was passed as being in quite sound health. However, on Wednesday last - the day before yesterday - the body of Mr Maltravers was found in the grounds of his house in Essex, Marsdon Manor, and the cause of his death is described as some kind of internal haemorrhage. That in itself would be nothing remarkable, but sinister rumours as to Mr Maltravers' financial position have been in the air of late, and the Northern Union have ascertained beyond any possible doubt that the deceased gentleman stood upon the verge of bankruptcy. Now that alters matters considerably. Maltravers had a beautiful young wife, and it is suggested that he got together all the ready money he could for the purpose of paying the premiums on a life insurance for his wife's benefit, and then committed suicide. Such a thing is not uncommon. In any case, my friend Alfred Wright, who is a director of the Northern Union, has asked me to investigate the facts of the case, but, as I told him, I am not very hopeful of success. If the cause of the death had been heart failure, I should have been more sanguine. Heart failure may always be translated as the inability of the local GP to discover what his patient really did die of, but a haemorrhage seems fairly definite. Still, we can but make some necessary inquiries. Five minutes to pack your bag, Hastings, and we will take a taxi to Liverpool Street.'

About an hour later, we alighted from a Great Eastern train at the little station of Marsdon Leigh. Inquiries at the station yielded the information that Marsdon Manor was about a mile distant. Poirot decided to walk, and we betook ourselves along the main street.

'What is our plan of campaign?' I asked.

'First I will call upon the doctor. I have ascertained that there is only one doctor in Marsdon Leigh, Dr Ralph Bernard. Ah, here we are at his house.'

The house in question was a kind of superior cottage, standing back a little from the road. A brass plate on the gate bore the doctor's name. We passed up the path and rang the bell.

We proved to be fortunate in our call. It was the doctor's consulting hour, and for the moment there were no patients waiting for him. Dr Bernard was an elderly man, high-shouldered and stooping, with a pleasant vagueness of manner.

Poirot introduced himself and explained the purpose of our visit, adding that Insurance Companies were bound to investigate fully in a case of this kind.

'Of course, of course,' said Dr Bernard vaguely. 'I suppose, as he was such a rich man, his life was insured for a big sum?'

'You consider him a rich man, doctor?'

The doctor looked rather surprised.

'Was he not? He kept two cars, you know, and Marsdon Manor is a pretty big place to keep up, although I believe he bought it very cheap.'

'I understand that he had had considerable losses of late,' said Poirot, watching the doctor narrowly.

The latter, however, merely shook his head sadly.

'Is that so? Indeed. It is fortunate for his wife, then, that there is this life insurance. A very beautiful and charming young creature, but terribly unstrung by this sad catastrophe. A mass of nerves, poor thing. I have tried to spare her all I can, but of course the shock was bound to be considerable.'

'You had been attending Mr Maltravers recently?'

'My dear sir, I never attended him.'

'What?'

'I understand Mr Maltravers was a Christian Scientist - or something of that kind.'

'But you examined the body?'

'Certainly. I was fetched by one of the under-gardeners.'

'And the cause of death was clear?'

'Absolutely. There was blood on the lips, but most of the bleeding must have been internal.'

'Was he still lying where he had been found?'

'Yes, the body had not been touched. He was lying at the edge of a small plantation. He had evidently been out shooting rooks, a small rook rifle lay beside him. The haemorrhage must have occurred quite suddenly. Gastric ulcer, without a doubt.'

'No question of his having been shot, eh?'

'My dear sir!'

'I demand pardon,' said Poirot humbly. 'But, if my memory is not at fault, in the case of a recent murder, the doctor first gave a verdict of heart failure - altering it when the local constable pointed out that there was a bullet wound through the head!'

'You will not find any bullet wounds on the body of Mr Maltravers,' said Dr Bernard dryly. 'Now, gentlemen, if there is nothing further - '

We took the hint.

'Good morning, and many thanks to you, doctor, for so kindly answering our questions. By the way, you saw no need for an autopsy?'

'Certainly not.' The doctor became quite apoplectic. 'The cause of death was clear, and in my profession we see no need to distress unduly the relatives of a dead patient.'

And, turning, the doctor slammed the door sharply in our faces.

'And what do you think of Dr Bernard, Hastings?' inquired Poirot, as we proceeded on our way to the Manor.

'Rather an old ass.'

'Exactly. Your judgments of character are always profound, my friend.'

I glanced at him uneasily, but he seemed perfectly serious. A twinkle, however, came into his eye, and he added slyly:

'That is to say, when there is no question of a beautiful woman!'

I looked at him coldly.

On our arrival at the manor-house, the door was opened to us by a middle-aged parlourmaid. Poirot handed her his card, and a letter from the Insurance Company for Mrs Maltravers. She showed us into a small morning-room, and retired to tell her mistress. About ten minutes elapsed, and then the door opened, and a slender figure in widow's weeds stood upon the threshold.

'Monsieur Poirot?' she faltered.

'Madame!' Poirot sprang gallantly to his feet and hastened towards her. 'I cannot tell you how I regret to derange you in this way. But what will you? *Les affaires* - they know no mercy.'

Mrs Maltravers permitted him to lead her to a chair. Her eyes were red with weeping, but the temporary disfigurement could not conceal her extraordinary beauty. She was about twenty-seven or -eight, and very fair, with large blue eyes and a pretty pouting mouth.

'It is something about my husband's insurance, is it? But must I be bothered *now* - so soon?'

'Courage, my dear madame. Courage! You see, your late husband insured his life for rather a large sum, and in such a case the Company always has to satisfy itself as to a few details. They have empowered me to act for them. You can rest assured that I will do all in my power to render the matter not too unpleasant for you. Will you recount to me briefly the sad events of Wednesday?'

'I was changing for tea when my maid came up - one of the gardeners had just run to the house. He had found - '

Her voice trailed away. Poirot pressed her hand sympathetically.

'I comprehend. Enough! You had seen your husband earlier in the afternoon?'

'Not since lunch. I had walked down to the village for some stamps, and I believe he was out pottering round the grounds.'

'Shooting rooks, eh?'

'Yes, he usually took his little rook rifle with him, and I heard one or two shots in the distance.'

'Where is this little rook rifle now?'

'In the hall, I think.'

She led the way out of the room and found and handed the little weapon to Poirot, who examined it cursorily.

'Two shots fired, I see,' he observed, as he handed it back. 'And now, madame, if I might see - '

He paused delicately.

'The servant shall take you,' she murmured, averting her head.

The parlourmaid, summoned, led Poirot upstairs. I remained with the lovely and unfortunate woman. It was hard to know whether to speak or remain silent. I essayed one or two general reflections to which she responded absently, and in a very few minutes Poirot rejoined us.

'I thank you for all your courtesy, madame. I do not think you need be troubled any further with this matter. By the way, do you know anything of your husband's financial position?'

She shook her head.

'Nothing whatever. I am very stupid over business things.'

'I see. Then you can give us no clue as to why he suddenly decided to insure his life? He had not done so previously, I understand.'

'Well, we had only been married a little over a year. But, as to why he insured his life, it was because he had absolutely made up his mind that he would not live long. He had a strong premonition of his own death. I gather that he had had one haemorrhage already, and that he knew that another one would prove fatal. I tried to dispel these gloomy fears of his, but without avail. Alas, he was only too right!'

Tears in her eyes, she bade us a dignified farewell. Poirot made a characteristic gesture as we walked down the drive together.

'*Eh bien*, that is that! Back to London, my friend, there appears to be no mouse in this mouse-hole. And yet - '

'Yet what?'

'A slight discrepancy, that is all! You noticed it? You did not? Still, life is full of discrepancies, and assuredly the man cannot have taken his own life - there is no poison that would fill his mouth with blood. No, no, I must resign myself to the fact that all here is clear and above-board - but who is this?'

A tall young man was striding up the drive towards us. He passed us without making any sign, but I noted that he was not ill-looking, with a lean, deeply-bronzed face that spoke of life in a tropic clime.

A gardener who was sweeping up leaves had paused for a minute in his task, and Poirot ran quickly up to him.

'Tell me, I pray you, who is that gentleman? Do you know him?'

'I don't remember his name, sir, though I did hear it. He was staying down here last week for a night. Tuesday, it was.'

'Quick, *mon ami*, let us follow him.'

We hastened up the drive after the retreating figure. A glimpse of a black-robed figure on the terrace at the side of the house, and our quarry swerved and we after him, so that we were witnesses of the meeting.

Mrs Maltravers almost staggered where she stood, and her face blanched noticeably.

'You,' she gasped. 'I thought you were on the sea - on your way to East Africa?'

'I got some news from my lawyers that detained me,' explained the young man. 'My old uncle in Scotland died unexpectedly and left me some money. Under the circumstances I thought it better to cancel my passage. Then I saw this bad news in the paper and I came down to see if there was anything I could do. You'll want someone to look after things for you a bit perhaps.'

At that moment they became aware of our presence. Poirot stepped forward, and with many apologies explained that he had left his stick in the hall. Rather reluctantly, it seemed to me, Mrs Maltravers made the necessary introduction.

'Monsieur Poirot, Captain Black.'

A few minutes' chat ensued, in the course of which Poirot elicited the fact that Captain Black was putting up at the Anchor Inn. The missing stick not having been discovered (which was not surprising), Poirot uttered more apologies and we withdrew.

We returned to the village at a great pace, and Poirot made a bee line for the Anchor Inn.

'Here we establish ourselves until our friend the Captain returns,' he explained. 'You noticed that I emphasized the point that we were returning to London by the first train? Possibly you thought I meant it. But no - you observed Mrs Maltravers' face when she caught sight of this young Black? She was clearly taken aback, and he - *eh bien*, he was very devoted, did you not think so? And he was here on Tuesday night - the day before Mr Maltravers died. We must investigate the doings of Captain Black, Hastings.'

In about half an hour we espied our quarry approaching the inn. Poirot went out and accosted him and presently brought him up to the room we had engaged.

'I have been telling Captain Black of the mission which brings us here,' he explained. 'You can understand, *monsieur le capitaine*, that I am anxious to arrive at Mr Maltravers' state of mind immediately before his death, and that at the same time I do not wish to distress Mrs Maltravers unduly by asking her painful questions. Now, you were here just before the occurrence, and can give us equally valuable information.'

'I'll do anything I can to help you, I'm sure,' replied the young soldier; 'but I'm afraid I didn't notice anything out of the ordinary.

You see, although Maltravers was an old friend of my people's, I didn't know him very well myself.'

'You came down - when?'

'Tuesday afternoon. I went up to town early Wednesday morning, as my boat sailed from Tilbury about twelve o'clock. But some news I got made me alter my plans, as I dare say you heard me explain to Mrs Maltravers.'

'You were returning to East Africa, I understand?'

'Yes. I've been out there ever since the War - a great country.'

'Exactly. Now what was the talk about at dinner on Tuesday night?'

'Oh, I don't know. The usual odd topics. Maltravers asked after my people, and then we discussed the question of German reparations, and then Mrs Maltravers asked a lot of questions about East Africa, and I told them one or two yarns, that's about all, I think.'

'Thank you.'

Poirot was silent for a moment, then he said gently: 'With your permission, I should like to try a little experiment. You have told us all that your conscious self knows, I want now to question your subconscious self.'

'Psychoanalysis, what?' said Black, with visible alarm.

'Oh, no,' said Poirot reassuringly. 'You see, it is like this, I give you a word, you answer with another, and so on. Any word, the first one you think of. Shall we begin?'

'All right,' said Black slowly, but he looked uneasy.

'Note down the words, please, Hastings,' said Poirot. Then he took from his pocket his big turnip-faced watch and laid it on the table beside him. 'We will commence. Day.'

There was a moment's pause, and then Black replied:

'*Night*.'

As Poirot proceeded, his answers came quicker.

'Name,' said Poirot.

'*Place*.'

'Bernard.'

'*Shaw*.'

'Tuesday.'

'*Dinner*'

'Journey.'

'*Ship*.'

'Country.'

'*Uganda*.'

'Story.'

'*Lions*'

'Rook Rifle.'

'*Farm*.'

'Shot.'

'*Suicide*.'

'Elephant.'

'*Tusks*.'

'Money.'

'*Lawyers*.'

'Thank you, Captain Black. Perhaps you could spare me a few minutes in about half an hour's time?'

'Certainly.' The young soldier looked at him curiously and wiped his brow as he got up.

'And now, Hastings,' said Poirot, smiling at me as the door closed behind him. 'You see it all, do you not?'

'I don't know what you mean.'

'Does that list of words tell you nothing?'

I scrutinized it, but was forced to shake my head.

'I will assist you. To begin with, Black answered well within the normal time limit, with no pauses, so we can take it that he himself has no guilty knowledge to conceal. "Day" to "Night" and "Place" to "Name" are normal associations. I began work with "Bernard," which might have suggested the local doctor had he come across him at all. Evidently he had not. After our recent conversation, he

gave "Dinner" to my "Tuesday", but "Journey" and "Country" were answered by "Ship" and "Uganda", showing clearly that it was his journey abroad that was important to him and not the one which brought him down here. "Story" recalls to him one of the "Lion" stories he told at dinner. I proceeded to "Rook Rifle" and he answered with the totally unexpected word "Farm". When I say "Shot", he answers at once "Suicide". The association seems clear. A man he knows committed suicide with a rook rifle on a farm somewhere. Remember, too, that his mind is still on the stories he told at dinner, and I think you will agree that I shall not be far from the truth if I recall Captain Black and ask him to repeat the particular suicide story which he told at the dinner-table on Tuesday evening.'

Black was straightforward enough over the matter.

'Yes, I did tell them that story now that I come to think of it. Chap shot himself on a farm out there. Did it with a rook rifle through the roof of his mouth, bullet lodged in the brain. Doctors were no end puzzled over it - there was nothing to show except a little blood on the lips. But what -? '

'What has it got to do with Mr Maltravers? You did not know, I see, that he was found with a rook rifle by his side.'

'You mean my story suggested to him - oh, but that is awful!'

'Do not distress yourself - it would have been one way or another. Well, I must get on the telephone to London.'

Poirot had a lengthy conversation over the wire, and came back thoughtful. He went off by himself in the afternoon, and it was not till

seven o'clock that he announced that he could put it off no longer, but must break the news to the young widow. My sympathy had already gone out to her unreservedly. To be left penniless, and with the knowledge that her husband had killed himself to assure her future was a hard burden for any woman to bear. I cherished a secret hope, however, that young Black might prove capable of consoling her after her first grief had passed. He evidently admired her enormously.

Our interview with the lady was painful. She refused vehemently to believe the facts that Poirot advanced, and when she was at last convinced broke down into bitter weeping. An examination of the body turned our suspicions into certainty. Poirot was very sorry for the poor lady, but, after all, he was employed by the Insurance Company, and what could he do? As he was preparing to leave he said gently to Mrs Maltravers:

'Madame, you of all people should know that there are no dead!'

'What do you mean?' she faltered, her eyes growing wide.

'Have you never taken part in any spiritualistic séances? You are mediumistic, you know.'

'I have been told so. But you do not believe in Spiritualism, surely?'

'Madame, I have seen some strange things. You know that they say in the village that this house is haunted?'

She nodded, and at that moment the parlourmaid announced that dinner was ready.

'Won't you just stay and have something to eat?'

We accepted gratefully, and I felt that our presence could not but help distract her a little from her own griefs.

We had just finished our soup, when there was a scream outside the door, and the sound of breaking crockery. We jumped up. The parlourmaid appeared, her hand to her heart.

'It was a man - standing in the passage.'

Poirot rushed out, returning quickly.

'There is no one there.'

'Isn't there, sir?' said the parlourmaid weakly. 'Oh, it did give me a start!'

'But why?'

She dropped her voice to a whisper.

'I thought - I thought it was the master - it looked like 'im.'

I saw Mrs Maltravers give a terrified start, and my mind flew to the old superstition that a suicide cannot rest. She thought of it too, I am sure, for a minute later, she caught Poirot's arm with a scream.

'Didn't you hear that? Those three taps on the window? That's how *he* always used to tap when he passed round the house.'

'The ivy,' I cried. 'It was the ivy against the pane.'

But a sort of terror was gaining on us all. The parlourmaid was obviously unstrung, and when the meal was over Mrs Maltravers besought Poirot not to go at once. She was clearly terrified to be left alone. We sat in the little morning room. The wind was getting

up, and moaning round the house in an eerie fashion. Twice the door of the room came unlatched and the door slowly opened, and each time she clung to me with a terrified gasp.

'Ah, but this door, it is bewitched!' cried Poirot angrily at last. He got up and shut it once more, then turned the key in the lock. 'I shall lock it, so!'

'Don't do that,' she gasped, 'if it should come open now - '

And even as she spoke the impossible happened. The locked door slowly swung open. I could not see into the passage from where I sat, but she and Poirot were facing it. She gave one long shriek as she turned to him.

'You saw him - there in the passage?' she cried.

He was staring down at her with a puzzled face, then shook his head.

'I saw him - my husband - you must have seen him too?'

'Madame, I saw nothing. You are so well - unstrung - '

'I am perfectly well, I - Oh, God!'

Suddenly, without warning, the lights quivered and went out. Out of the darkness came three loud raps. I could hear Mrs Maltravers moaning.

And then - I saw!

The man I had seen on the bed upstairs stood there facing us, gleaming with a faint ghostly light. There was blood on his lips, and

he held his right hand out, pointing. Suddenly a brilliant light seemed to proceed from it. It passed over Poirot and me, and fell on Mrs Maltravers. I saw her white terrified face, and something else!

'My God, Poirot!' I cried. 'Look at her hand, her right hand. It's all red!'

Her own eyes fell on it, and she collapsed in a heap on the floor.

'Blood,' she cried hysterically. 'Yes, it's blood. I killed him. I did it. He was showing me, and then I put my hand on the trigger and pressed. Save me from him - save me! He's come back!'

Her voice died away in a gurgle.

'Lights,' said Poirot briskly.

The lights went on as if by magic.

'That's it,' he continued. 'You heard, Hastings? And you, Everett? Oh, by the way, this is Mr Everett, rather a fine member of the theatrical profession. I 'phoned to him this afternoon. His make-up is good, isn't it? Quite like the dead man, and with a pocket torch and the necessary phosphorescence he made the proper impression. I shouldn't touch her right hand if I were you, Hastings. Red paint marks so. When the lights went out I clasped her hand, you see. By the way, we mustn't miss our train. Inspector Japp is outside the window. A bad night - but he has been able to while away the time by tapping on the window every now and then.'

'You see,' continued Poirot, as we walked briskly through the wind and rain, 'there was a little discrepancy. The doctor seemed to think the deceased was a Christian Scientist, and who could have

given him that impression but Mrs Maltravers? But to us she represented him as being in a grave state of apprehension about his own health. Again, why was she so taken aback by the reappearance of young Black? And lastly, although I know that convention decrees that a woman must make a decent pretence of mourning for her husband, I do not care for such heavily-rouged eyelids! You did not observe them, Hastings? No? As I always tell you, you see nothing!

'Well, there it was. There were the two possibilities. Did Black's story suggest an ingenious method of committing suicide to Mr Maltravers, or did his other listener, the wife, see an equally ingenious method of committing murder? I inclined to the latter view. To shoot himself in the way indicated, he would probably have had to pull the trigger with his toe - or at least so I imagine. Now if Maltravers had been found with one boot off, we should almost certainly have heard of it from someone. An odd detail like that would have been remembered.

'No, as I say, I inclined to the view that it was a case of murder, not suicide, but I realized that I had not a shadow of proof in support of my theory. Hence the elaborate little comedy you saw played tonight.'

'Even now I don't quite see all the details of the crime,' I said.

'Let us start from the beginning. Here is a shrewd and scheming woman who, knowing of her husband's financial *débâcle* and tired of the elderly mate she has only married for his money, induces him to insure his life for a large sum, and then seeks for the means to accomplish her purpose. An accident gives her that - the young soldier's strange story. The next afternoon when *monsieur le*

capitaine, as she thinks, is on the high seas, she and her husband are strolling round the grounds. "What a curious story that was last night!" she observes. "Could a man shoot himself in such a way? Do show me if it is possible!" The poor fool - he shows her. He places the end of the rifle in his mouth. She stoops down, and puts her finger on the trigger, laughing up at him. "And now, sir," she says saucily, "supposing I pull the trigger?"

'And then - and then, Hastings - she pulls it!'

The Adventure of the Cheap Flat

So far, in the cases which I have recorded, Poirot's investigations have started from the central fact, whether murder or robbery, and have proceeded from thence by a process of logical deduction to the final triumphant unravelling. In the events I am now about to chronicle, a remarkable chain of circumstances led from the apparently trivial incidents which first attracted Poirot's attention to the sinister happenings which completed a most unusual case.

I had been spending the evening with an old friend of mine, Gerald Parker. There had been, perhaps, about half a dozen people there besides my host and myself, and the talk fell, as it was bound to do sooner or later wherever Parker found himself, on the subject of house-hunting in London. Houses and flats were Parker's special hobby. Since the end of the War, he had occupied at least half a dozen different flats and maisonnettes. No sooner was he settled anywhere than he would light unexpectedly upon a new find, and

would forthwith depart bag and baggage. His moves were nearly always accomplished at a slight pecuniary gain, for he had a shrewd business head, but it was sheer love of the sport that actuated him, and not a desire to make money at it. We listened to Parker for some time with the respect of the novice for the expert. Then it was our turn, and a perfect babel of tongues was let loose. Finally the floor was left to Mrs Robinson, a charming little bride who was there with her husband. I had never met them before, as Robinson was only a recent acquaintance of Parker's.

'Talking of flats,' she said, 'have you heard of our piece of luck, Mr Parker? We've got a flat - at last! In Montagu Mansions.'

'Well,' said Parker, 'I've always said there are plenty of flats - at a price!'

'Yes, but this isn't at a price. It's dirt cheap. Eighty pounds a year!'

'But - but Montagu Mansions is just off Knightsbridge, isn't it? Big handsome building. Or are you talking of a poor relation of the same name stuck in the slums somewhere?'

'No, it's the Knightsbridge one. That's what makes it so wonderful.'

'Wonderful is the word! It's a blinking miracle. But there must be a catch somewhere. Big premium, I suppose?'

'No premium!'

'No prem - oh, hold my head, somebody!' groaned Parker.

'But we've got to buy the furniture,' continued Mrs Robinson.

'Ah!' Parker bristled up. 'I knew there was a catch!'

'For fifty pounds. And it's beautifully furnished!'

'I give it up,' said Parker. 'The present occupants must be lunatics with a taste for philanthropy.'

Mrs Robinson was looking a little troubled. A little pucker appeared between her dainty brows.

'It is queer, isn't it? You don't think that - that - the place is *haunted*?'

'Never heard of a haunted flat,' declared Parker decisively.

'No-o.' Mrs Robinson appeared far from convinced. 'But there were several things about it all that struck me as - well, queer.'

'For instance - ' I suggested.

'Ah,' said Parker, 'our criminal expert's attention is aroused! Unburden yourself to him, Mrs Robinson. Hastings is a great unraveller of mysteries.'

I laughed, embarrassed, but not wholly displeased with the rôle thrust upon me.

'Oh, not really queer, Captain Hastings, but when we went to the agents, Stosser and Paul - we hadn't tried them before because they only have the expensive Mayfair flats, but we thought at any rate it would do no harm - everything they offered us was four and five hundred a year, or else huge premiums, and then, just as we were going, they mentioned that they had a flat at eighty, but that they doubted if it would be any good our going there, because it had been on their books some time and they had sent so many people to see it that it was almost sure to be taken - "snapped up"

as the clerk put it - only people were so tiresome in not letting them know, and then they went on sending, and people get annoyed at being sent to a place that had, perhaps, been let some time.'

Mrs Robinson paused for some much needed breath, and then continued:

'We thanked him, and said that we quite understood it would probably be no good, but that we should like an order all the same - just in case. And we went there straight away in a taxi, for, after all, you never know. No 4 was on the second floor, and just as we were waiting for the lift, Elsie Ferguson - she's a friend of mine, Captain Hastings, and they are looking for a flat too - came hurrying down the stairs. "Ahead of you for once, my dear," she said. "But it's no good. It's already let." That seemed to finish it, but - well, as John said, the place was very cheap, we could afford to give more, and perhaps if we offered a premium. A horrid thing to do, of course, and I feel quite ashamed of telling you, but you know what flat-hunting is.'

I assured her that I was well aware that in the struggle for house-room the baser side of human nature frequently triumphed over the higher, and that the well-known rule of dog eat dog always applied.

'So we went up and, would you believe it, the flat wasn't let at all. We were shown over it by the maid, and then we saw the mistress, and the thing was settled then and there. Immediate possession and fifty pounds for the furniture. We signed the agreement next day, and we are to move in tomorrow!' Mrs Robinson paused triumphantly.

'And what about Mrs Ferguson?' asked Parker. 'Let's have your deductions, Hastings.'

'"Obvious, my dear Watson,"' I quoted lightly. 'She went to the wrong flat.'

'Oh, Captain Hastings, how clever of you!' cried Mrs Robinson admiringly.

I rather wished Poirot had been there. Sometimes I have the feeling that he rather underestimates my capabilities.

II

The whole thing was rather amusing, and I propounded the thing as a mock problem to Poirot on the following morning. He seemed interested, and questioned me rather narrowly as to the rents of flats in various localities.

'A curious story,' he said thoughtfully. 'Excuse me, Hastings, I must take a short stroll.'

When he returned, about an hour later, his eyes were gleaming with a peculiar excitement. He laid his stick on the table, and brushed the nap of his hat with his usual tender care before he spoke.

'It is as well, *mon ami*, that we have no affairs of moment on hand. We can devote ourselves wholly to the present investigation.'

'What investigation are you talking about?'

'The remarkable cheapness of your friend, Mrs Robinson's, new flat.'

'Poirot, you are not serious!'

'I am most serious. Figure to yourself, my friend, that the real rent of those flats is £350. I have just ascertained that from the landlord's agents. And yet this particular flat is being sublet at eighty pounds! Why?'

'There must be something wrong with it. Perhaps it is haunted, as Mrs Robinson suggested.'

Poirot shook his head in a dissatisfied manner.

'Then again how curious it is that her friend tells her the flat is let, and, when she goes up, behold, it is not so at all!'

'But surely you agree with me that the other woman must have gone to the wrong flat. That is the only possible solution.'

'You may or may not be right on that point, Hastings. The fact still remains that numerous other applicants were sent to see it, and yet, in spite of its remarkable cheapness, it was still in the market when Mrs Robinson arrived.'

'That shows that there *must* be something wrong about it.'

'Mrs Robinson did not seem to notice anything amiss. Very curious, is it not? Did she impress you as being a truthful woman, Hastings?'

'She was a delightful creature!'

'*Evidemment*! since she renders you incapable of replying to my question. Describe her to me, then.'

'Well, she's tall and fair; her hair's really a beautiful shade of auburn - '

'Always you have had a penchant for auburn hair!' murmured Poirot. 'But continue.'

'Blue eyes and a very nice complexion and - well, that's all, I think,' I concluded lamely.

'And her husband?'

'Oh, he's quite a nice fellow - nothing startling.'

'Dark or fair?'

'I don't know - betwixt and between, and just an ordinary sort of face.'

Poirot nodded.

'Yes, there are hundreds of these average men - and, anyway, you bring more sympathy and appreciation to your description of women. Do you know anything about these people? Does Parker know them well?'

'They are just recent acquaintances, I believe. But surely, Poirot, you don't think for an instant - '

Poirot raised his hand.

'*Tout doucement, mon ami*. Have I said that I think anything? All I say is - it is a curious story. And there is nothing to throw light upon it; except perhaps the lady's name, eh, Hastings?'

'Her name is Stella,' I said stiffly, 'but I don't see - '

Poirot interrupted me with a tremendous chuckle. Something seemed to be amusing him vastly.

'And Stella means a star, does it not? Famous!'

'What on earth -? '

'And stars give light! *Voilà*! Calm yourself, Hastings. Do not put on that air of injured dignity. Come, we will go to Montagu Mansions and make a few inquiries.'

I accompanied him, nothing loath. The Mansions were a handsome block of buildings in excellent repair. A uniformed porter was sunning himself on the threshold, and it was to him that Poirot addressed himself:

'Pardon, but could you tell me if a Mr and Mrs Robinson reside here?'

The porter was a man of few words and apparently of a sour or suspicious disposition. He hardly looked at us and grunted out:

'No 4. Second floor.'

'I thank you. Can you tell me how long they have been here?'

'Six months.'

I started forward in amazement, conscious as I did so of Poirot's malicious grin.

'Impossible,' I cried. 'You must be making a mistake.'

'Six months.'

'Are you sure? The lady I mean is tall and fair with reddish gold hair and - '

'That's 'er,' said the porter. 'Come in the Michaelmas quarter, they did. Just six months ago.'

He appeared to lose interest in us and retreated slowly up the hall. I followed Poirot outside.

'*Eh bien*, Hastings?' my friend demanded slyly. 'Are you so sure now that delightful women always speak the truth?'

I did not reply.

Poirot had steered his way into Brompton Road before I asked him what he was going to do and where we were going.

'To the house agents, Hastings. I have a great desire to have a flat in Montagu Mansions. If I am not mistaken, several interesting things will take place there before long.'

We were fortunate in our quest. No 8, on the fourth floor, was to be let furnished at ten guineas a week. Poirot promptly took it for a month. Outside in the street again, he silenced my protests:

'But I make money nowadays! Why should I not indulge a whim? By the way, Hastings, have you a revolver?'

'Yes - somewhere,' I answered, slightly thrilled. 'Do you think - '

'That you will need it? It is quite possible. The idea pleases you, I see. Always the spectacular and romantic appeals to you.'

The following day saw us installed in our temporary home. The flat was pleasantly furnished. It occupied the same position in the building as that of the Robinsons, but was two floors higher.

The day after our installation was a Sunday. In the afternoon, Poirot left the front door ajar, and summoned me hastily as a bang reverberated from somewhere below.

'Look over the banisters. Are those your friends? Do not let them see you.'

I craned my neck over the staircase.

'That's them,' I declared in an ungrammatical whisper.

'Good. Wait awhile.'

About half an hour later, a young woman emerged in brilliant and varied clothing. With a sigh of satisfaction, Poirot tiptoed back into the flat.

'*C'est ça*. After the master and mistress, the maid. The flat should now be empty.'

'What are we going to do?' I asked uneasily.

Poirot had trotted briskly into the scullery and was hauling at the rope of the coal-lift.

'We are about to descend after the method of the dustbins,' he explained cheerfully. 'No one will observe us. The Sunday concert, the Sunday 'afternoon out,' and finally the Sunday nap after the Sunday dinner of England - *le rosbif* - all these will distract attention from the doings of Hercule Poirot. Come, my friend.'

He stepped into the rough wooden contrivance and I followed him gingerly.

'Are we going to break into the flat?' I asked dubiously.

Poirot's answer was not too reassuring:

'Not precisely today,' he replied.

Pulling on the rope, we descended slowly till we reached the second floor. Poirot uttered an exclamation of satisfaction as he perceived that the wooden door into the scullery was open.

'You observe? Never do they bolt these doors in the daytime. And yet anyone could mount or descend as we have done. At night, yes - though not always then - and it is against that that we are going to make provision.'

He had drawn some tools from his pocket as he spoke, and at once set deftly to work, his object being to arrange the bolt so that it could be pulled back from the lift. The operation only occupied about three minutes. Then Poirot returned the tools to his pocket, and we reascended once more to our own domain.

III

On Monday Poirot was out all day, but when he returned in the evening he flung himself into his chair with a sigh of satisfaction.

'Hastings, shall I recount to you a little history? A story after your own heart and which will remind you of your favourite cinema?'

'Go ahead,' I laughed. 'I presume that it is a true story, not one of your efforts of fancy.'

'It is true enough. Inspector Japp of Scotland Yard will vouch for its accuracy, since it was through his kind offices that it came to my ears. Listen, Hastings. A little over six months ago some important Naval plans were stolen from an American Government department. They showed the position of some of the most important Harbour defences, and would be worth a considerable sum to any foreign Government - that of Japan, for example. Suspicion fell upon a young man named Luigi Valdarno, an Italian by birth, who was employed in a minor capacity in the Department and who was missing at the same time as the papers. Whether Luigi Valdarno was the thief or not, he was found two days later on the East Side in New York, shot dead. The papers were not on him. Now for some time past Luigi Valdarno had been going about with a Miss Elsa Hardt, a young concert singer who had recently appeared and who lived with a brother in an apartment in Washington. Nothing was known of the antecedents of Miss Elsa Hardt, and she disappeared suddenly about the time of Valdarno's death. There are reasons for believing that she was in reality an accomplished international spy who has done much nefarious work under various *aliases*. The American Secret Service, whilst doing their best to trace her, also kept an eye upon certain insignificant Japanese

gentlemen living in Washington. They felt pretty certain that, when Elsa Hardt had covered her tracks sufficiently, she would approach the gentlemen in question. One of them left suddenly for England a fortnight ago. On the face of it, therefore, it would seem that Elsa Hardt is in England.' Poirot paused, and then added softly: 'The official description of Elsa Hardt is: Height 5 ft 7, eyes blue, hair auburn, fair complexion, nose straight, no special distinguishing marks.'

'Mrs Robinson!' I gasped.

'Well, there is a chance of it, anyhow,' amended Poirot. 'Also, I learn that a swarthy man, a foreigner of some kind, was inquiring about the occupants of No 4 only this morning. Therefore, *mon ami*, I fear that you must forswear your beauty sleep tonight, and join me in my all-night vigil in that flat below - armed with that excellent revolver of yours, *bien entendu*!'

'Rather,' I cried with enthusiasm. 'When shall we start?'

'The hour of midnight is both solemn and suitable, I fancy. Nothing is likely to occur before then.'

At twelve o'clock precisely, we crept cautiously into the coal-lift and lowered ourselves to the second floor. Under Poirot's manipulation, the wooden door quickly swung inwards, and we climbed into the flat. From the scullery we passed into the kitchen where we established ourselves comfortably in two chairs with the door into the hall ajar.

'Now we have but to wait,' said Poirot contentedly, closing his eyes.

To me, the waiting appeared endless. I was terrified of going to sleep. Just when it seemed to me that I had been there about eight hours - and had, as I found out afterwards, in reality been exactly one hour and twenty minutes - a faint scratching sound came to my ears. Poirot's hand touched mine. I rose, and together we moved carefully in the direction of the hall. The noise came from there. Poirot placed his lips to my ear.

'Outside the front door. They are cutting out the lock. When I give the word, not before, fall upon him from behind and hold him fast. Be careful, he will have a knife.'

Presently there was a rending sound, and a little circle of light appeared through the door. It was extinguished immediately and then the door was slowly opened. Poirot and I flattened ourselves against the wall. I heard a man's breathing as he passed us. Then he flashed on his torch, and as he did so, Poirot hissed in my ear:

'*Allez*.'

We sprang together, Poirot with a quick movement enveloped the intruder's head with a light woollen scarf whilst I pinioned his arms. The whole affair was quick and noiseless. I twisted a dagger from his hand, and as Poirot brought down the scarf from his eyes, whilst keeping it wound tightly round his mouth, I jerked up my revolver where he could see it and understand that resistance was useless. As he ceased to struggle Poirot put his mouth close to his ear and began to whisper rapidly. After a minute the man nodded. Then enjoining silence with a movement of the hand, Poirot led the way out of the flat and down the stairs. Our captive followed, and I brought up the rear with the revolver. When we were out in the street, Poirot turned to me.

'There is a taxi waiting just round the corner. Give me the revolver. We shall not need it now.'

'But if this fellow tries to escape?'

Poirot smiled.

'He will not.'

I returned in a minute with the waiting taxi. The scarf had been unwound from the stranger's face, and I gave a start of surprise.

'He's not a Jap,' I ejaculated in a whisper to Poirot.

'Observation was always your strong point, Hastings! Nothing escapes you. No, the man is not a Jap. He is an Italian.'

We got into the taxi, and Poirot gave the driver an address in St John's Wood. I was by now completely fogged. I did not like to ask Poirot where we were going in front of our captive, and strove in vain to obtain some light upon the proceedings.

We alighted at the door of a small house standing back from the road. A returning wayfarer, slightly drunk, was lurching along the pavement and almost collided with Poirot, who said something sharply to him which I did not catch. All three of us went up the steps of the house. Poirot rang the bell and motioned us to stand a little aside. There was no answer and he rang again and then seized the knocker which he plied for some minutes vigorously.

A light appeared suddenly above the fanlight, and the door was opened cautiously a little way.

'What the devil do you want?' a man's voice demanded harshly.

'I want the doctor. My wife is taken ill.'

'There's no doctor here.'

The man prepared to shut the door, but Poirot thrust his foot in adroitly. He became suddenly a perfect caricature of an infuriated Frenchman.

'What you say, there is no doctor? I will have the law on you. You must come! I will stay here and ring and knock all night.'

'My dear sir - ' The door was opened again, the man, clad in a dressing-gown and slippers, stepped forward to pacify Poirot with an uneasy glance round.

'I will call the police.'

Poirot prepared to descend the steps.

'No, don't do that for Heaven's sake!' The man dashed after him.

With a neat push Poirot sent him staggering down the steps. In another minute all three of us were inside the door and it was pushed to and bolted.

'Quick - in here.' Poirot led the way into the nearest room, switching on the light as he did so. 'And you - behind the curtain.'

'Si, signor,' said the Italian and slid rapidly behind the full folds of rose-coloured velvet which draped the embrasure of the window.

Not a minute too soon. Just as he disappeared from view a woman rushed into the room. She was tall with reddish hair and held a scarlet kimono round her slender form.

'Where is my husband?' she cried, with a quick frightened glance. 'Who are you?'

Poirot stepped forward with a bow.

'It is to be hoped your husband will not suffer from a chill. I observed that he had slippers on his feet, and that his dressing-gown was a warm one.'

'Who are you? What are you doing in my house?'

'It is true that none of us have the pleasure of your acquaintance, madame. It is especially to be regretted as one of our number has come specially from New York in order to meet you.'

The curtains parted and the Italian stepped out. To my horror I observed that he was brandishing my revolver, which Poirot must doubtless have put down through inadvertence in the cab.

The woman gave a piercing scream and turned to fly, but Poirot was standing in front of the closed door.

'Let me by,' she shrieked. 'He will murder me.'

'Who was it dat croaked Luigi Valdarno?' asked the Italian hoarsely, brandishing the weapon, and sweeping each one of us with it. We dared not move.

'My God, Poirot, this is awful. What shall we do?' I cried.

'You will oblige me by refraining from talking so much, Hastings. I can assure you that our friend will not shoot until I give the word.'

'You’ sure o' dat, eh?' said the Italian, leering unpleasantly.

It was more than I was, but the woman turned to Poirot like a flash.

'What is it you want?'

Poirot bowed.

'I do not think it is necessary to insult Miss Elsa Hardt's intelligence by telling her.'

With a swift movement, the woman snatched up a big black velvet cat which served as a cover for the telephone.

'They are stitched in the lining of that.'

'Clever,' murmured Poirot appreciatively. He stood aside from the door. 'Good evening, madame. I will detain your friend from New York whilst you make your getaway.'

'Whatta fool!' roared the big Italian, and raising the revolver he fired point-blank at the woman's retreating figure just as I flung myself upon him.

But the weapon merely clicked harmlessly and Poirot's voice rose in mild reproof.

'Never will you trust your old friend, Hastings. I do not care for my friends to carry loaded pistols about with them and never would I permit a mere acquaintance to do so. No, no, *mon ami,*' This to the Italian who was swearing hoarsely. Poirot continued to address him in a tone of mild reproof: 'See now, what I have done for you. I have saved you from being hanged. And do not think that our beautiful lady will escape. No, no, the house is watched, back and front. Straight into the arms of the police they will go. Is not that a beautiful and consoling thought? Yes, you may leave the room now.

But be careful - be very careful. I - Ah, he is gone! And my friend Hastings looks at me with eyes of reproach. But it was all so simple! It was clear, from the first, that out of several hundred, probably, applicants for No 4 Montagu Mansions, only the Robinsons were considered suitable. Why? What was there that singled them out from the rest - at practically a glance. Their appearance? Possibly, but it was not so unusual. Their name, then!'

'But there's nothing unusual about the name of Robinson,' I cried. 'It's quite a common name.'

'Ah! *Sapristi*, but exactly! That was the point. Elsa Hardt and her husband, or brother or whatever he really is, come from New York, and take a flat in the name of Mr and Mrs Robinson. Suddenly they learn that one of these secret societies, the Mafia, or the Camorra, to which doubtless Luigi Valdarno belonged, is on their track. What do they do? They hit on a scheme of transparent simplicity. Evidently they knew that their pursuers were not personally acquainted with either of them. What, then, can be simpler? They offer the flat at an absurdly low rental. Of the thousands of young couples in London looking for flats, there cannot fail to be several Robinsons. It is only a matter of waiting. If you will look at the name of Robinson in the telephone directory, you will realize that a fair-haired Mrs Robinson was pretty sure to come along sooner or later. Then what will happen? The avenger arrives. He knows the name, he knows the address. He strikes! All is over, vengeance is satisfied, and Miss Elsa Hardt has escaped by the skin of her teeth once more. By the way, Hastings, you must present me to the real Mrs Robinson - that delightful and truthful creature! What will they think when they find their flat has been broken into! We must hurry back. Ah, that sounds like Japp and his friends arriving.'

A mighty tattoo sounded on the knocker.

'How did you know this address?' I asked as I followed Poirot out into the hall. 'Oh, of course, you had the first Mrs Robinson followed when she left the other flat.'

'*A la bonne heure*, Hastings. You use your grey cells at last. Now for a little surprise for Japp.'

Softly unbolting the door, he stuck the cat's head round the edge and ejaculated a piercing 'Miaow.'

The Scotland Yard inspector, who was standing outside with another man, jumped in spite of himself.

'Oh, it's only Monsieur Poirot at one of his little jokes!' he exclaimed, as Poirot's head followed that of the cat. 'Let us in, moosior.'

'You have our friends safe and sound? '

'Yes, we've got the birds all right. But they hadn't got the goods with them.'

'I see. So you come to search. Well, I am about to depart with Hastings, but I should like to give you a little lecture upon the history and habits of the domestic cat.'

'For the Lord's sake, have you gone completely balmy?'

'The cat,' declaimed Poirot, 'was worshipped by the ancient Egyptians. It is still regarded as a symbol of good luck if a black cat crosses your path. This cat crossed your path tonight, Japp. To speak of the interior of any animal or any person is not, I know,

considered polite in England. But the interior of this cat is perfectly delicate. I refer to the lining.'

With a sudden grunt, the second man seized the cat from Poirot's hand.

'Oh, I forgot to introduce you,' said Japp. 'Mr Poirot, this is Mr Burt of the United States Secret Service.'

The American's trained fingers had felt what he was looking for. He held out his hand, and for a moment speech failed him. Then he rose to the occasion.

'Pleased to meet you,' said Mr Burt.

The Mystery of Hunter's Lodge

'After all,' murmured Poirot, 'it is possible that I shall not die this time.'

Coming from a convalescent influenza patient, I hailed the remark as showing a beneficial optimism. I myself had been the first sufferer from the disease. Poirot in his turn had gone down. He was now sitting up in bed, propped up with pillows, his head muffled in a woollen shawl, and was slowly sipping a particularly noxious *tisane* which I had prepared according to his directions. His eye rested with pleasure upon a neatly graduated row of medicine bottles which adorned the mantelpiece.

'Yes, yes,' my little friend continued. 'Once more shall I be myself again, the great Hercule Poirot, the terror of evildoers! Figure to

yourself, *mon ami*, that I have a little paragraph to myself in *Society Gossip*. But yes! Here it is: "Go it - criminals - all out! Hercule Poirot - and believe me, girls, he's some Hercules! - our own pet society detective can't get a grip on you. 'Cause why? 'Cause he's got *la grippe* himself"!'

I laughed.

'Good for you, Poirot. You are becoming quite a public character. And fortunately you haven't missed anything of particular interest during this time.'

'That is true. The few cases I have had to decline did not fill me with any regret.'

Our landlady stuck her head in at the door.

'There's a gentleman downstairs. Says he must see Monsieur Poirot or you, Captain. Seeing as he was in a great to-do - and with all that quite the gentleman - I brought up 'is card.'

She handed me the bit of pasteboard. 'Mr Roger Havering,' I read.

Poirot motioned with his head towards the bookcase, and I obediently pulled forth *Who's Who*. Poirot took it from me and scanned the pages rapidly.

'Second son of fifth Baron Windsor. Married 1913 Zoe, fourth daughter of William Crabb.'

'H'm!' I said. 'I rather fancy that's the girl who used to act at the Frivolity - only she called herself Zoe Carrisbrook. I remember she married some young man about town just before the War.'

'Would it interest you, Hastings, to go down and hear what our visitor's particular little trouble is? Make him all my excuses.'

Roger Havering was a man of about forty, well set up and of smart appearance. His face, however, was haggard, and he was evidently labouring under great agitation.

'Captain Hastings? You are Monsieur Poirot's partner, I understand. It is imperative that he should come with me to Derbyshire today.'

'I'm afraid that's impossible,' I replied. 'Poirot is ill in bed - influenza.'

His face fell.

'Dear me, that is a great blow to me.'

'The matter on which you want to consult him is serious?'

'My God, yes! My uncle, the best friend I have in the world, was foully murdered last night.'

'Here in London?'

'No, in Derbyshire. I was in town and received a telegram from my wife this morning. Immediately upon its receipt I determined to come round and beg Monsieur Poirot to undertake the case.'

'If you will excuse me a minute,' I said, struck by a sudden idea.

I rushed upstairs, and in a few brief words acquainted Poirot with the situation. He took any further words out of my mouth.

'I see. I see. You want to go yourself, is it not so? Well, why not? You should know my methods by now. All I ask is that you should report

to me fully every day, and follow implicitly any instructions I may wire you.'

To this I willingly agreed.

II

An hour later I was sitting opposite Mr Havering in a first-class carriage on the Midland Railway, speeding rapidly away from London.

'To begin with, Captain Hastings, you must understand that Hunter's Lodge, where we are going, and where the tragedy took place, is only a small shooting-box in the heart of the Derbyshire moors. Our real home is near Newmarket, and we usually rent a flat in town for the season. Hunter's Lodge is looked after by a housekeeper who is quite capable of doing all we need when we run down for an occasional weekend. Of course, during the shooting season, we take down some of our own servants from Newmarket. My uncle, Mr Harrington Pace (as you may know, my mother was a Miss Pace of New York), has, for the last three years, made his home with us. He never got on well with my father, or my elder brother, and I suspect that my being somewhat of a prodigal son myself rather increased than diminished his affection towards me. Of course I am a poor man, and my uncle was a rich one - in other words, he paid the piper! But, though exacting in many ways, he was not really hard to get on with, and we all three lived very harmoniously together. Two days ago my uncle, rather wearied with some recent gaieties of ours in town, suggested that we should run down to Derbyshire for a day or two. My wife

telegraphed to Mrs Middleton, the housekeeper, and we went down that same afternoon. Yesterday evening I was forced to return to town, but my wife and my uncle remained on. This morning I received this telegram.' He handed it over to me:

'Come at once uncle Harrington murdered last night bring good detective if you can but do come - Zoe.'

'Then, as yet you know no details?'

'No, I suppose it will be in the evening papers. Without doubt the police are in charge.'

It was about three o'clock when we arrived at the little station of Elmer's Dale. From there a five-mile drive brought us to a small grey stone building in the midst of the rugged moors.

'A lonely place,' I observed with a shiver.

Havering nodded.

'I shall try and get rid of it. I could never live here again.'

We unlatched the gate and were walking up the narrow path to the oak door when a familiar figure emerged and came to meet us.

'Japp!' I ejaculated.

The Scotland Yard inspector grinned at me in a friendly fashion before addressing my companion.

'Mr Havering, I think? I've been sent down from London to take charge of this case, and I'd like a word with you, if I may, sir.'

'My wife - '

'I've seen your good lady, sir - and the housekeeper. I won't keep you a moment, but I'm anxious to get back to the village now that I've seen all there is to see here.'

'I know nothing as yet as to what - '

'Ex-actly,' said Japp soothingly. 'But there are just one or two little points I'd like your opinion about all the same. Captain Hastings here, he knows me, and he'll go on up to the house and tell them you're coming. What have you done with the little man, by the way, Captain Hastings?'

'He's ill in bed with influenza.'

'Is he now? I'm sorry to hear that. Rather the case of the cart without the horse, your being here without him, isn't it?'

And on his rather ill-timed jest I went on to the house. I rang the bell, as Japp had closed the door behind him. After some moments it was opened to me by a middle-aged woman in black.

'Mr Havering will be here in a moment,' I explained. 'He has been detained by the inspector. I have come down with him from London to look into the case. Perhaps you can tell me briefly what occurred last night.'

'Come inside, sir.' She closed the door behind me, and we stood in the dimly-lighted hall. 'It was after dinner last night, sir, that the man came. He asked to see Mr Pace, sir, and, seeing that he spoke the same way, I thought it was an American gentleman friend of Mr Pace's and I showed him into the gun-room, and then went to tell Mr Pace. He wouldn't give any name, which, of course, was a bit odd, now I come to think of it. I told Mr Pace, and he seemed puzzled

like, but he said to the mistress: "Excuse me, Zoe, while I just see what this fellow wants." He went off to the gun-room, and I went back to the kitchen, but after a while I heard loud voices, as if they were quarrelling, and I came out into the hall. At the same time, the mistress she comes out too, and just then there was a shot and then a dreadful silence. We both ran to the gun-room door, but it was locked and we had to go round to the window. It was open, and there inside was Mr Pace, all shot and bleeding.'

'What became of the man?'

'He must have got away through the window, sir, before we got to it.'

'And then?'

'Mrs Havering sent me to fetch the police. Five miles to walk it was. They came back with me, and the constable he stayed all night, and this morning the police gentleman from London arrived.'

'What was this man like who called to see Mr Pace?'

The housekeeper reflected.

'He had a black beard, sir, and was about middle-aged, and had on a light overcoat. Beyond the fact that he spoke like an American I didn't notice much about him.'

'I see. Now I wonder if I can see Mrs Havering?'

'She's upstairs, sir. Shall I tell her?'

'If you please. Tell her that Mr Havering is outside with Inspector Japp, and that the gentleman he has brought back with him from London is anxious to speak to her as soon as possible.'

'Very good, sir.'

I was in a fever of impatience to get at all the facts. Japp had two or three hours' start of me, and his anxiety to be gone made me keen to be close at his heels.

Mrs Havering did not keep me waiting long. In a few minutes I heard a light step descending the stairs, and looked up to see a very handsome young woman coming towards me. She wore a flame-coloured jumper, that set off the slender boyishness of her figure. On her dark head was a little hat of flame-coloured leather. Even the present tragedy could not dim the vitality of her personality.

I introduced myself, and she nodded in quick comprehension.

'Of course I have often heard of you and your colleague, Monsieur Poirot. You have done some wonderful things together, haven't you? It was very clever of my husband to get you so promptly. Now will you ask me questions? That is the easiest way, isn't it, of getting to know all you want to about this dreadful affair?'

'Thank you, Mrs Havering. Now what time was it that this man arrived?'

'It must have been just before nine o'clock. We had finished dinner, and were sitting over our coffee and cigarettes.'

'Your husband had already left for London?'

'Yes, he went up by the 6.15.'

'Did he go by car to the station, or did he walk?'

'Our own car isn't down here. One came out from the garage in Elmer's Dale to fetch him in time for the train.'

'Was Mr Pace quite his usual self?'

'Absolutely. Most normal in every way.'

'Now, can you describe this visitor at all?'

'I'm afraid not. I didn't see him. Mrs Middleton showed him straight into the gun-room and then came to tell my uncle.'

'What did your uncle say?'

'He seemed rather annoyed, but went off at once. It was about five minutes later that I heard the sound of raised voices. I ran out into the hall and almost collided with Mrs Middleton. Then we heard the shot. The gun-room door was locked on the inside, and we had to go right round the house to the window. Of course that took some time, and the murderer had been able to get well away. My poor uncle' - her voice faltered - 'had been shot through the head. I saw at once that he was dead. I sent Mrs Middleton for the police. I was careful to touch nothing in the room but to leave it exactly as I found it.'

I nodded approval.

'Now, as to the weapon?'

'Well, I can make a guess at it, Captain Hastings. A pair of revolvers of my husband's were mounted upon the wall. One of them is missing. I pointed this out to the police, and they took the other one

away with them. When they have extracted the bullet, I suppose they will know for certain.'

'May I go to the gun-room?'

'Certainly. The police have finished with it. But the body has been removed.'

She accompanied me to the scene of the crime. At that moment Havering entered the hall, and with a quick apology his wife ran to him. I was left to undertake my investigations alone.

I may as well confess at once that they were rather disappointing. In detective novels clues abound, but here I could find nothing that struck me as out of the ordinary except a large blood-stain on the carpet where I judged the dead man had fallen. I examined everything with painstaking care and took a couple of pictures of the room with my little camera which I had brought with me. I also examined the ground outside the window, but it appeared to have been so heavily trampled underfoot that I judged it was useless to waste time over it. No, I had seen all that Hunter's Lodge had to show me. I must go back to Elmer's Dale and get into touch with Japp. Accordingly I took leave of the Haverings, and was driven off in the car that had brought us up from the station.

I found Japp at the Matlock Arms and he took me forthwith to see the body. Harrington Pace was a small, spare, clean-shaven man, typically American in appearance. He had been shot through the back of the head, and the revolver had been discharged at close quarters.

'Turned away for a moment,' remarked Japp, 'and the other fellow snatched up a revolver and shot him. The one Mrs Havering handed over to us was fully loaded and I suppose the other one was also. Curious what darn fool things people do. Fancy keeping two loaded revolvers hanging up on your wall.'

'What do you think of the case?' I asked, as we left the gruesome chamber behind us.

'Well, I'd got my eye on Havering to begin with. Oh, yes!' - noting my exclamation of astonishment. 'Havering has one or two shady incidents in his past. When he was a boy at Oxford there was some funny business about the signature on one of his father's cheques. All hushed up of course. Then, he's pretty heavily in debt now, and they're the kind of debts he wouldn't like to go to his uncle about, whereas you may be sure the uncle's will would be in his favour. Yes, I'd got my eye on him, and that's why I wanted to speak to him before he saw his wife, but their statements dovetail all right, and I've been to the station and there's no doubt whatever that he left by the 6.15. That gets up to London about 10.30. He went straight to his club, he says, and if that's confirmed all right - why, he couldn't have been shooting his uncle here at nine o'clock in a black beard!'

'Ah, yes, I was going to ask you what you thought about that beard?'

Japp winked.

'I think it grew pretty fast - grew in the five miles from Elmer's Dale to Hunter's Lodge. Americans that I've met are mostly clean-shaven. Yes, it's amongst Mr Pace's American associates that we'll have to look for the murderer. I questioned the housekeeper first, and then her mistress, and their stories agree all right, but I'm sorry

Mrs Havering didn't get a look at the fellow. She's a smart woman, and she might have noticed something that would set us on the track.'

I sat down and wrote a minute and lengthy account to Poirot. I was able to add various further items of information before I posted the letter.

The bullet had been extracted and was proved to have been fired from a revolver identical with the one held by the police. Furthermore, Mr Havering's movements on the night in question had been checked and verified, and it was proved beyond doubt that he had actually arrived in London by the train in question. And, thirdly, a sensational development had occurred. A city gentleman, living at Ealing, on crossing Haven Green to get to the District Railway Station that morning, had observed a brown-paper parcel stuck between the railings. Opening it, he found that it contained a revolver. He handed the parcel over to the local police station, and before night it was proved to be the one we were in search of, the fellow to that given us by Mrs Havering. One bullet had been fired from it.

All this I added to my report. A wire from Poirot arrived whilst I was at breakfast the following morning:

'Of course black-bearded man was not Havering only you or Japp would have such an idea wire me description of housekeeper and what clothes she wore this morning same of Mrs Havering do not waste time taking photographs of interiors they are underexposed and not in the least artistic.'

It seemed to me that Poirot's style was unnecessarily facetious. I also fancied he was a shade jealous of my position on the spot with full facilities for handling the case. His request for a description of the clothes worn by the two women appeared to me to be simply ridiculous, but I complied as well as I, a mere man, was able to.

At eleven a reply wire came from Poirot:

'Advise Japp arrest housekeeper before it is too late.'

Dumbfounded, I took the wire to Japp. He swore softly under his breath.

'He's the goods, Monsieur Poirot! If he says so, there's something in it. And I hardly noticed the woman. I don't know that I can go so far as arresting her, but I'll have her watched. We'll go up right away, and take another look at her.'

But it was too late. Mrs Middleton, that quiet middle-aged woman, who had appeared so normal and respectable, had vanished into thin air. Her box had been left behind. It contained only ordinary wearing apparel. There was no clue in it to her identity, or as to her whereabouts.

From Mrs Havering we elicited all the facts we could:

'I engaged her about three weeks ago when Mrs Emery, our former housekeeper, left. She came to me from Mrs Selbourne's Agency in Mount Street - a very well-known place. I get all my servants from there. They sent several women to see me, but this Mrs Middleton seemed much the nicest, and had splendid references. I engaged her on the spot, and notified the Agency of the fact. I can't believe

that there was anything wrong with her. She was such a nice quiet woman.'

The thing was certainly a mystery. Whilst it was clear that the woman herself could not have committed the crime, since at the moment the shot was fired Mrs Havering was with her in the hall, nevertheless she must have some connection with the murder, or why should she suddenly take to her heels and bolt?

I wired the latest development to Poirot and suggested returning to London and making inquiries at Selbourne's Agency.

Poirot's reply was prompt:

'Useless to inquire at agency they will never have heard of her find out what vehicle took her up to hunters lodge when she first arrived there.'

Though mystified, I was obedient. The means of transport in Elmer's Dale were limited. The local garage had two battered Ford cars, and there were two station flies. None of these had been requisitioned on the date in question. Questioned, Mrs Havering explained that she had given the woman the money for her fare down to Derbyshire and sufficient to hire a car or fly to take her up to Hunter's Lodge. There was usually one of the Fords at the station on the chance of its being required. Taking into consideration the further fact that nobody at the station had noticed the arrival of a stranger, black-bearded or otherwise, on the fatal evening, everything seemed to point to the conclusion that the murderer had come to the spot in a car, which had been waiting near at hand to aid his escape, and that the same car had brought the mysterious housekeeper to her new post. I may mention that inquiries at the

Agency in London bore out Poirot's prognostication. No such woman as 'Mrs Middleton' had ever been on their books. They had received the Hon. Mrs Havering's application for a housekeeper, and had sent her various applicants for the post. When she sent them the engagement fee, she omitted to mention which woman she had selected.

Somewhat crestfallen, I returned to London. I found Poirot established in an arm-chair by the fire in a garish silk dressing-gown. He greeted me with much affection.

'*Mon ami* Hastings! But how glad I am to see you. Veritably I have for you a great affection! And you have enjoyed yourself? You have run to and fro with the good Japp? You have interrogated and investigated to your heart's content?'

'Poirot,' I cried, 'the thing's a dark mystery! It will never be solved.'

'It is true that we are not likely to cover ourselves with glory over it.'

'No, indeed. It's a hard nut to crack.'

'Oh, as far as that goes, I am very good at cracking the nuts! A veritable squirrel! It is not that which embarrasses me. I know well enough who killed Mr Harrington Pace.'

'You know? How did you find out?'

'Your illuminating answers to my wires supplied me with the truth. See here, Hastings, let us examine the facts methodically and in order. Mr Harrington Pace is a man with a considerable fortune which at his death will doubtless pass to his nephew. Point No 1. His nephew is known to be desperately hard up. Point No 2. His

nephew is also known to be - shall we say a man of rather loose moral fibre? Point No 3.'

'But Roger Havering is proved to have journeyed straight up to London.'

'*Précisément* - and therefore, as Mr Havering left Elmer's Dale at 6.15, and since Mr Pace cannot have been killed before he left, or the doctor would have spotted the time of the crime as being given wrongly when he examined the body, we conclude quite rightly, that Mr Havering did *not* shoot his uncle. But there is a Mrs Havering, Hastings.'

'Impossible! The housekeeper was with her when the shot was fired.'

'Ah, yes, the housekeeper. But she has disappeared.'

'She will be found.'

'I think not. There is something peculiarly elusive about that housekeeper, don't you think so, Hastings? It struck me at once.'

'She played her part, I suppose, and then got out in the nick of time.'

'And what was her part?'

'Well, presumably to admit her confederate, the black-bearded man.'

'Oh, no, that was not her part! Her part was what you have just mentioned, to provide an alibi for Mrs Havering at the moment the shot was fired. And no one will ever find her, *mon ami*, because she

does not exist! "There's no such person," as your so great Shakespeare says.'

'It was Dickens,' I murmured, unable to suppress a smile. 'But what do you mean, Poirot?'

'I mean that Zoe Havering was an actress before her marriage, that you and Japp only saw the housekeeper in a dark hall, a dim middle-aged figure in black with a faint subdued voice, and finally that neither you nor Japp, nor the local police whom the housekeeper fetched, ever saw Mrs Middleton and her mistress at one and the same time. It was child's play for that clever and daring woman. On the pretext of summoning her mistress, she runs upstairs, slips on a bright jumper and a hat with black curls attached which she jams down over the grey transformation. A few deft touches, and the make-up is removed, a slight dusting of rouge, and the brilliant Zoe Havering comes down with her clear ringing voice. Nobody looks particularly at the housekeeper. Why should they? There is nothing to connect her with the crime. She, too, has an alibi.'

'But the revolver that was found at Ealing? Mrs Havering could not have placed it there?'

'No, that was Roger Havering's job - but it was a mistake on their part. It put me on the right track. A man who has committed murder with a revolver which he found on the spot would fling it away at once, he would not carry it up to London with him. No, the motive was clear, the criminals wished to focus the interest of the police on a spot far removed from Derbyshire, they were anxious to get the police away as soon as possible from the vicinity of Hunter's Lodge. Of course the revolver found at Ealing was not the one with

which Mr Pace was shot. Roger Havering discharged one shot from it, brought it up to London, went straight to his club to establish his alibi, then went quickly out to Ealing by the District, a matter of about twenty minutes only, placed the parcel where it was found and so back to town. That charming creature, his wife, quietly shoots Mr Pace after dinner - you remember he was shot from behind? Another significant point, that! - reloads the revolver and puts it back in its place, and then starts off with her desperate little comedy.'

'It's incredible,' I murmured, fascinated, 'and yet - '

'And yet it is true. *Bien sur*, my friend, it is true. But to bring that precious pair to justice, that is another matter. Well, Japp must do what he can - I have written him fully - but I very much fear, Hastings, that we shall be obliged to leave them to Fate, or *le bon Dieu*, whichever you prefer.'

'The wicked flourish like a green bay tree,' I reminded him.

'But at a price, Hastings, always at a price, *croyez-moi*!'

Poirot's forebodings were confirmed. Japp, though convinced of the truth of his theory, was unable to get together the necessary evidence to ensure a conviction.

Mr Pace's huge fortune passed into the hands of his murderers. Nevertheless, Nemesis did overtake them, and when I read in the paper that the Hon. Roger and Mrs Havering were amongst those killed in the crashing of the Air Mail to Paris I knew that Justice was satisfied.

The Million Dollar Bond Robbery

'What a number of bond robberies there have been lately!' I observed one morning, laying aside the newspaper. 'Poirot, let us forsake the science of detection, and take to crime instead!'

'You are on the - how do you say it? - get-rich-quick tack, eh, *mon ami*?'

'Well, look at this last *coup*, the million dollars' worth of Liberty Bonds which the London and Scottish Bank were sending to New York, and which disappeared in such a remarkable manner on board the *Olympia*.'

'If it were not for the *mal de mer*, and the difficulty of practising the so excellent method of Laverguier for a longer time than the few hours of crossing the Channel, I should delight to voyage myself on one of these big liners,' murmured Poirot dreamily.

'Yes, indeed,' I said enthusiastically. 'Some of them must be perfect palaces; the swimming-baths, the lounges, the restaurant, the palm courts - really, it must be hard to believe that one is on the sea.'

'Me, I always know when I am on the sea,' said Poirot sadly. 'And all those bagatelles that you enumerate, they say nothing to me; but, my friend, consider for a moment the geniuses that travel as it were incognito! On board these floating palaces, as you so justly call them, one would meet the élite, the *haute noblesse* of the criminal world!'

I laughed.

'So that's the way your enthusiasm runs! You would have liked to cross swords with the man who sneaked the Liberty Bonds?'

The landlady interrupted us.

'A young lady as wants to see you, Mr Poirot. Here's her card.'

The card bore the inscription: Miss Esmée Farquhar, and Poirot, after diving under the table to retrieve a stray crumb, and putting it carefully in the waste-paper basket, nodded to the landlady to admit her.

In another minute one of the most charming girls I have ever seen was ushered into the room. She was perhaps about five-and-twenty, with big brown eyes and a perfect figure. She was well-dressed and perfectly composed in manner.

'Sit down, I beg of you, mademoiselle. This is my friend, Captain Hastings, who aids me in my little problems.'

'I am afraid it is a big problem I have brought you today. Monsieur Poirot,' said the girl, giving me a pleasant bow as she seated herself. 'I dare say you have read about it in the papers. I am referring to the theft of Liberty Bonds on the *Olympia*.' Some astonishment must have shown itself on Poirot's face, for she continued quickly: 'You are doubtless asking yourself what I have to do with a grave institution like the London and Scottish Bank. In one sense nothing, in another sense everything. You see. Monsieur Poirot, I am engaged to Mr Philip Ridgeway.'

'Aha! and Mr Philip Ridgeway - '

'Was in charge of the bonds when they were stolen. Of course no actual blame can attach to him, it was not his fault in any way. Nevertheless, he is half distraught over the matter, and his uncle, I know, insists that he must carelessly have mentioned having them in his possession. It is a terrible set-back in his career.'

'Who is his uncle?'

'Mr Vavasour, joint general manager of the London and Scottish Bank.'

'Suppose, Miss Farquhar, that you recount to me the whole story?'

'Very well. As you know, the Bank wished to extend their credits in America, and for this purpose decided to send over a million dollars in Liberty Bonds. Mr Vavasour selected his nephew, who had occupied a position of trust in the Bank for many years and who was conversant with all the details of the Bank's dealings in New York, to make the trip. The *Olympia* sailed from Liverpool on the 23rd, and the bonds were handed over to Philip on the morning of that day by Mr Vavasour and Mr Shaw, the two joint general managers of the London and Scottish Bank. They were counted, enclosed in a package, and sealed in his presence, and he then locked the package at once in his portmanteau.'

'A portmanteau with an ordinary lock?'

'No, Mr Shaw insisted on a special lock being fitted to it by Hubbs's. Philip, as I say, placed the package at the bottom of the trunk. It was stolen just a few hours before reaching New York. A rigorous search of the whole ship was made, but without result. The bonds seemed literally to have vanished into thin air.'

Poirot made a grimace.

'But they did not vanish absolutely, since I gather that they were sold in small parcels within half an hour of the docking of the *Olympia*! Well, undoubtedly the next thing is for me to see Mr Ridgeway.'

'I was about to suggest that you should lunch with me at the "Cheshire Cheese." Philip will be there. He is meeting me, but does not yet know that I have been consulting you on his behalf.'

We agreed to this suggestion readily enough, and drove there in a taxi.

Mr Philip Ridgeway was there before us, and looked somewhat surprised to see his fiancée arriving with two complete strangers. He was a nice-looking young fellow, tall and spruce, with a touch of greying hair at the temples, though he could not have been much over thirty.

Miss Farquhar went up to him and laid her hand on his arm.

'You must forgive my acting without consulting you, Philip,' she said. 'Let me introduce you to Monsieur Hercule Poirot, of whom you must often have heard, and his friend, Captain Hastings.'

Ridgeway looked very astonished.

'Of course I have heard of you, Monsieur Poirot,' he said, as he shook hands, 'But I had no idea that Esmée was thinking of consulting you about my - our trouble.'

'I was afraid you would not let me do it, Philip,' said Miss Farquhar meekly.

'So you took care to be on the safe side,' he observed, with a smile. 'I hope Monsieur Poirot will be able to throw some light on this extraordinary puzzle, for I confess frankly that I am nearly out of my mind with worry and anxiety about it.'

Indeed, his face looked drawn and haggard and showed only too clearly the strain under which he was labouring.

'Well, well,' said Poirot. 'Let us lunch, and over lunch we will put our heads together and see what can be done. I want to hear Mr Ridgeway's story from his own lips.'

Whilst we discussed the excellent steak and kidney pudding of the establishment, Philip Ridgeway narrated the circumstances leading to the disappearance of the bonds. His story agreed with that of Miss Farquhar in every particular. When he had finished, Poirot took up the thread with a question.

'What exactly led you to discover that the bonds had been stolen, Mr Ridgeway?'

He laughed rather bitterly.

'The thing stared me in the face, Monsieur Poirot. I couldn't have missed it. My cabin trunk was half out from under the bunk and all scratched and cut about where they'd tried to force the lock.'

'But I understood that it had been opened with a key?'

'That's so. They tried to force it, but couldn't. And, in the end, they must have got it unlocked somehow or other.'

'Curious,' said Poirot, his eyes beginning to flicker with the green light I knew so well. 'Very curious! They waste much, much time

trying to prise it open, and then - *sapristi*! they find that they have the key all the time - for each of Hubbs's locks are unique.'

'That's just why they couldn't have had the key. It never left me day or night.'

'You are sure of that?'

'I can swear to it, and besides, if they had had the key or a duplicate, why should they waste time trying to force an obviously unforceable lock?'

'Ah! there is exactly the question we are asking ourselves! I venture to prophesy that the solution, if we ever find it, will hinge on that curious fact. I beg of you not to assault me if I ask you one more question: *Are you perfectly certain you did not leave the trunk unlocked?*'

Philip Ridgeway merely looked at him, and Poirot gesticulated apologetically.

'Ah, but these things can happen, I assure you! Very well, the bonds were stolen from the trunk. What did the thief do with them? How did he manage to get ashore with them?'

'Ah!' cried Ridgeway. 'That's just it. How? Word was passed to the Customs authorities, and every soul that left the ship was gone over with a toothcomb!'

'And the bonds, I gather, made a bulky package?'

'Certainly they did. They could hardly have been hidden on board - and anyway we know they weren't, because they were offered for sale within half an hour of the *Olympia's* arrival, long before I got

the cables going and the numbers sent out. One broker swears he bought some of them even before the *Olympia* got in. But you can't send bonds by wireless.'

'Not by wireless, but did any tug come alongside?'

'Only the official ones, and that was after the alarm was given when everyone was on the look-out. I was watching out myself for their being passed over to someone that way. My God, Monsieur Poirot, this thing will drive me mad! People are beginning to say I stole them myself.'

'But you also were searched on landing, weren't you?' asked Poirot gently.

'Yes.'

The young man stared at him in a puzzled manner.

'You do not catch my meaning, I see,' said Poirot, smiling enigmatically. 'Now I should like to make a few inquiries at the Bank.'

Ridgeway produced a card and scribbled a few words on it.

'Send this in and my uncle will see you at once.'

Poirot thanked him, bade farewell to Miss Farquhar, and together we started out for Threadneedle Street and the head office of the London and Scottish Bank. On production of Ridgeway's card, we were led through the labyrinth of counters and desks, skirting paying-in clerks and paying-out clerks and up to a small office on the first floor where the joint general managers received us. They were two grave gentlemen, who had grown grey in the service of

the Bank. Mr Vavasour had a short white beard, Mr Shaw was clean shaven.

'I understand you are strictly a private inquiry agent?' said Mr Vavasour. 'Quite so, quite so. We have, of course, placed ourselves in the hands of Scotland Yard. Inspector McNeil has charge of the case. A very able officer, I believe.'

'I am sure of it,' said Poirot politely. 'You will permit a few questions, on your nephew's behalf? About this lock, who ordered it from Hubbs's?'

'I ordered it myself,' said Mr Shaw. 'I would not trust to any clerk in the matter. As to the keys, Mr Ridgeway had one, and the other two are held by my colleague and myself.'

'And no clerk has had access to them?'

Mr Shaw turned inquiringly to Mr Vavasour.

'I think I am correct in saying that they have remained in the safe where we placed them on the 23rd,' said Mr Vavasour. 'My colleague was unfortunately taken ill a fortnight ago - in fact on the very day that Philip left us. He has only just recovered.'

'Severe bronchitis is no joke to a man of my age,' said Mr Shaw ruefully. 'But I am afraid Mr Vavasour has suffered from the hard work entailed by my absence, especially with this unexpected worry coming on top of everything.'

Poirot asked a few more questions. I judged that he was endeavouring to gauge the exact amount of intimacy between uncle and nephew. Mr Vavasour's answers were brief and punctilious. His

nephew was a trusted official of the Bank, and had no debts or money difficulties that he knew of. He had been entrusted with similar missions in the past. Finally we were politely bowed out.

'I am disappointed,' said Poirot, as we emerged into the street.

'You hoped to discover more? They are such stodgy old men.'

'It is not their stodginess which disappoints me, *mon ami*. I do not expect to find in a Bank manager a "keen financier with an eagle glance," as your favourite works of fiction put it. No, I am disappointed in the case - it is too easy!'

'*Easy?*

'Yes, do you not find it almost childishly simple?'

'You know who stole the bonds?'

'I do.'

'But then - we must - why - '

'Do not confuse and fluster yourself, Hastings. We are not going to do anything at present.'

'But why? What are you waiting for?'

'For the *Olympia*. She is due on her return trip from New York on Tuesday.'

'But if you know who stole the bonds, why wait? He may escape.'

'To a South Sea island where there is no extradition? No, *mon ami*, he would find life very uncongenial there. As to why I wait - *eh bien*,

to the intelligence of Hercule Poirot the case is perfectly clear, but for the benefit of others, not so greatly gifted by the good God - the Inspector McNeil, for instance - it would be as well to make a few inquiries to establish the facts. One must have consideration for those less gifted than oneself.'

'Good Lord, Poirot! Do you know, I'd give a considerable sum of money to see you make a thorough ass of yourself - just for once. You're so confoundedly conceited!'

'Do not enrage yourself, Hastings. In verity, I observe that there are times when you almost detest me! Alas, I suffer the penalties of greatness!'

The little man puffed out his chest, and sighed so comically that I was forced to laugh.

Tuesday saw us speeding to Liverpool in a first-class carriage of the L and NWR. Poirot had obstinately refused to enlighten me as to his suspicions - or certainties. He contented himself with expressing surprise that I, too, was not equally *au fait* with the situation. I disdained to argue, and entrenched my curiosity behind a rampart of pretended indifference.

Once arrived at the quay alongside which lay the big transatlantic liner, Poirot became brisk and alert. Our proceedings consisted in interviewing four successive stewards and inquiring after a friend of Poirot's who had crossed to New York on the 23rd.

'An elderly gentleman, wearing glasses. A great invalid, hardly moved out of his cabin.'

The description appeared to tally with one Mr Ventnor who had occupied the cabin C24 which was next to that of Philip Ridgeway. Although unable to see how Poirot had deduced Mr Ventnor's existence and personal appearance, I was keenly excited.

'Tell me,' I cried, 'was this gentleman one of the first to land when you got to New York?'

The steward shook his head.

'No, indeed, sir, he was one of the last off the boat.'

I retired crestfallen, and observed Poirot grinning at me. He thanked the steward, a note changed hands, and we took our departure.

'It's all very well,' I remarked heatedly, 'but that last answer must have damned your precious theory, grin as you please!'

'As usual, you see nothing, Hastings. That last answer is, on the contrary, the coping-stone of my theory.'

I flung up my hands in despair.

'I give it up.'

II

When we were in the train, speeding towards London, Poirot wrote busily for a few minutes, sealing up the result in an envelope.

'This is for the good Inspector McNeil. We will leave it at Scotland Yard in passing, and then to the Rendezvous Restaurant, where I

have asked Miss Esmée Farquhar to do us the honour of dining with us.'

'What about Ridgeway?'

'What about him?' asked Poirot with a twinkle.

'Why, you surely don't think - you can't - '

'The habit of incoherence is growing upon you, Hastings. As a matter of fact I *did* think. If Ridgeway had been the thief - which was perfectly possible - the case would have been charming; a piece of neat methodical work.'

'But not so charming for Miss Farquhar.'

'Possibly you are right. Therefore all is for the best. Now, Hastings, let us review the case. I can see that you are dying to do so. The sealed package is removed from the trunk and vanishes, as Miss Farquhar puts it, into thin air. We will dismiss the thin air theory, which is not practicable at the present stage of science, and consider what is likely to have become of it. Everyone asserts the incredulity of its being smuggled ashore - '

'Yes, but we know - '

"*You* may know, Hastings. I do not. I take the view that, since it seemed incredible, it *was* incredible. Two possibilities remain: it was hidden on board - also rather difficult - or it was thrown overboard.'

'With a cork on it, do you mean?'

'Without a cork.'

I stared.

'But if the bonds were thrown overboard, they couldn't have been sold in New York.'

'I admire your logical mind, Hastings. The bonds were sold in New York, therefore they were not thrown overboard. You see where that leads us?'

'Where we were when we started.'

'*Jamais de la vie*! If the package was thrown overboard, and the bonds were sold in New York, the package could not have contained the bonds. Is there any evidence that the package *did* contain the bonds? Remember, Mr Ridgeway never opened it from the time it was placed in his hands in London.'

'Yes, but then - '

Poirot waved an impatient hand.

'Permit me to continue. The last moment that the bonds are seen as bonds is in the office of the London and Scottish Bank on the morning of the 23rd. They reappear in New York half an hour after the *Olympia* gets in, and according to one man, whom nobody listens to, actually *before* she gets in. Supposing then, that they have never been on the *Olympia* at all? Is there any other way they could get to New York? Yes. The *Gigantic* leaves Southampton on the same day as the *Olympia*, and she holds the record for the Atlantic. Mailed by the *Gigantic*, the bonds would be in New York the day before the *Olympia* arrived. All is clear, the case begins to explain itself. The sealed packet is only a dummy, and the moment of its substitution must be in the office in the Bank. It would be an

easy matter for any of the three men present to have prepared a duplicate package which could be substituted for the genuine one. *Très bien*, the bonds are mailed to a confederate in New York, with instructions to sell as soon as the *Olympia* is in, but someone must travel on the *Olympia* to engineer the supposed moment of the robbery.'

'But why?'

'Because if Ridgeway merely opens the packet and finds it a dummy, suspicion flies at once to London. No, the man on board in the cabin next door does his work, pretends to force the lock in an obvious manner so as to draw immediate attention to the theft, really unlocks the trunk with a duplicate key, throws the package overboard and waits until the last to leave the boat. Naturally he wears glasses to conceal his eyes, and is an invalid since he does not want to run the risk of meeting Ridgeway. He steps ashore in New York and returns by the first boat available.'

'But who - which was he?'

'The man who had a duplicate key, the man who ordered the lock, the man who has *not* been severely ill with bronchitis at his home in the country - *enfin*, the "stodgy" old man, Mr Shaw! There are criminals in high places sometimes, my friend. Ah, here we are. Mademoiselle, I have succeeded! You permit?'

And, beaming, Poirot kissed the astonished girl lightly on either cheek!

The Adventure of the Egyptian Tomb

I have always considered that one of the most thrilling and dramatic of the many adventures I have shared with Poirot was that of our investigation into the strange series of deaths which followed upon the discovery and opening of the Tomb of King Men-her-Ra.

Hard upon the discovery of the Tomb of Tutankh-Amen by Lord Carnarvon, Sir John Willard and Mr Bleibner of New York, pursuing their excavations not far from Cairo, in the vicinity of the Pyramids of Gizeh, came unexpectedly on a series of funeral chambers. The greatest interest was aroused by their discovery. The Tomb appeared to be that of King Men-her-Ra, one of those shadowy kings of the Eighth Dynasty, when the Old Kingdom was falling to decay. Little was known about this period, and the discoveries were fully reported in the newspapers.

An event soon occurred which took a profound hold on the public mind. Sir John Willard died quite suddenly of heart failure.

The more sensational newspapers immediately took the opportunity of reviving all the old superstitious stories connected with the ill luck of certain Egyptian treasures. The unlucky Mummy at the British Museum, that hoary old chestnut, was dragged out with fresh zest, was quietly denied by the Museum, but nevertheless enjoyed all its usual vogue.

A fortnight later Mr Bleibner died of acute blood poisoning, and a few days afterwards a nephew of his shot himself in New York. The 'Curse of Men-her-Ra' was the talk of the day, and the magic power of dead-and-gone Egypt was exalted to a fetish point.

It was then that Poirot received a brief note from Lady Willard, widow of the dead archaeologist, asking him to go and see her at her house in Kensington Square. I accompanied him.

Lady Willard was a tall, thin woman, dressed in deep mourning. Her haggard face bore eloquent testimony to her recent grief.

'It is kind of you to have come so promptly, Monsieur Poirot.'

'I am at your service, Lady Willard. You wished to consult me?'

'You are, I am aware, a detective, but it is not only as a detective that I wish to consult you. You are a man of original views, I know, you have imagination, experience of the world; tell me, Monsieur Poirot, what are your views on the supernatural?'

Poirot hesitated for a moment before he replied. He seemed to be considering. Finally he said:

'Let us not misunderstand each other, Lady Willard. It is not a general question that you are asking me there. It has a personal application, has it not? You are referring obliquely to the death of your late husband?'

'That is so,' she admitted.

'You want me to investigate the circumstances of his death?'

'I want you to ascertain for me exactly how much is newspaper chatter, and how much may be said to be founded on fact? Three deaths, Monsieur Poirot - each one explicable taken by itself, but taken together surely an almost unbelievable coincidence, and all within a month of the opening of the tomb! It may be mere superstition, it may be some potent curse from the past that

operates in ways undreamed of by modern science. The fact remains - three deaths! And I am afraid, Monsieur Poirot, horribly afraid. It may not yet be the end.'

'For whom do you fear?'

'For my son. When the news of my husband's death came I was ill. My son, who has just come down from Oxford, went out there. He brought the - the body home, but now he has gone out again, in spite of my prayers and entreaties. He is so fascinated by the work that he intends to take his father's place and carry on the system of excavations. You may think me a foolish, credulous woman, but, Monsieur Poirot, I am afraid. Supposing that the spirit of the dead King is not yet appeased? Perhaps to you I seem to be talking nonsense - '

'No, indeed, Lady Willard,' said Poirot quickly. 'I, too, believe in the force of superstition, one of the greatest forces the world has ever known.'

I looked at him in surprise. I should never have credited Poirot with being superstitious. But the little man was obviously in earnest.

'What you really demand is that I shall protect your son? I will do my utmost to keep him from harm.'

'Yes, in the ordinary way, but against an occult influence?'

'In volumes of the Middle Ages, Lady Willard, you will find many ways of counteracting black magic. Perhaps they knew more than we moderns with all our boasted science. Now let us come to facts, that I may have guidance. Your husband had always been a devoted Egyptologist, hadn't he?'

'Yes, from his youth upwards. He was one of the greatest living authorities upon the subject.'

'But Mr Bleibner, I understand, was more or less of an amateur?'

'Oh, quite. He was a very wealthy man who dabbled freely in any subject that happened to take his fancy. My husband managed to interest him in Egyptology, and it was his money that was so useful in financing the expedition.'

'And the nephew? What do you know of his tastes? Was he with the party at all?'

'I do not think so. In fact I never knew of his existence till I read of his death in the paper. I do not think he and Mr Bleibner can have been at all intimate. He never spoke of having any relations.'

'Who are the other members of the party?'

'Well, there's Dr Tosswill, a minor official connected with the British Museum; Mr Schneider of the Metropolitan Museum in New York; a young American secretary; Dr Ames, who accompanies the expedition in his professional capacity; and Hassan, my husband's devoted native servant.'

'Do you remember the name of the American secretary?'

'Harper, I think, but I cannot be sure. He had not been with Mr Bleibner very long, I know. He was a very pleasant young fellow.'

'Thank you, Lady Willard.'

'If there is anything else - '

'For the moment, nothing. Leave it now in my hands, and be assured that I will do all that is humanly possible to protect your son.'

They were not exactly reassuring words, and I observed Lady Willard wince as he uttered them. Yet, at the same time, the fact that he had not pooh-poohed her fears seemed in itself to be a relief to her.

For my part I had never before suspected that Poirot had so deep a vein of superstition in his nature. I tackled him on the subject as we went homewards. His manner was grave and earnest.

'But yes, Hastings. I believe in these things. You must not underrate the force of superstition.'

'What are we going to do about it?'

'*Toujours pratique*, the good Hastings! *Eh bien*, to begin with we are going to cable to New York for fuller details of young Mr Bleibner's death.'

He duly sent off his cable. The reply was full and precise. Young Rupert Bleibner had been in low water for several years. He had been a beachcomber and a remittance man in several South Sea islands, but had returned to New York two years ago, where he had rapidly sunk lower and lower. The most significant thing, to my mind, was that he had recently managed to borrow enough money to take him to Egypt. 'I've a good friend there I can borrow from,' he had declared. Here, however, his plans had gone awry. He had returned to New York cursing his skinflint of an uncle who cared more for the bones of dead and gone kings than his own flesh and

blood. It was during his sojourn in Egypt that the death of Sir John Willard occurred. Rupert had plunged once more into his life of dissipation in New York, and then, without warning, he had committed suicide, leaving behind him a letter which contained some curious phrases. It seemed written in a sudden fit of remorse. He referred to himself as a leper and an outcast, and the letter ended by declaring that such as he were better dead.

A shadowy theory leapt into my brain. I had never really believed in the vengeance of a long dead Egyptian king. I saw here a more modern crime. Supposing this young man had decided to do away with his uncle - preferably by poison. By mistake, Sir John Willard receives the fatal dose. The young man returns to New York, haunted by his crime. The news of his uncle's death reaches him. He realizes how unnecessary his crime has been, and stricken with remorse takes his own life.

I outlined my solution to Poirot. He was interested.

'It is ingenious what you have thought of there - decidedly it is ingenious. It may even be true. But you leave out of count the fatal influence of the Tomb.'

I shrugged my shoulders.

'You still think that has something to do with it?'

'So much so, *mon ami*, that we start for Egypt tomorrow.'

'What?' I cried, astonished.

'I have said it.' An expression of conscious heroism spread over Poirot's face. Then he groaned. 'But, oh,' he lamented, 'the sea! The hateful sea!'

II

It was a week later. Beneath our feet was the golden sand of the desert. The hot sun poured down overhead. Poirot, the picture of misery, wilted by my side. The little man was not a good traveller. Our four days' voyage from Marseilles had been one long agony to him. He had landed at Alexandria the wraith of his former self, even his usual neatness had deserted him. We had arrived in Cairo and had driven out at once to the Mena House Hotel, right in the shadow of the Pyramids.

The charm of Egypt had laid hold of me. Not so Poirot. Dressed precisely the same as in London, he carried a small clothes-brush in his pocket and waged an unceasing war on the dust which accumulated on his dark apparel.

'And my boots,' he wailed. 'Regard them, Hastings. My boots, of the neat patent leather, usually so smart and shining. See, the sand is inside them, which is painful, and outside them, which outrages the eyesight. Also the heat, it causes my moustaches to become limp - but limp!'

'Look at the Sphinx,' I urged. 'Even I can feel the mystery and the charm it exhales.'

Poirot looked at it discontentedly.

'It has not the air happy,' he declared. 'How could it, half-buried in sand in that untidy fashion. Ah, this cursed sand!'

'Come, now, there's a lot of sand in Belgium,' I reminded him, mindful of a holiday spent at Knocke-sur-mer in the midst of '*Les dunes impeccables*' as the guide-book had phrased it.

'Not in Brussels,' declared Poirot. He gazed at the Pyramids thoughtfully. 'It is true that they, at least, are of a shape solid and geometrical, but their surface is of an unevenness most unpleasing. And the palm-trees I like them not. Not even do they plant them in rows!'

I cut short his lamentations, by suggesting that we should start for the camp. We were to ride there on camels, and the beasts were patiently kneeling, waiting for us to mount, in charge of several picturesque boys headed by a voluble dragoman.

I pass over the spectacle of Poirot on a camel. He started by groans and lamentations and ended by shrieks, gesticulations and invocations to the Virgin Mary and every Saint in the calendar. In the end, he descended ignominiously and finished the journey on a diminutive donkey. I must admit that a trotting camel is no joke for the amateur. I was stiff for several days.

At last we neared the scene of the excavations. A sun-burnt man with a grey beard, in white clothes and wearing a helmet, came to meet us.

'Monsieur Poirot and Captain Hastings? We received your cable. I'm sorry that there was no one to meet you in Cairo. An unforeseen event occurred which completely disorganized our plans.'

Poirot paled. His hand, which had stolen to his clothes-brush, stayed its course.

'Not another death?' he breathed.

'Yes.'

'Sir Guy Willard?' I cried.

'No, Captain Hastings. My American colleague, Mr Schneider.'

'And the cause?' demanded Poirot.

'Tetanus.'

I blanched. All around me I seemed to feel an atmosphere of evil, subtle and menacing. A horrible thought flashed across me. Supposing I were the next?

'*Mon Dieu*,' said Poirot, in a very low voice, 'I do not understand this. It is horrible. Tell me, monsieur, there is no doubt that it was tetanus?'

'I believe not. But Dr Ames will tell you more than I can do.'

'Ah, of course, you are not the doctor.'

'My name is Tosswill.'

This, then, was the British expert described by Lady Willard as being a minor official at the British Museum. There was something at once grave and steadfast about him that took my fancy.

'If you will come with me,' continued Dr Tosswill, 'I will take you to Sir Guy Willard. He was most anxious to be informed as soon as you should arrive.'

We were taken across the camp to a large tent. Dr Tosswill lifted up the flap and we entered. Three men were sitting inside.

'Monsieur Poirot and Captain Hastings have arrived, Sir Guy,' said Tosswill.

The youngest of the three men jumped up and came forward to greet us. There was a certain impulsiveness in his manner which reminded me of his mother. He was not nearly so sunburnt as the others, and that fact, coupled with a certain haggardness round the eyes, made him look older than his twenty-two years. He was clearly endeavouring to bear up under a severe mental strain.

He introduced his two companions, Dr Ames, a capable-looking man of thirty-odd, with a touch of greying hair at the temples, and Mr Harper, the secretary, a pleasant lean young man wearing the national insignia of horn-rimmed spectacles.

After a few minutes' desultory conversation the latter went out, and Dr Tosswill followed him. We were left alone with Sir Guy and Dr Ames.

'Please ask any questions you want to ask, Monsieur Poirot,' said Willard. 'We are utterly dumbfounded at this strange series of disasters, but it isn't - it can't be, anything but coincidence.'

There was a nervousness about his manner which rather belied the words. I saw that Poirot was studying him keenly.

'Your heart is really in this work, Sir Guy?'

'Rather. No matter what happens, or what comes of it, the work is going on. Make up your mind to that.'

Poirot wheeled round on the other.

'What have you to say to that, *monsieur le docteur*?'

'Well,' drawled the doctor, 'I'm not for quitting myself.'

Poirot made one of those expressive grimaces of his.

'Then, *évidemment*, we must find out just how we stand. When did Mr Schneider's death take place?'

'Three days ago.'

'You are sure it was tetanus?'

'Dead sure.'

'It couldn't have been a case of strychnine poisoning, for instance?'

'No, Monsieur Poirot. I see what you're getting at. But it was a clear case of tetanus.'

'Did you not inject anti-serum?'

'Certainly we did,' said the doctor dryly. 'Every conceivable thing that could be done was tried.'

'Had you the anti-serum with you?'

'No. We procured it from Cairo.'

'Have there been any other cases of tetanus in the camp?'

'No, not one.'

'Are you certain that the death of Mr Bleibner was not due to tetanus?'

'Absolutely plumb certain. He had a scratch upon his thumb which became poisoned, and septicaemia set in. It sounds pretty much the same to a layman, I dare say, but the two things are entirely different.'

'Then we have four deaths - all totally dissimilar, one heart failure, one blood poisoning, one suicide and one tetanus.'

'Exactly, Monsieur Poirot.'

'Are you certain that there is nothing which might link the four together?'

'I don't quite understand you?'

'I will put it plainly. Was any act committed by those four men which might seem to denote disrespect to the spirit of Men-her-Ra?'

The doctor gazed at Poirot in astonishment.

'You're talking through your hat, Monsieur Poirot. Surely you've not been guyed into believing all that fool talk?'

'Absolute nonsense,' muttered Willard angrily.

Poirot remained placidly immovable, blinking a little out of his green cat's eyes.

'So you do not believe it, *monsieur le docteur*?'

'No, sir, I do not,' declared the doctor emphatically. 'I am a scientific man, and I believe only what science teaches.'

'Was there no science then in Ancient Egypt?' asked Poirot softly. He did not wait for a reply, and indeed Dr Ames seemed rather at a loss for the moment. 'No, no, do not answer me, but tell me this. What do the native workmen think?'

'I guess,' said Dr Ames, 'that, where white folk lose their heads, natives aren't going to be far behind. I'll admit that they're getting what you might call scared - but they've no cause to be.'

'I wonder,' said Poirot non-committally.

Sir Guy leant forward.

'Surely,' he cried incredulously, 'you cannot believe in - oh, but the thing's absurd! You can know nothing of Ancient Egypt if you think that.'

For answer Poirot produced a little book from his pocket - an ancient tattered volume. As he held it out I saw its title, *The Magic of the Egyptians and Chaldeans*. Then, wheeling round, he strode out of the tent. The doctor stared at me.

'What is his little idea?'

The phrase, so familiar on Poirot's lips, made me smile as it came from another.

'I don't know exactly,' I confessed. 'He's got some plan of exorcizing the evil spirits, I believe.'

I went in search of Poirot, and found him talking to the lean-faced young man who had been the late Mr Bleibner's secretary.

'No,' Mr Harper was saying, 'I've only been six months with the expedition. Yes, I knew Mr Bleibner's affairs pretty well.'

'Can you recount to me anything concerning his nephew?'

'He turned up here one day, not a bad-looking fellow. I'd never met him before, but some of the others had - Ames, I think, and Schneider. The old man wasn't at all pleased to see him. They were at it in no time, hammer and tongs. "Not a cent," the old man shouted. "Not one cent now or when I'm dead. I intend to leave my money to the furtherance of my life's work. I've been talking it over with Mr Schneider today." And a bit more of the same. Young Bleibner lit out for Cairo right away.'

'Was he in perfectly good health at the time?'

'The old man?'

'No, the young one.'

'I believe he did mention there was something wrong with him. But it couldn't have been anything serious, or I should have remembered.'

'One thing more, has Mr Bleibner left a will?'

'So far as we know, he has not.'

'Are you remaining with the expedition, Mr Harper?'

'No, sir, I am not. I'm for New York as soon as I can square up things here. You may laugh if you like, but I'm not going to be this blasted old Men-her-Ra's next victim. He'll get me if I stop here.'

The young man wiped the perspiration from his brow.

Poirot turned away. Over his shoulder he said with a peculiar smile:

'Remember, he got one of his victims in New York.'

'Oh, hell!' said Mr Harper forcibly.

'That young man is nervous,' said Poirot thoughtfully. 'He is on the edge, but absolutely on the edge.'

I glanced at Poirot curiously, but his enigmatical smile told me nothing. In company with Sir Guy Willard and Dr Tosswill we were taken round the excavations. The principal finds had been removed to Cairo, but some of the tomb furniture was extremely interesting. The enthusiasm of the young baronet was obvious, but I fancied that I detected a shade of nervousness in his manner as though he could not quite escape from the feeling of menace in the air. As we entered the tent which had been assigned to us, for a wash before joining the evening meal, a tall dark figure in white robes stood aside to let us pass with a graceful gesture and a murmured greeting in Arabic. Poirot stopped.

'You are Hassan, the late Sir John Willard's servant?'

'I served my Lord Sir John, now I serve his son.' He took a step nearer to us and lowered his voice. 'You are a wise one, they say, learned in dealing with evil spirits. Let the young master depart from here. There is evil in the air around us.'

And with an abrupt gesture, not waiting for a reply, he strode away.

'Evil in the air,' muttered Poirot. 'Yes, I feel it.'

Our meal was hardly a cheerful one. The floor was left to Dr Tosswill, who discoursed at length upon Egyptian antiquities. Just as we were preparing to retire to rest, Sir Guy caught Poirot by the arm and pointed. A shadowy figure was moving amidst the tents. It was no human one: I recognized distinctly the dog-headed figure I had seen carved on the walls of the tomb.

My blood froze at the sight.

'*Mon Dieu!*' murmured Poirot, crossing himself vigorously. 'Anubis, the jackal-headed, the god of departing souls.'

'Someone is hoaxing us,' cried Dr Tosswill, rising indignantly to his feet.

'It went into your tent, Harper,' muttered Sir Guy, his face dreadfully pale.

'No,' said Poirot, shaking his head, 'into that of Dr Ames.'

The doctor stared at him incredulously, then, repeating Dr Tosswill's words, he cried:

'Someone is hoaxing us. Come, we'll soon catch the fellow.'

He dashed energetically in pursuit of the shadowy apparition. I followed him, but, search as we would, we could find no trace of any living soul having passed that way. We returned, somewhat disturbed in mind, to find Poirot taking energetic measures, in his own way, to ensure his personal safety. He was busily surrounding

our tent with various diagrams and inscriptions which he was drawing in the sand. I recognized the five-pointed star or Pentagon many times repeated. As was his wont, Poirot was at the same time delivering an impromptu lecture on witchcraft and magic in general. White Magic as opposed to Black, with various references to the Ka and the Book of the Dead thrown in.

It appeared to excite the liveliest contempt in Dr Tosswill, who drew me aside, literally snorting with rage.

'Balderdash, sir,' he exclaimed angrily. 'Pure balderdash. The man's an impostor. He doesn't know the difference between the superstitions of the Middle Ages and the beliefs of Ancient Egypt. Never have I heard such a hotch-potch of ignorance and credulity.'

I calmed the excited expert, and joined Poirot in the tent. My little friend was beaming cheerfully.

'We can now sleep in peace,' he declared happily. 'And I can do with some sleep. My head, it aches abominably. Ah, for a good *tisane*!'

As though in answer to prayer, the flap of the tent was lifted and Hassan appeared, bearing a steaming cup which he offered to Poirot. It proved to be camomile tea, a beverage of which he is inordinately fond. Having thanked Hassan and refused his offer of another cup for myself, we were left alone once more. I stood at the door of the tent some time after undressing, looking out over the desert.

'A wonderful place,' I said aloud, 'and a wonderful work. I can feel the fascination. This desert life, this probing into the heart of a vanished civilization. Surely, Poirot, you, too, must feel the charm?'

I got no answer, and I turned, a little annoyed. My annoyance was quickly changed to concern. Poirot was lying back across the rude couch, his face horribly convulsed. Beside him was the empty cup. I rushed to his side, then dashed out and across the camp to Dr Ames's tent.

'Dr Ames!' I cried. 'Come at once.'

'What's the matter?' said the doctor, appearing in pyjamas.

'My friend. He's ill. Dying. The camomile tea. Don't let Hassan leave the camp.'

Like a flash the doctor ran to our tent. Poirot was lying as I left him.

'Extraordinary,' cried Ames. 'Looks like a seizure - or - what did you say about something he drank?' He picked up the empty cup.

'Only I did not drink it!' said a placid voice.

We turned in amazement. Poirot was sitting up on the bed. He was smiling.

'No,' he said gently. 'I did not drink it. While my good friend Hastings was apostrophising the night, I took the opportunity of pouring it, not down my throat, but into a little bottle. That little bottle will go to the analytical chemist. No' - as the doctor made a sudden movement - 'as a sensible man, you will understand that violence will be of no avail. During Hastings' brief absence to fetch you, I

have had time to put the bottle in safe keeping. Ah, quick, Hastings, hold him!'

I misunderstood Poirot's anxiety. Eager to save my friend, I flung myself in front of him. But the doctor's swift movement had another meaning. His hand went to his mouth, a smell of bitter almonds filled the air, and he swayed forward and fell.

'Another victim,' said Poirot gravely, 'but the last. Perhaps it is the best way. He has three deaths on his head.'

'Dr Ames?' I cried, stupefied. 'But I thought you believed in some occult influence?'

'You misunderstood me, Hastings. What I meant was that I believe in the terrific force of superstition. Once get it firmly established that a series of deaths are supernatural, and you might almost stab a man in broad daylight, and it would still be put down to the curse, so strongly is the instinct of the supernatural implanted in the human race. I suspected from the first that a man was taking advantage of that instinct. The idea came to him, I imagine, with the death of Sir John Willard. A fury of superstition arose at once. As far as I could see, nobody could derive any particular profit from Sir John's death. Mr Bleibner was a different case. He was a man of great wealth. The information I received from New York contained several suggestive points. To begin with, young Bleibner was reported to have said he had a good friend in Egypt from whom he could borrow. It was tacitly understood that he meant his uncle, but it seemed to me that in that case he would have said so outright. The words suggest some boon companion of his own. Another thing, he scraped up enough money to take him to Egypt, his uncle refused outright to advance him a penny, yet he was able to pay the

return passage to New York. Someone must have lent him the money.'

'All that was very thin,' I objected.

'But there was more. Hastings, there occur often enough words spoken metaphorically which are taken literally. The opposite can happen too. In this case, words which were meant literally were taken metaphorically. Young Bleibner wrote plainly enough: 'I am a leper,' but nobody realized that he shot himself because he believed that he had contracted the dread disease of leprosy.'

'What?' I ejaculated.

'It was the clever invention of a diabolical mind. Young Bleibner was suffering from some minor skin trouble; he had lived in the South Sea Islands, where the disease is common enough. Ames was a former friend of his, and a well-known medical man, he would never dream of doubting his word. When I arrived here, my suspicions were divided between Harper and Dr Ames, but I soon realized that only the doctor could have perpetrated and concealed the crimes, and I learnt from Harper that he was previously acquainted with young Bleibner. Doubtless the latter at some time or another had made a will or had insured his life in favour of the doctor. The latter saw his chance of acquiring wealth. It was easy for him to inoculate Mr Bleibner with the deadly germs. Then the nephew, overcome with despair at the dread news his friend had conveyed to him, shot himself. Mr Bleibner, whatever his intentions, had made no will. His fortune would pass to his nephew and from him to the doctor.'

'And Mr Schneider?'

'We cannot be sure. He knew young Bleibner too, remember, and may have suspected something, or, again, the doctor may have thought that a further death motiveless and purposeless would strengthen the coils of superstition. Furthermore, I will tell you an interesting psychological fact, Hastings. A murderer has always a strong desire to repeat his successful crime, the performance of it grows upon him. Hence my fears for young Willard. The figure of Anubis you saw to-night was Hassan, dressed up by my orders. I wanted to see if I could frighten the doctor. But it would take more than the supernatural to frighten him. I could see that he was not entirely taken in by my pretences of belief in the occult. The little comedy I played for him did not deceive him. I suspected that he would endeavour to make me the next victim. Ah, but in spite of *la mer maudite*, the heat abominable, and the annoyances of the sand, the little grey cells still functioned!'

Poirot proved to be perfectly right in his premises. Young Bleibner, some years ago, in a fit of drunken merriment, had made a jocular will, leaving 'my cigarette-case you admire so much and everything else of which I die possessed which will be principally debts to my good friend Robert Ames who once saved my life from drowning.'

The case was hushed up as far as possible, and, to this day, people talk of the remarkable series of deaths in connection with the Tomb of Men-her-Ra as a triumphal proof of the vengeance of a bygone king upon the desecrators of his tomb - a belief which, as Poirot pointed out to me, is contrary to all Egyptian belief and thought.

'Poirot,' I said, 'a change of air would do you good.'

'You think so, *mon ami*?'

'I am sure of it.'

'Eh - eh?' said my friend, smiling, 'It is all arranged, then?'

'You will come?'

'Where do you propose to take me?'

'Brighton. As a matter of fact, a friend of mine in the City put me on to a very good thing, and - well, I have money to burn, as the saying goes. I think a weekend at the Grand Metropolitan would do us all the good in the world.'

'Thank you, I accept most gratefully. You have the good heart to think of an old man. And the good heart, it is in the end worth all the little grey cells. Yes, yes, I who speak to you am in danger of forgetting that sometimes.'

I did not quite relish the implication. I fancy that Poirot is sometimes a little inclined to underestimate my mental capacities. But his pleasure was so evident that I put my slight annoyance aside.

'Then, that's all right,' I said hastily.

Saturday evening saw us dining at the Grand Metropolitan in the midst of a gay throng. All the world and his wife seemed to be at Brighton. The dresses were marvellous, and the jewels - worn

sometimes with more love of display than good taste - were something magnificent.

'*Hein*, it is a sight, this!' murmured Poirot. 'This is the home of the Profiteer, is it not so, Hastings?'

'Supposed to be,' I replied. 'But we'll hope they aren't all tarred with the Profiteering brush.'

Poirot gazed round him placidly.

'The sight of so many jewels makes me wish I had turned my brains to crime, instead of to its detection. What a magnificent opportunity for some thief of distinction! Regard, Hastings, that stout woman by the pillar. She is, as you would say, plastered with gems.'

I followed his eyes.

'Why,' I exclaimed, 'it's Mrs Opalsen.'

'You know her?'

'Slightly. Her husband is a rich stockbroker who made a fortune in the recent Oil boom.'

After dinner we ran across the Opalsens in the lounge, and I introduced Poirot to them. We chatted for a few minutes, and ended by having our coffee together.

Poirot said a few words in praise of some of the costlier gems displayed on the lady's ample bosom, and she brightened up at once.

'It's a perfect hobby of mine, Mr Poirot. I just *love* jewellery. Ed knows my weakness, and every time things go well he brings me something new. You are interested in precious stones?'

'I have had a good deal to do with them one time and another, madame. My profession has brought me into contact with some of the most famous jewels in the world.'

He went on to narrate, with discreet pseudonyms, the story of the historic jewels of a reigning house, and Mrs Opalsen listened with bated breath.

'There now,' she exclaimed, as he ended. 'If it isn't just like a play! You know, I've got some pearls of my own that have a history attached to them. I believe it's supposed to be one of the finest necklaces in the world - the pearls are so beautifully matched and so perfect in colour. I declare I really must run up and get it!'

'Oh, madame,' protested Poirot, 'you are too amiable. Pray do not derange yourself!'

'Oh, but I'd like to show it to you.'

The buxom dame waddled across to the lift briskly enough. Her husband, who had been talking to me, looked at Poirot inquiringly.

'Madame your wife is so amiable as to insist on showing me her pearl necklace,' explained the latter.

'Oh, the pearls!' Opalsen smiled in a satisfied fashion. 'Well, they *are* worth seeing. Cost a pretty penny too! Still, the money's there all right; I could get what I paid for them any day - perhaps more. May have to, too, if things go on as they are now. Money's

confoundedly tight in the City. All this infernal EPD.' He rambled on, launching into technicalities where I could not follow him.

He was interrupted by a small page-boy who approached and murmured something in his ear.

'Eh - what? I'll come at once. Not taken ill, is she? Excuse me, gentlemen.'

He left us abruptly. Poirot leaned back and lit one of his tiny Russian cigarettes. Then, carefully and meticulously, he arranged the empty coffee-cups in a neat row, and beamed happily on the result.

The minutes passed. The Opalsens did not return.

'Curious,' I remarked, at length. 'I wonder when they will come back.'

Poirot watched the ascending spirals of smoke, and then said thoughtfully:

'They will not come back.'

'Why?'

'Because, my friend, something has happened.'

'What sort of thing? How do you know?' I asked curiously.

Poirot smiled.

'A few moments ago the manager came hurriedly out of his office and ran upstairs. He was much agitated. The lift-boy is deep in talk with one of the pages. The lift-bell has rung three times, but he

heeds it not. Thirdly, even the waiters are *distrait*; and to make a waiter *distrait* - ' Poirot shook his head with an air of finality. 'The affair must indeed be of the first magnitude. Ah, it is as I thought! Here come the police.'

Two men had just entered the hotel - one in uniform, the other in plain clothes. They spoke to a page, and were immediately ushered upstairs. A few minutes later, the same boy descended and came up to where we were sitting.

'Mr Opalsen's compliments, and would you step upstairs?'

Poirot sprang nimbly to his feet. One would have said that he awaited the summons. I followed with no less alacrity.

The Opalsens' apartments were situated on the first floor. After knocking on the door, the page-boy retired, and we answered the summons, 'Come in!' A strange scene met our eyes. The room was Mrs Opalsen's bedroom, and in the centre of it, lying back in an armchair, was the lady herself, weeping violently. She presented an extraordinary spectacle, with the tears making great furrows in the powder with which her complexion was liberally coated. Mr Opalsen was striding up and down angrily. The two police officials stood in the middle of the room, one with a notebook in hand. An hotel chambermaid, looking frightened to death, stood by the fireplace; and on the other side of the room a Frenchwoman, obviously Mrs Opalsen's maid, was weeping and wringing her hands, with an intensity of grief that rivalled that of her mistress.

Into this pandemonium stepped Poirot, neat and smiling. Immediately, with an energy surprising in one of her bulk, Mrs Opalsen sprang from her chair towards him.

'There now; Ed may say what he likes, but I believe in luck, I do. It was fated I should meet you the way I did this evening, and I've a feeling that if you can't get my pearls back for me nobody can.'

'Calm yourself, I pray of you, madame.' Poirot patted her hand soothingly. 'Reassure yourself. All will be well. Hercule Poirot will aid you!'

Mr Opalsen turned to the police inspector.

'There will be no objection to my - er - calling in this gentleman, I suppose?'

'None at all, sir,' replied the man civilly, but with complete indifference. 'Perhaps now your lady's feeling better she'll just let us have the facts?'

Mrs Opalsen looked helplessly at Poirot. He led her back to her chair.

'Seat yourself, madame, and recount to us the whole history without agitating yourself.'

Thus abjured, Mrs Opalsen dried her eyes gingerly, and began.

'I came upstairs after dinner to fetch my pearls for Mr Poirot here to see. The chambermaid and Célestine were both in the room as usual - '

'Excuse me, madame, but what do you mean by "as usual"?'

Mr Opalsen explained.

'I make it a rule that no one is to come into this room unless Célestine, the maid, is there also. The chambermaid does the room in the morning while Célestine is present, and comes in after dinner to turn down the beds under the same conditions; otherwise she never enters the room.'

'Well, as I was saying,' continued Mrs Opalsen, 'I came up. I went to the drawer here' - she indicated the bottom right-hand drawer of the knee-hole dressing-table - 'took out my jewel-case and unlocked it. It seemed quite as usual - but the pearls were not there!'

The inspector had been busy with his notebook. 'When had you last seen them?' he asked.

'They were there when I went down to dinner.'

'You are sure?'

'Quite sure. I was uncertain whether to wear them or not, but in the end I decided on the emeralds, and put them back in the jewel-case.'

'Who locked up the jewel-case?'

'I did. I wear the key on a chain round my neck.' She held it up as she spoke.

The inspector examined it, and shrugged his shoulders.

'The thief must have had a duplicate key. No difficult matter. The lock is quite a simple one. What did you do after you'd locked the jewel-case?'

'I put it back in the bottom drawer where I always keep it.'

'You didn't lock the drawer?'

'No, I never do. My maid remains in the room till I come up, so there's no need.'

The inspector's face grew graver.

'Am I to understand that the jewels were there when you went down to dinner, and that since then *the maid has not left the room*?'

Suddenly, as though the horror of her own situation for the first time burst upon her, Célestine uttered a piercing shriek, and, flinging herself upon Poirot, poured out a torrent of incoherent French.

The suggestion was infamous! That she should be suspected of robbing Madame! The police were well known to be of a stupidity incredible! But Monsieur, who was a Frenchman -

'A Belgian,' interjected Poirot, but Célestine paid no attention to the correction.

Monsieur would not stand by and see her falsely accused, while that infamous chambermaid was allowed to go scot-free. She had never liked her - a bold, red-faced thing - a born thief. She had said from the first that she was not honest. And had kept a sharp watch over her too, when she was doing Madame's room! Let those idiots of policemen search her, and if they did not find Madame's pearls on her it would be very surprising!

Although this harangue was uttered in rapid and virulent French, Célestine had interlarded it with a wealth of gesture, and the

chambermaid realized at least a part of her meaning. She reddened angrily.

'If that foreign woman's saying I took the pearls, it's a lie!' she declared heatedly. 'I never so much as saw them.'

'Search her!' screamed the other. 'You will find it is as I say.'

'You're a liar - do you hear?' said the chambermaid, advancing upon her. 'Stole 'em yourself, and want to put it on me. Why, I was only in the room about three minutes before the lady come up, and then you were sitting here the whole time, as you always do, like a cat watching a mouse.'

The inspector looked across inquiringly at Célestine. 'Is that true? Didn't you leave the room at all?'

'I did not actually leave her alone,' admitted Célestine reluctantly, 'but I went into my own room through the door here twice - once to fetch a reel of cotton, and once for my scissors. She must have done it then.'

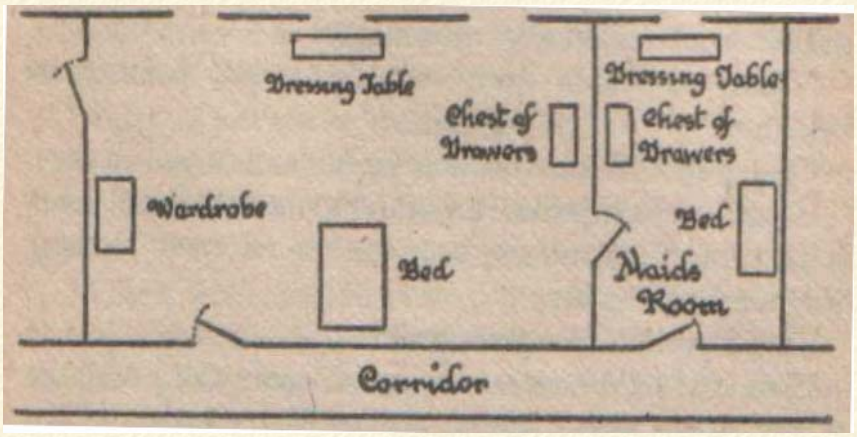
'You wasn't gone a minute,' retorted the chambermaid angrily. 'Just popped out and in again. I'd be glad if the police *would* search me. *I've* nothing to be afraid of.'

At this moment there was a tap at the door. The inspector went to it. His face brightened when he saw who it was.

'Ah!' he said. 'That's rather fortunate. I sent for one of our female searchers, and she's just arrived. Perhaps if you wouldn't mind going into the room next door.'

He looked at the chambermaid, who stepped across the threshold with a toss of her head, the searcher following her closely.

The French girl had sunk sobbing into a chair. Poirot was looking round the room, the main features of which I have made clear by a sketch.



'Where does that door lead?' he inquired, nodding his head towards the one by the window.

'Into the next apartment, I believe,' said the inspector. 'It's bolted, anyway, on this side.'

Poirot walked across to it, tried it, then drew back the bolt and tried it again.

'And on the other side as well,' he remarked. 'Well, that seems to rule out that.'

He walked over to the windows, examining each of them in turn.

'And again - nothing. Not even a balcony outside.'

'Even if there were,' said the inspector impatiently, 'I don't see how that would help us, if the maid never left the room.'

'*Évidemment*,' said Poirot, not disconcerted. 'As Mademoiselle is positive she did not leave the room - '

He was interrupted by the reappearance of the chamber-maid and the police searcher.

'Nothing,' said the latter laconically.

'I should hope not, indeed,' said the chambermaid virtuously. 'And that French hussy ought to be ashamed of herself taking away an honest girl's character!'

'There, there, my girl; that's all right,' said the inspector, opening the door. 'Nobody suspects you. You go along and get on with your work.'

The chambermaid went unwillingly.

'Going to search *her*?' she demanded, pointing at Célestine.

'Yes, yes!' He shut the door on her and turned the key.

Célestine accompanied the searcher into the small room in her turn. A few minutes later she also returned. Nothing had been found on her.

The inspector's face grew graver.

'I'm afraid I'll have to ask you to come along with me all the same, miss.' He turned to Mrs Opalsen. 'I'm sorry, madam, but all the evidence points that way. If she's not got them on her, they're hidden somewhere about the room.'

Célestine uttered a piercing shriek, and clung to Poirot's arm. The latter bent and whispered something in the girl's ear. She looked up at him doubtfully.

'*Si, si, mon enfant* - I assure you it is better not to resist.' Then he turned to the inspector. 'You permit, monsieur? A little experiment - purely for my own satisfaction.'

'Depends on what it is,' replied the police officer non-committally.

Poirot addressed Célestine once more.

'You have told us that you went into your room to fetch a reel of cotton. Whereabouts was it?'

'On top of the chest of drawers, monsieur.'

'And the scissors?'

'They also.'

'Would it be troubling you too much, mademoiselle, to ask you to repeat those two actions? You were sitting here with your work, you say?'

Célestine sat down, and then, at a sign from Poirot, rose, passed into the adjoining room, took up an object from the chest of drawers, and returned.

Poirot divided his attention between her movements and a large turnip of a watch which he held in the palm of his hand.

'Again, if you please, mademoiselle.'

At the conclusion of the second performance, he made a note in his pocket-book, and returned the watch to his pocket.

'Thank you, mademoiselle. And you, monsieur' - he bowed to the inspector - 'for your courtesy.'

The inspector seemed somewhat entertained by this excessive politeness. Célestine departed in a flood of tears, accompanied by the woman and the plain-clothes official.

Then, with a brief apology to Mrs Opalsen, the inspector set to work to ransack the room. He pulled out drawers, opened cupboards, completely unmade the bed, and tapped the floor. Mr Opalsen looked on sceptically.

'You really think you will find them?'

'Yes, sir. It stands to reason. She hadn't time to take them out of the room. The lady's discovering the robbery so soon upset her plans. No, they're here right enough. One of the two must have hidden them - and it's very unlikely for the chambermaid to have done so.'

'More than unlikely - impossible!" said Poirot quietly.

'Eh?' The inspector stared.

Poirot smiled modestly.

'I will demonstrate. Hastings, my good friend, take my watch in your hand - with care. It is a family heirloom! Just now I timed Mademoiselle's movements - her first absence from the room was of twelve seconds, her second of fifteen. Now observe my actions. Madame will have the kindness to give me the key of the jewel-case. I thank you. My friend Hastings will have the kindness to say "Go!"'

'Go! 'I said.

With almost incredible swiftness, Poirot wrenched open the drawer of the dressing-table, extracted the jewel-case, fitted the key in the lock, opened the case, selected a piece of jewellery, shut and locked the case, and returned it to the drawer, which he pushed to again. His movements were like lightning.

'Well, *mon ami*?' he demanded of me breathlessly.

'Forty-six seconds,' I replied.

'You see?' He looked round. 'There would not have been time for the chambermaid even to take the necklace out, far less hide it.'

'Then that settles it on the maid,' said the inspector with satisfaction, and returned to his search. He passed into the maid's bedroom next door.

Poirot was frowning thoughtfully. Suddenly he shot a question at Mr Opalsen.

'This necklace - it was, without doubt, insured?'

Mr Opalsen looked a trifle surprised at the question.

'Yes,' he said hesitatingly, 'that is so.'

'But what does that matter?' broke in Mrs Opalsen tearfully. 'It's my necklace I want. It was unique. No money could be the same.'

'I comprehend, madame,' said Poirot soothingly. 'I comprehend perfectly. To *la femme* sentiment is everything - is it not so? But,

monsieur, who has not the so fine susceptibility, will doubtless find some slight consolation in the fact.'

'Of course, of course,' said Mr Opalsen rather uncertainly. 'Still - '

He was interrupted by a shout of triumph from the inspector. He came in dangling something from his fingers.

With a cry, Mrs Opalsen heaved herself up from her chair. She was a changed woman.

'Oh, oh, my necklace!'

She clasped it to her breast with both hands. We crowded round.

'Where was it?' demanded Opalsen.

'Maid's bed. In among the springs of the wire mattress. She must have stolen it and hidden it there before the chambermaid arrived on the scene.'

'You permit, madame?' said Poirot gently. He took the necklace from her and examined it closely; then handed it back with a bow.

'I'm afraid, madam, you'll have to hand it over to us for the time being,' said the inspector. 'We shall want it for the charge. But it shall be returned to you as soon as possible.'

Mr Opalsen frowned.

'Is that necessary?'

'I'm afraid so, sir. Just a formality.'

'Oh, let him take it, Ed!' cried his wife. 'I'd feel safer if he did. I shouldn't sleep a wink thinking someone else might try and get hold of it. That wretched girl! And I would never have believed it of her.'

'There, there, my dear, don't take on so.'

I felt a gentle pressure on my arm. It was Poirot.

'Shall we slip away, my friend? I think our services are no longer needed.'

Once outside, however, he hesitated, and then, much to my surprise, he remarked:

'I should rather like to see the room next door.'

The door was not locked, and we entered. The room, which was a large double one, was unoccupied. Dust lay about rather noticeably, and my sensitive friend gave a characteristic grimace as he ran his finger round a rectangular mark on a table near the window.

'The *service* leaves to be desired,' he observed dryly.

He was staring thoughtfully out of the window, and seemed to have fallen into a brown study.

'Well?' I demanded impatiently. 'What did we come in here for?'

He started.

'*Je vous demande pardon, mon ami*. I wished to see if the door was really bolted on this side also.'

'Well,' I said, glancing at the door which communicated with the room we had just left, 'it *is* bolted.'

Poirot nodded. He still seemed to be thinking.

'And anyway,' I continued, 'what does it matter? The case is over. I wish you'd had more chance of distinguishing yourself. But it was the kind of case that even a stiff-backed idiot like that inspector couldn't go wrong over.'

Poirot shook his head.

'The case is not over, my friend. It will not be over until we find out who stole the pearls.'

'But the maid did!'

'Why do you say that? '

'Why,' I stammered, 'they were found - actually in her mattress.'

'Ta, ta, ta!' said Poirot impatiently. 'Those were not the pearls.'

'What?'

'Imitation, *mon ami*.'

The statement took my breath away. Poirot was smiling placidly.

'The good inspector obviously knows nothing of jewels. But presently there will be a fine hullabaloo!'

'Come!' I cried, dragging at his arm.

'Where?'

'We must tell the Opalsens at once.'

'I think not.'

'But that poor woman - '

'*Eh bien*; that poor woman, as you call her, will have a much better night believing the jewels to be safe.'

'But the thief may escape with them!'

'As usual, my friend, you speak without reflection. How do you know that the pearls Mrs Opalsen locked up so carefully tonight were not the false ones, and that the real robbery did not take place at a much earlier date?'

'Oh! 'I said, bewildered.

'Exactly,' said Poirot, beaming. 'We start again.'

He led the way out of the room, paused a moment as though considering, and then walked down to the end of the corridor, stopping outside the small den where the chambermaids and valets of the respective floors congregated. Our particular chambermaid appeared to be holding a small court there, and to be retailing her late experiences to an appreciative audience. She stopped in the middle of a sentence. Poirot bowed with his usual politeness.

'Excuse that I derange you, but I shall be obliged if you will unlock for me the door of Mr Opalsen's room.'

The woman rose willingly, and we accompanied her down the passage again. Mr Opalsen's room was on the other side of the

corridor, its door facing that of his wife's room. The chambermaid unlocked it with her pass-key, and we entered.

As she was about to depart Poirot detained her.

'One moment; have you ever seen among the effects of Mr Opalsen a card like this?'

He held out a plain white card, rather highly glazed and uncommon in appearance. The maid took it and scrutinized it carefully.

'No, sir, I can't say I have. But, anyway, the valet has most to do with the gentlemen's rooms.'

'I see. Thank you.'

Poirot took back the card. The woman departed. Poirot appeared to reflect a little. Then he gave a short, sharp nod of the head.

'Ring the bell, I pray of you, Hastings. Three times, for the valet.'

I obeyed, devoured with curiosity. Meanwhile Poirot had emptied the waste-paper basket on the floor, and was swiftly going through its contents.

In a few moments the valet answered the bell. To him Poirot put the same question, and handed him the card to examine. But the response was the same. The valet had never seen a card of that particular quality among Mr Opalsen's belongings. Poirot thanked him, and he withdrew, somewhat unwillingly, with an inquisitive glance at the overturned waste-paper basket and the litter on the floor. He could hardly have helped overhearing Poirot's thoughtful remark as he bundled the torn papers back again:

'And the necklace was heavily insured ... '

'Poirot,' I cried, 'I see - '

'You see nothing, my friend,' he replied quickly. 'As usual, nothing at all! It is incredible - but there it is. Let us return to our own apartments.'

We did so in silence. Once there, to my intense surprise, Poirot effected a rapid change of clothing.

'I go to London tonight,' he explained. 'It is imperative.'

'What?'

'Absolutely. The real work, that of the brain (ah, those brave little grey cells), it is done. I go to seek the confirmation. I shall find it! Impossible to deceive Hercule Poirot!'

'You'll come a cropper one of these days,' I observed, rather disgusted by his vanity.

'Do not be enraged, I beg of you, *mon ami*. I count on you to do me a service - of your friendship.'

'Of course,' I said eagerly, rather ashamed of my moroseness. 'What is it?'

'The sleeve of my coat that I have taken off - will you brush it? See you, a little white powder has clung to it. You without doubt observed me run my finger round the drawer of the dressing-table?'

'No, I didn't.'

'You should observe my actions, my friend. Thus I obtained the powder on my finger, and, being a little overexcited, I rubbed it on my sleeve; an action without method which I deplore - false to all my principles.'

'But what was the powder?' I asked, not particularly interested in Poirot's principles.

'Not the poison of the Borgias,' replied Poirot, with a twinkle. 'I see your imagination mounting. I should say it was French chalk.'

'French chalk?'

'Yes, cabinet-makers use it to make drawers run smoothly.

I laughed.

'You old sinner! I thought you were working up to something exciting.'

'Au revoir, my friend. I save myself. I fly!'

The door shut behind him. With a smile, half of derision, half of affection, I picked up the coat and stretched out my hand for the clothes brush.

II

The next morning, hearing nothing from Poirot, I went out for a stroll, met some old friends, and lunched with them at their hotel. In the afternoon we went for a spin. A punctured tyre delayed us, and it was past eight when I got back to the Grand Metropolitan.

The first sight that met my eyes was Poirot, looking even more diminutive than usual, sandwiched between the Opalsens, beaming in a state of placid satisfaction.

'*Mon ami* Hastings!' he cried, and sprang to meet me. 'Embrace me, my friend; all has marched to a marvel!'

Luckily, the embrace was merely figurative - not a thing one is always sure of with Poirot.

'Do you mean - ' I began.

'Just wonderful, I call it!' said Mrs Opalsen, smiling all over her fat face. 'Didn't I tell you, Ed, that if he couldn't get back my pearls nobody would?'

'You did, my dear, you did. And you were right.'

I looked helplessly at Poirot, and he answered the glance.

'My friend Hastings is, as you say in England, all at the seaside. Seat yourself, and I will recount to you all the affair that has so happily ended.'

'Ended?'

'But yes. They are arrested.'

'Who are arrested?'

'The chambermaid and the valet, *parbleu*! You did not suspect? Not with my parting hint about the French chalk?'

'You said cabinet-makers used it.'

'Certainly they do - to make drawers slide easily. Somebody wanted that drawer to slide in and out without any noise. Who could that be? Obviously, only the chambermaid. The plan was so ingenious that it did not at once leap to the eye - not even to the eye of Hercule Poirot.

'Listen, this was how it was done. The valet was in the empty room next door, waiting. The French maid leaves the room. Quick as a flash the chambermaid whips open the drawer, takes out the jewel-case and, slipping back the bolt, passes it through the door. The valet opens it at his leisure with the duplicate key with which he has provided himself, extracts the necklace, and waits his time. Célestine leaves the room again, and - pst! - in a flash the case is passed back again and replaced in the drawer.

'Madame arrives, the theft is discovered. The chambermaid demands to be searched, with a good deal of righteous indignation, and leaves the room without a stain on her character. The imitation necklace with which they have provided themselves has been concealed in the French girl's bed that morning by the chambermaid—a master stroke, *ça*!'

'But what did you go to London for?'

'You remember the card?'

'Certainly. It puzzled me - and puzzles me still. I thought - '

I hesitated delicately, glancing at Mr Opalsen.

Poirot laughed heartily.

'*Une blague!* For the benefit of the valet. The card was one with a specially prepared surface - for fingerprints. I went straight to Scotland Yard, asked for our old friend Inspector Japp, and laid the facts before him. As I had suspected, the fingerprints proved to be those of two well-known jewel thieves who have been "wanted" for some time. Japp came down with me, the thieves were arrested, and the necklace was discovered in the valet's possession. A clever pair, but they failed in *method*. Have I not told you, Hastings, at least thirty-six times, that without method - '

'At least thirty-six thousand times!' I interrupted. 'But where did their "method" break down?'

'*Mon ami*, it is a good plan to take a place as chambermaid or valet - but you must not shirk your work. They left an empty room undusted; and therefore, when the man put down the jewel-case on the little table near the communicating door, it left a square mark - '

'I remember,' I cried.

'Before, I was undecided. Then - I *knew*!'

There was a moment's silence.

'And I've got my pearls,' said Mrs Opalsen as a sort of Greek chorus.

'Well,' I said, 'I'd better have some dinner.'

Poirot accompanied me.

'This ought to mean kudos for you,' I observed.

'*Pas du tout*,' replied Poirot tranquilly. 'Japp and the local inspector will divide the credit between them. But' - he tapped his pocket - 'I have a cheque here, from Mr Opalsen, and, how say you, my friend? This weekend has not gone according to plan. Shall we return here next weekend - at my expense this time?'

The Kidnapped Prime Minister

Now that war and the problems of war are things of the past, I think I may safely venture to reveal to the world the part which my friend Poirot played in a moment of national crisis. The secret has been well guarded. Not a whisper of it reached the Press. But, now that the need for secrecy has gone by, I feel it is only just that England should know the debt it owes to my quaint little friend, whose marvellous brain so ably averted a great catastrophe.

One evening after dinner - I will not particularize the date; it suffices to say that it was at the time when 'Peace by negotiation' was the parrot-cry of England's enemies - my friend and I were sitting in his rooms. After being invalided out of the Army I had been given a recruiting job, and it had become my custom to drop in on Poirot in the evenings after dinner and talk with him of any cases of interest that he might have on hand.

I was attempting to discuss with him the sensational news of that day - no less than an attempted assassination of Mr David MacAdam, England's Prime Minister. The account in the papers had evidently been carefully censored. No details were given, save that

the Prime Minister had had a marvellous escape, the bullet just grazing his cheek.

I considered that our police must have been shamefully careless for such an outrage to be possible. I could well understand that the German agents in England would be willing to risk much for such an achievement. 'Fighting Mac,' as his own party had nicknamed him, had strenuously and unequivocally combated the Pacifist influence which was becoming so prevalent.

He was more than England's Prime Minister - he *was* England; and to have removed him from his sphere of influence would have been a crushing and paralysing blow to Britain.

Poirot was busy mopping a grey suit with a minute sponge. Never was there a dandy such as Hercule Poirot. Neatness and order were his passion. Now, with the odour of benzene filling the air, he was quite unable to give me his full attention.

'In a little minute I am with you, my friend. I have all but finished. The spot of grease - he is not good - I remove him - so!' He waved his sponge.

I smiled as I lit another cigarette.

'Anything interesting on?' I inquired, after a minute or two.

'I assist a - how do you call it? - "charlady" to find her husband. A difficult affair, needing the tact. For I have a little idea that when he is found he will not be pleased. What would you? For my part, I sympathize with him. He was a man of discrimination to lose himself.'

I laughed.

'At last! The spot of grease, he is gone! I am at your disposal.'

'I was asking you what you thought of this attempt to assassinate MacAdam?'

'*Enfantillage!*' replied Poirot promptly. 'One can hardly take it seriously. To fire with the rifle - never does it succeed. It is a device of the past.'

'It was very near succeeding this time,' I reminded him.

Poirot shook his head impatiently. He was about to reply when the landlady thrust her head round the door and informed him that there were two gentlemen below who wanted to see him.

'They won't give their names, sir, but they says as it's very important.'

'Let them mount,' said Poirot, carefully folding his grey trousers.

In a few minutes the two visitors were ushered in, and my heart gave a leap as in the foremost I recognized no less a personage than Lord Estair, Leader of the House of Commons; whilst his companion, Mr Bernard Dodge, was also a member of the War Cabinet, and, as I knew, a close personal friend of the Prime Minister.

'Monsieur Poirot?' said Lord Estair interrogatively. My friend bowed. The great man looked at me and hesitated. 'My business is private.'

'You may speak freely before Captain Hastings,' said my friend, nodding to me to remain. 'He has not all the gifts, no! But I answer for his discretion.'

Lord Estair still hesitated, but Mr Dodge broke in abruptly:

'Oh, come on - don't let's beat about the bush! As far as I can see, the whole of England will know the hole we're in soon enough. Time's everything.'

'Pray be seated, messieurs,' said Poirot politely. 'Will you take the big chair, *milord*?'

Lord Estair started slightly. 'You know me?'

Poirot smiled. 'Certainly. I read the little papers with the pictures. How should I not know you? '

'Monsieur Poirot, I have come to consult you upon a matter of the most vital urgency. I must ask for absolute secrecy.'

'You have the word of Hercule Poirot - I can say no more!' said my friend grandiloquently.

'It concerns the Prime Minister. We are in grave trouble.'

'We're up a tree!' interposed Mr Dodge.

'The injury is serious then?' I asked.

'What injury?'

'The bullet wound.'

'Oh, that!' cried Mr Dodge contemptuously. 'That's old history.'

'As my colleague says,' continued Lord Estair, 'that affair is over and done with. Luckily, it failed. I wish I could say as much for the second attempt.'

'There has been a second attempt, then?'

'Yes, though not of the same nature. Monsieur Poirot, the Prime Minister has disappeared.'

'What?'

'He has been kidnapped!'

'Impossible!' I cried, stupefied.

Poirot threw a withering glance at me, which I knew enjoined me to keep my mouth shut.

'Unfortunately, impossible as it seems, it is only too true,' continued his lordship.

Poirot looked at Mr Dodge. 'You said just now, monsieur, that time was everything. What did you mean by that?'

The two men exchanged glances, and then Lord Estair said:

'You have heard, Monsieur Poirot, of the approaching Allied Conference?'

My friend nodded.

'For obvious reasons, no details have been given of when and where it is to take place. But, although it has been kept out of the newspapers, the date is, of course, widely known in diplomatic circles. The Conference is to be held tomorrow - Thursday -

evening at Versailles. Now you perceive the terrible gravity of the situation. I will not conceal from you that the Prime Minister's presence at the Conference is a vital necessity. The Pacifist propaganda, started and maintained by the German agents in our midst, has been very active. It is the universal opinion that the turning-point of the Conference will be the strong personality of the Prime Minister. His absence may have the most serious results - possibly a premature and disastrous peace. And we have no one who can be sent in his place. He alone can represent England.'

Poirot's face had grown very grave. 'Then you regard the kidnapping of the Prime Minister as a direct attempt to prevent his being present at the Conference?'

'Most certainly I do. He was actually on his way to France at the time.'

'And the Conference is to be held?'

'At nine o'clock tomorrow night.'

Poirot drew an enormous watch from his pocket.

'It is now a quarter to nine.'

'Twenty-four hours,' said Mr Dodge thoughtfully.

'And a quarter,' amended Poirot. 'Do not forget the quarter, monsieur - it may come in useful. Now for the details - the abduction, did it take place in England or in France?'

'In France. Mr MacAdam crossed to France this morning. He was to stay tonight as the guest of the Commander-in-Chief, proceeding tomorrow to Paris. He was conveyed across the Channel by

destroyer. At Boulogne he was met by a car from General Headquarters and one of the Commander-in-Chief's ADCs.'

'*Eh bien?*'

'Well, they started from Boulogne - but they never arrived.'

'What?'

'Monsieur Poirot, it was a bogus car and a bogus ADC. The real car was found in a side road, with the chauffeur and the ADC neatly gagged and bound.'

'And the bogus car?'

'Is still at large.'

Poirot made a gesture of impatience. 'Incredible! Surely it cannot escape attention for long?'

'So we thought. It seemed merely a question of searching thoroughly. That part of France is under Military Law. We were convinced that the car could not go long unnoticed. The French police and our own Scotland Yard men, and the military are straining every nerve. It is, as you say, incredible - but nothing has been discovered!'

At that moment a tap came at the door, and a young officer entered with a heavily sealed envelope which he handed to Lord Estair.

'Just through from France, sir. I brought it on here, as you directed.'

The Minister tore it open eagerly, and uttered an exclamation. The officer withdrew.

'Here is news at last! This telegram has just been decoded. They have found the second car, also the secretary, Daniels, chloroformed, gagged, and bound, in an abandoned farm near C-. He remembers nothing, except something being pressed against his mouth and nose from behind, and struggling to free himself. The police are satisfied as to the genuineness of his statement.'

'And they have found nothing else?'

'No.'

'Not the Prime Minister's dead body? Then, there is hope. But it is strange. Why, after trying to shoot him this morning, are they now taking so much trouble to keep him alive?'

Dodge shook his head. 'One thing's quite certain. They're determined at all costs to prevent his attending the Conference.'

'If it is humanly possible, the Prime Minister shall be there. God grant it is not too late. Now, messieurs, recount to me everything - from the beginning. I must know about this shooting affair as well.'

'Last night, the Prime Minister, accompanied by one of his secretaries, Captain Daniels - '

'The same who accompanied him to France?'

'Yes. As I was saying, they motored down to Windsor, where the Prime Minister was granted an Audience. Early this morning he returned to town, and it was on the way that the attempted assassination took place,'

'One moment, if you please. Who is this Captain Daniels? You have his dossier?'

Lord Estair smiled. 'I thought you would ask me that. We do not know very much of him. He is of no particular family. He has served in the English Army, and is an extremely able secretary, being an exceptionally fine linguist. I believe he speaks seven languages. It is for that reason that the Prime Minister chose him to accompany him to France.'

'Has he any relatives in England?'

'Two aunts. A Mrs Everard, who lives at Hampstead, and a Miss Daniels, who lives near Ascot.'

'Ascot? That is near to Windsor, is it not?'

'That point has not been overlooked. But it has led to nothing.'

'You regard the Capitaine Daniels, then, as above suspicion?'

A shade of bitterness crept into Lord Estair's voice, as he replied:

'No, Monsieur Poirot. In these days, I should hesitate before I pronounced *anyone* above suspicion.'

'*Très bien*. Now I understand, *milord*, that the Prime Minister would, as a matter of course, be under vigilant police protection, which ought to render any assault upon him an impossibility?'

Lord Estair bowed his head. 'That is so. The Prime Minister's car was closely followed by another car containing detectives in plain clothes. Mr MacAdam knew nothing of these precautions. He is personally a most fearless man, and would be inclined to sweep

them away arbitrarily. But, naturally, the police make their own arrangements. In fact, the Premier's chauffeur, O'Murphy, is a CID man.'

'O'Murphy? That is a name of Ireland, is it not so?'

'Yes, he is an Irishman.'

'From what part of Ireland?'

'County Clare, I believe.'

'*Tiens*! But proceed, *milord*.'

'The Premier started for London. The car was a closed one. He and Captain Daniels sat inside. The second car followed as usual. But, unluckily, for some unknown reason, the Prime Minister's car deviated from the main road - '

'At a point where the road curves?' interrupted Poirot.

'Yes - but how did you know?'

'Oh, *c'est évident*! Continue!'

'For some unknown reason,' continued Lord Estair, 'the Premier's car left the main road. The police car, unaware of the deviation, continued to keep to the high road. At a short distance down the unfrequented lane, the Prime Minister's car was suddenly held up by a band of masked men. The chauffeur - '

'That brave O'Murphy!' murmured Poirot thoughtfully.

'The chauffeur, momentarily taken aback, jammed on the brakes. The Prime Minister put his head out of the window. Instantly a shot

rang out - then another. The first one grazed his cheek, the second, fortunately, went wide. The chauffeur, now realizing the danger, instantly forged straight ahead, scattering the band of men.'

'A near escape,' I ejaculated, with a shiver.

'Mr MacAdam refused to make any fuss over the slight wound he had received. He declared it was only a scratch. He stopped at a local cottage hospital, where it was dressed and bound up - he did not, of course, reveal his identity. He then drove, as per schedule, straight to Charing Cross, where a special train for Dover was awaiting him, and, after a brief account of what had happened had been given to the anxious police by Captain Daniels, he duly departed for France. At Dover, he went on board the waiting destroyer. At Boulogne, as you know, the bogus car was waiting for him, carrying the Union Jack, and correct in every detail.'

'That is all you have to tell me?'

'Yes.'

'There is no other circumstance that you have omitted, *milord*?'

'Well, there is one rather peculiar thing.'

'Yes?'

'The Prime Minister's car did not return home after leaving the Prime Minister at Charing Cross. The police were anxious to interview O'Murphy, so a search was instituted at once. The car was discovered standing outside a certain unsavoury little restaurant in Soho, which is well known as a meeting-place of German agents.'

'And the chauffeur?'

'The chauffeur was nowhere to be found. He, too, had disappeared.'

'So,' said Poirot thoughtfully, 'there are two disappearances: the Prime Minister in France, and O'Murphy in London.'

He looked keenly at Lord Estair, who made a gesture of despair.

'I can only tell you, Monsieur Poirot, that, if anyone had suggested to me yesterday that O'Murphy was a traitor, I should have laughed in his face.'

'And today?'

'Today I do not know what to think.'

Poirot nodded gravely. He looked at his turnip of a watch again.

'I understand that I have *carte blanche*, messieurs - in every way, I mean? I must be able to go where I choose, and how I choose.'

'Perfectly. There is a special train leaving for Dover in an hour's time, with a further contingent from Scotland Yard. You shall be accompanied by a Military officer and a CID man, who will hold themselves at your disposal in every way. Is that satisfactory?'

'Quite. One more question before you leave, messieurs. What made you come to me? I am unknown, obscure, in this great London of yours.'

'We sought you out on the express recommendation and wish of a very great man of your own country.'

'*Comment?* My old friend the *Préfet* - ?'

Lord Estair shook his head.

'One higher than the *Préfet*. One whose word was once law in Belgium - and shall be again! That England has sworn!'

Poirot's hand flew swiftly to a dramatic salute. 'Amen to that! Ah, but my Master does not forget ... Messieurs, I, Hercule Poirot, will serve you faithfully. Heaven only send that it will be in time. But this is dark - dark ... I cannot see.'

'Well, Poirot,' I cried impatiently, as the door closed behind the Ministers, 'what do you think?'

My friend was busy packing a minute suit-case, with quick, deft movements. He shook his head thoughtfully.

'I do not know what to think. My brains desert me.'

'Why, as you said, kidnap him, when a knock on the head would do as well?' I mused.

'Pardon me, *mon ami*, but I did not quite say that. It is undoubtedly far more their affair to kidnap him.'

'But why?'

'Because uncertainty creates panic. That is one reason. Were the Prime Minister dead, it would be a terrible calamity, but the situation would have to be faced. But now you have paralysis. Will the Prime Minister reappear, or will he not? Is he dead or alive? Nobody knows, and until they know nothing definite can be done. And, as I tell you, uncertainty breeds panic, which is what *les Boches* are playing for. Then, again, if the kidnappers are holding him secretly somewhere, they have the advantage of being able to

make terms with both sides. The German Government is not a liberal paymaster, as a rule, but no doubt they can be made to disgorge substantial remittances in such a case as this. Thirdly, they run no risk of the hangman's rope. Oh, decidedly, kidnapping is their affair.'

'Then, if that is so, why should they first try to shoot him?'

Poirot made a gesture of anger. 'Ah, that is just what I do not understand! It is inexplicable - stupid! They have all their arrangements made (and very good arrangements too!) for the abduction, and yet they imperil the whole affair by a melodramatic attack, worthy of a cinema, and quite as unreal. It is almost impossible to believe in it, with its band of masked men, not twenty miles from London!'

'Perhaps they were two quite separate attempts which happened irrespective of each other,' I suggested.

'Ah, no, that would be too much of a coincidence! Then, further - who is the traitor? There must have been a traitor - in the first affair, anyway. But who was it - Daniels or O'Murphy? It must have been one of the two, or why did the car leave the main road? We cannot suppose that the Prime Minister connived at his own assassination! Did O'Murphy take that turning of his own accord, or was it Daniels who told him to do so?'

'Surely it must have been O'Murphy's doing.'

'Yes, because if it was Daniels' the Prime Minister would have heard the order, and would have asked the reason. But there are altogether too many "whys" in this affair, and they contradict each

other. If O'Murphy is an honest man, *why* did he leave the main road? But if he was a dishonest man, *why* did he start the car again when only two shots had been fired - thereby, in all probability, saving the Prime Minister's life? And, again, if he was honest, why did he, immediately on leaving Charing Cross, drive to a well-known rendezvous of German spies?'

'It looks bad,' I said.

'Let us look at the case with method. What have we for and against these two men? Take O'Murphy first. Against: that his conduct in leaving the main road was suspicious; that he is an Irishman from County Clare; that he has disappeared in a highly suggestive manner. For: that his promptness in restarting the car saved the Premier's life; that he is a Scotland Yard man, and, obviously, from the post allotted to him, a trusted detective. Now for Daniels. There is not much against him, except the fact that nothing is known of his antecedents, and that he speaks too many languages for a good Englishman! (Pardon me, *mon ami*, but, as linguists, you are deplorable!) Now *for* him, we have the fact that he was found gagged, bound, and chloroformed - which does not look as though he had anything to do with the matter.'

'He might have gagged and bound himself, to divert suspicion.'

Poirot shook his head. 'The French police would make no mistake of that kind. Besides, once he had attained his object, and the Prime Minister was safely abducted, there would not be much point in his remaining behind. His accomplices *could* have gagged and chloroformed him, of course, but I fail to see what object they hoped to accomplish by it. He can be of little use to them now, for,

until the circumstances concerning the Prime Minister have been cleared up, he is bound to be closely watched.'

'Perhaps he hoped to start the police on a false scent?'

'Then why did he not do so? He merely says that something was pressed over his nose and mouth, and that he remembers nothing more. There is no false scent there. It sounds remarkably like the truth.'

'Well,' I said, glancing at the clock, 'I suppose we'd better start for the station. You may find more clues in France.'

'Possibly, *mon ami*, but I doubt it. It is still incredible to me that the Prime Minister has not been discovered in that limited area, where the difficulty of concealing him must be tremendous. If the military and the police of two countries have not found him, how shall I?'

At Charing Cross we were met by Mr Dodge.

'This is Detective Barnes, of Scotland Yard, and Major Norman. They will hold themselves entirely at your disposal. Good luck to you. It's a bad business, but I've not given up hope. Must be off now.' And the Minister strode rapidly away.

We chatted in a desultory fashion with Major Norman. In the centre of the little group of men on the platform I recognized a little ferret-faced fellow talking to a tall, fair man. He was an old acquaintance of Poirot's - Detective-Inspector Japp, supposed to be one of the smartest of Scotland Yard's officers. He came over and greeted my friend cheerfully.

'I heard you were on this job too. Smart bit of work. So far they've got away with the goods all right. But I can't believe they can keep him hidden long. Our people are going through France with a toothcomb. So are the French. I can't help feeling it's only a matter of hours now.'

'That is, if he's still alive,' remarked the tall detective gloomily.

Japp's face fell. 'Yes ... But somehow I've got the feeling he's alive all right.'

Poirot nodded. 'Yes, yes; he's alive. But can he be found in time? I, like you, did not believe he could be hidden so long.'

The whistle blew, and we all trooped up into the Pullman car. Then, with a slow, unwilling jerk, the train drew out of the station.

It was a curious journey. The Scotland Yard men crowded together. Maps of Northern France were spread out, and eager forefingers traced the lines of roads and villages. Each man had his own pet theory. Poirot showed none of his usual loquacity, but sat staring in front of him, with an expression on his face that reminded me of a puzzled child. I talked to Norman, whom I found quite an amusing fellow. On arriving at Dover Poirot's behaviour moved me to intense amusement. The little man, as he went on board the boat, clutched desperately at my arm. The wind was blowing lustily.

'*Mon Dieu*!' he murmured. 'This is terrible!'

'Have courage, Poirot,' I cried. 'You will succeed. You will find him. I am sure of it.'

'Ah, *mon ami*, you mistake my emotion. It is this villainous sea that troubles me! The *mal de mer* - it is horrible suffering!'

'Oh!' I said, rather taken aback.

The first throb of the engines was felt, and Poirot groaned and closed his eyes.

'Major Norman has a map of Northern France if you would like to study it? '

Poirot shook his head impatiently.

'But no, but no! Leave me, my friend. See you, to think, the stomach and the brain must be in harmony. Laverguier has a method most excellent for averting the *mal de mer*. You breathe in - and out - slowly, so - turning the head from left to right and counting six between each breath.'

I left him to his gymnastic endeavours; and went on deck.

As we came slowly into Boulogne Harbour Poirot appeared, neat and smiling, and announced to me in a whisper that Laverguier's system had succeeded 'to a marvel!'

Japp's forefinger was still tracing imaginary routes on his map. 'Nonsense! The car started from Boulogne - here they branched off. Now, my idea is that they transferred the Prime Minister to another car. See?'

'Well,' said the tall detective, 'I shall make for the seaports. Ten to one, they've smuggled him on board a ship.'

Japp shook his head. 'Too obvious. The order went out at once to close all the ports.'

The day was just breaking as we landed. Major Norman touched Poirot on the arm. 'There's a military car here waiting for you, sir.'

'Thank you, monsieur. But, for the moment, I do not propose to leave Boulogne.'

'What?'

'No, we will enter this hotel here, by the quay.'

He suited the action to the word, demanded and was accorded a private room. We three followed him, puzzled and uncomprehending.

He shot a quick glance at us. 'It is not so that the good detective should act, eh? I perceive your thought. He must be full of energy. He must rush to and fro. He should prostrate himself on the dusty road and seek the marks of tyres through a little glass. He must gather up the cigarette-end, the fallen match? That is your idea, is it not?'

His eyes challenged us. 'But I - Hercule Poirot - tell you that it is not so! The true clues are within - *here*!' He tapped his forehead. 'See you, I need not have left London. It would have been sufficient for me to sit quietly in my rooms there. All that matters is the little grey cells within. Secretly and silently they do their part, until suddenly I call for a map, and I lay my finger on a spot - so - and I say: the Prime Minister is *there*! And it is so! With method and logic one can accomplish anything! This frantic rushing to France was a mistake - it is playing a child's game of hide-and-seek. But now, though it may

be too late, I will set to work the right way, from within. Silence, my friends, I beg of you.'

And for five long hours the little man sat motionless, blinking his eyelids like a cat, his green eyes nickering and becoming steadily greener and greener. The Scotland Yard man was obviously contemptuous, Major Norman was bored and impatient, and I myself found the time pass with wearisome slowness.

Finally, I got up and strolled as noiselessly as I could to the window. The matter was becoming a farce. I was secretly concerned for my friend. If he failed, I would have preferred him to fail in a less ridiculous manner. Out of the window I idly watched the daily leave boat, belching forth columns of smoke, as she lay alongside the quay.

Suddenly I was aroused by Poirot's voice close to my elbow.

'*Mes amis*, let us start!'

I turned. An extraordinary transformation had come over my friend. His eyes were flickering with excitement, his chest was swelled to the uttermost.

'I have been an imbecile, my friends! But I see daylight at last.'

Major Norman moved hastily to the door. 'I'll order the car.'

'There is no need. I shall not use it. Thank Heaven the wind has fallen.'

'Do you mean you are going to walk, sir?'

'No, my young friend. I am no St Peter. I prefer to cross the sea by boat.'

'To cross the *sea*?'

'Yes. To work with method, one must begin from the beginning. And the beginning of this affair was in England. Therefore, we return to England.'

II

At three o'clock, we stood once more upon Charing Cross platform. To all our expostulations, Poirot turned a deaf ear, and reiterated again and again that to start at the beginning was not a waste of time, but the only way. On the way over, he had conferred with Norman in a low voice, and the latter had despatched a sheaf of telegrams from Dover.

Owing to the special passes held by Norman, we got through everywhere in record time. In London, a large police car was waiting for us, with some plain-clothes men, one of whom handed a typewritten sheet of paper to my friend. He answered my inquiring glance.

'A list of the cottage hospitals within a certain radius west of London. I wired for it from Dover.'

We were whirled rapidly through the London streets. We were on the Bath Road. On we went, through Hammersmith, Chiswick and Brentford. I began to see our objective. Through Windsor and on to

Ascot. My heart gave a leap. Ascot was where Daniels had an aunt living. We were after *him*, then, not O'Murphy.

We duly stopped at the gate of a trim villa. Poirot jumped out and rang the bell. I saw a perplexed frown dimming the radiance of his face. Plainly, he was not satisfied. The bell was answered. He was ushered inside. In a few moments he reappeared, and climbed into the car with a short, sharp shake of his head. My hopes began to die down. It was past four now. Even if he found certain evidence incriminating Daniels, what would be the good of it, unless he could wring from someone the exact spot in France where they were holding the Prime Minister?

Our return progress towards London was an interrupted one. We deviated from the main road more than once, and occasionally stopped at a small building, which I had no difficulty in recognizing as a cottage hospital. Poirot only spent a few minutes at each, but at every halt his radiant assurance was more and more restored.

He whispered something to Norman, to which the latter replied:

'Yes, if you turn off to the left, you will find them waiting by the bridge.'

We turned up a side road, and in the failing light I discerned a second car, waiting by the side of the road. It contained two men in plain clothes. Poirot got down and spoke to them, and then we started off in a northerly direction, the other car following close behind.

We drove for some time, our objective being obviously one of the northern suburbs of London. Finally, we drove up to the front door

of a tall house, standing a little back from the road in its own grounds.

Norman and I were left with the car. Poirot and one of the detectives went up to the door and rang. A neat parlourmaid opened it. The detective spoke.

'I am a police officer, and I have a warrant to search this house.'

The girl gave a little scream, and a tall, handsome woman of middle age appeared behind her in the hall.

'Shut the door, Edith. They are burglars, I expect.'

But Poirot swiftly inserted his foot in the door, and at the same moment blew a whistle. Instantly the other detectives ran up, and poured into the house, shutting the door behind them.

Norman and I spent about five minutes cursing our forced inactivity. Finally the door reopened, and the men emerged, escorting three prisoners - a woman and two men. The woman and one of the men were taken to the second car. The other man was placed in our car by Poirot himself.

'I must go with the others, my friend. But have great care of this gentleman. You do not know him, no? *Eh bien*, let me present to you. Monsieur O'Murphy!'

O'Murphy! I *gaped* at him open-mouthed as we started again. He was not handcuffed, but I did not fancy he would try to escape. He sat there staring in front of him as though dazed. Anyway, Norman and I would be more than a match for him.

To my surprise, we still kept a northerly route. We were not returning to London, then! I was much puzzled. Suddenly, as the car slowed down, I recognized that we were close to Hendon Aerodrome. Immediately I grasped Poirot's idea. He proposed to reach France by aeroplane.

It was a sporting idea, but, on the face of it, impracticable. A telegram would be far quicker. Time was everything. He must leave the personal glory of rescuing the Prime Minister to others.

As we drew up. Major Norman jumped out, and a plain-clothes man took his place. He conferred with Poirot for a few minutes, and then went off briskly.

I, too, jumped out, and caught Poirot by the arm.

'I congratulate you, old fellow! They have told you the hiding-place? But, look here, you must wire to France at once. You'll be too late if you go yourself.'

Poirot looked at me curiously for a minute or two.

'Unfortunately, my friend, there are some things that cannot be sent by telegram.'

III

At that moment Major Norman returned, accompanied by a young officer in the uniform of the Flying Corps.

'This is Captain Lyall, who will fly you over to France. He can start at once.'

'Wrap up warmly, sir,' said the young pilot. 'I can lend you a coat, if you like.'

Poirot was consulting his enormous watch. He murmured to himself: 'Yes, there is time - just time.' Then he looked up, and bowed politely to the young officer. 'I thank you, monsieur. But it is not I who am your passenger. It is this gentleman here.'

He moved a little aside as he spoke, and a figure came forward out of the darkness. It was the second male prisoner who had gone in the other car, and as the light fell on his face, I gave a gasp of surprise.

It was the Prime Minister!

IV

'For Heaven's sake, tell me all about it,' I cried impatiently, as Poirot, Norman and I motored back to London. 'How in the world did they manage to smuggle him back to England?'

'There was no need to smuggle him back,' replied Poirot dryly. 'The Prime Minister has never left England. He was kidnapped on his way from Windsor to London.'

'*What?*

'I will make all clear. The Prime Minister was in his car, his secretary beside him. Suddenly a pad of chloroform is clapped on his face - '

'But by whom?'

'By the clever linguistic Captain Daniels. As soon as the Prime Minister is unconscious, Daniels picks up the speaking-tube, and directs O'Murphy to turn to the right, which the chauffeur, quite unsuspicious, does. A few yards down that unfrequented road a large car is standing, apparently broken down. Its driver signals to O'Murphy to stop. O'Murphy slows up. The stranger approaches. Daniels leans out of the window, and, probably with the aid of an instantaneous anaesthetic, such as ethylchloride, the chloroform trick is repeated. In a few seconds, the two helpless men are dragged out and transferred to the other car, and a pair of substitutes take their places.'

'Impossible!'

'*Pas du tout!* Have you not seen music-hall turns imitating celebrities with marvellous accuracy? Nothing is easier than to personate a public character. The Prime Minister of England is far easier to understudy than Mr John Smith of Clapham, say. As for O'Murphy's "double", no one was going to take much notice of him until after the departure of the Prime Minister, and by then he would have made himself scarce. He drives straight from Charing Cross to the meeting-place of his friends. He goes in as O'Murphy, he emerges as someone quite different. O'Murphy has disappeared, leaving a conveniently suspicious trail behind him.'

'But the man who personated the Prime Minister was seen by everyone!'

'He was not seen by anyone who knew him privately or intimately. And Daniels shielded him from contact with anyone as much as possible. Moreover, his face was bandaged up, and anything unusual in his manner would be put down to the fact that he was

suffering from shock as a result of the attempt upon his life. Mr MacAdam has a weak throat, and always spares his voice as much as possible before any great speech. The deception was perfectly easy to keep up as far as France. There it would be impracticable and impossible - so the Prime Minister disappears. The police of this country hurry across the Channel, and no one bothers to go into the details of the first attack. To sustain the illusion that the abduction has taken place in France, Daniels is gagged and chloroformed in a convincing manner.'

'And the man who has enacted the part of the Prime Minister?'

'Rids himself of his disguise. He and the bogus chauffeur may be arrested as suspicious characters, but no one will dream of suspecting their real part in the drama, and they will eventually be released for lack of evidence.'

'And the real Prime Minister?'

'He and O'Murphy were driven straight to the house of "Mrs Everard," at Hampstead, Daniels' so-called "aunt". In reality, she is Frau Bertha Ebenthal, and the police have been looking for her for some time. It is a valuable little present that I have made to them - to say nothing of Daniels! Ah, it was a clever plan, but he did not reckon on the cleverness of Hercule Poirot!'

I think my friend might well be excused his moment of vanity.

'When did you first begin to suspect the truth of the matter?'

'When I began to work the right way - from *within*! I could not make that shooting affair fit in - but when I saw that the net result of it was that *the Prime Minister went to France with his face bound up* I

began to comprehend! And when I visited all the cottage hospitals between Windsor and London, and found that no one answering to my description had had his face bound up and dressed that morning, I was sure! After that, it was child's play for a mind like mine!'

The following morning, Poirot showed me a telegram he had just received. It had no place of origin, and was unsigned. It ran:

'In time.'

Later in the day the evening paper published an account of the Allied Conference. They laid particular stress on the magnificent ovation accorded to Mr David MacAdam, whose inspiring speech had produced a deep and lasting impression.

The Disappearance of Mr Davenheim

Poirot and I were expecting our old friend Inspector Japp of Scotland Yard to tea. We were sitting round the tea-table awaiting his arrival. Poirot had just finished carefully straightening the cups and saucers which our landlady was in the habit of throwing, rather than placing, on the table. He had also breathed heavily on the metal teapot, and polished it with a silk handkerchief. The kettle was on the boil, and a small enamel saucepan beside it contained some thick, sweet chocolate which was more to Poirot's palate than what he described as 'your English poison.'

A sharp 'rat-tat' sounded below, and a few minutes afterwards Japp entered briskly.

'Hope I'm not late,' he said as he greeted us. 'To tell the truth, I was yarning with Miller, the man who's in charge of the Davenheim case.'

I pricked up my ears. For the last three days the papers had been full of the strange disappearance of Mr Davenheim, senior partner of Davenheim and Salmon, the well-known bankers and financiers. On Saturday last he had walked out of his house, and had never been seen since. I looked forward to extracting some interesting details from Japp.

'I should have thought,' I remarked, 'that it would be almost impossible for anyone to "disappear" nowadays.'

Poirot moved a plate of bread and butter the eighth of an inch, and said sharply:

'Be exact, my friend. What do you mean by "disappear"? To which class of disappearance are you referring?'

'Are disappearances classified and labelled, then?' I laughed.

Japp smiled also. Poirot frowned at us both.

'But certainly they are! They fall into three categories: First, and most common, the voluntary disappearance. Second, the much abused "loss of memory" case - rare, but occasionally genuine. Third, murder, and a more or less successful disposal of the body. Do you refer to all three as impossible of execution?'

'Very nearly so, I should think. You might lose your own memory, but someone would be sure to recognize you - especially in the case of a well-known man like Davenheim. Then "bodies" can't be made to vanish into thin air. Sooner or later they turn up, concealed in lonely places, or in trunks. Murder will out. In the same way, the absconding clerk, or the domestic defaulter, is bound to be run down in these days of wireless telegraphy. He can be headed off from foreign countries; ports and railway stations are watched; and, as for concealment in this country, his features and appearance will be known to everyone who reads a daily newspaper. He's up against civilization.'

'*Mon ami*,' said Poirot, 'you make one error. You do not allow for the fact that a man who had decided to make away with another man - or with himself in a figurative sense - might be that rare machine, a man of method. He might bring intelligence, talent, a careful calculation of detail to the task; and then I do not see why he should not be successful in baffling the police force.'

'But not *you*, I suppose?' said Japp good-humouredly, winking at me. 'He couldn't baffle you, eh, Monsieur Poirot?'

Poirot endeavoured, with a marked lack of success, to look modest. 'Me, also! Why not? It is true that I approach such problems with as exact science, a mathematical precision, which seems, alas, only too rare in the new generation of detectives!'

Japp grinned more widely.

'I don't know,' he said. 'Miller, the man who's on this case, is a smart chap. You may be very sure he won't overlook a footprint, or a cigar-ash, or a crumb even. He's got eyes that see everything.'

'So, *mon ami*,' said Poirot, 'has the London sparrow. But all the same, I should not ask the little brown bird to solve the problem of Mr Davenheim.'

'Come now, monsieur, you're not going to run down the value of details as clues?'

'By no means. These things are all good in their way. The danger is they may assume undue importance. Most details are insignificant; one or two are vital. It is the brain, the little grey cells' - he tapped his forehead - 'on which one must rely. The senses mislead. One must seek the truth within - not without.'

'You don't mean to say, Monsieur Poirot, that you would undertake to solve a case without moving from your chair, do you?'

'That is exactly what I do mean - granted the facts were placed before me. I regard myself as a consulting specialist.'

Japp slapped his knee. 'Hanged if I don't take you at your word. Bet you a fiver that you can't lay your hand - or rather tell me where to lay my hand - on Mr Davenheim, dead or alive, before a week is out.'

Poirot considered. '*Eh bien, mon ami*, I accept. *Le sport*, it is the passion of you English. Now - the facts.'

'On Saturday last, as is his usual custom, Mr Davenheim took the 12.40 train from Victoria to Chingside, where his palatial country place, The Cedars, is situated. After lunch, he strolled round the grounds, and gave various directions to the gardeners. Everybody agrees that his manner was absolutely normal and as usual. After tea he put his head into his wife's boudoir; saying that he was going to stroll down to the village and post some letters. He added that he

was expecting a Mr Lowen, on business. If he should come before he himself returned, he was to be shown into the study and asked to wait. Mr Davenheim then left the house by the front door, passed leisurely down the drive, and out at the gate, and - was never seen again. From that hour, he vanished completely.'

'Pretty - very pretty - altogether a charming little problem,' murmured Poirot. 'Proceed, my good friend.'

'About a quarter of an hour later a tall, dark man with a thick black moustache rang the front-door bell, and explained that he had an appointment with Mr Davenheim. He gave the name of Lowen, and in accordance with the banker's instructions was shown into the study. Nearly an hour passed. Mr Davenheim did not return. Finally Mr Lowen rang the bell, and explained that he was unable to wait any longer, as he must catch his train back to town.

'Mrs Davenheim apologized for her husband's absence, which seemed unaccountable, as she knew him to have been expecting the visitor. Mr Lowen reiterated his regrets and took his departure.

'Well, as everyone knows, Mr Davenheim did *not* return. Early on Sunday morning the police were communicated with, but could make neither head nor tail of the matter. Mr Davenheim seemed literally to have vanished into thin air. He had not been to the post office; nor had he been seen passing through the village. At the station they were positive he had not departed by any train. His own motor had not left the garage. If he had hired a car to meet him in some lonely spot, it seems almost certain that by this time, in view of the large reward offered for information, the driver of it would have come forward to tell what he knew. True, there was a small race-meeting at Entfield, five miles away, and if he had walked to

that station he might have passed unnoticed in the crowd. But since then his photograph and a full description of him have been circulated in every newspaper, and nobody has been able to give any news of him. We have, of course, received many letters from all over England, but each clue, so far, has ended in disappointment.

'On Monday morning a further sensational discovery came to light. Behind a *portière* in Mr Davenheim's study stands a safe, and that safe had been broken into and rifled. The windows were fastened securely on the inside, which seems to put an ordinary burglary out of court, unless, of course, an accomplice within the house fastened them again afterwards. On the other hand, Sunday having intervened, and the household being in a state of chaos, it is likely that the burglary was committed on the Saturday, and remained undetected until Monday.'

'*Précisément*,' said Poirot dryly. 'Well, is he arrested, *ce pauvre M. Lowen?*

Japp grinned. 'Not yet. But he's under pretty close supervision.'

Poirot nodded. 'What was taken from the safe? Have you any idea?'

'We've been going into that with the junior partner of the firm and Mrs Davenheim. Apparently there was a considerable amount in bearer bonds, and a very large sum in notes, owing to some large transaction having been just carried through. There was also a small fortune in jewellery. All Mrs Davenheim's jewels were kept in the safe. The purchasing of them had become a passion with her husband of late years, and hardly a month passed that he did not make her a present of some rare and costly gem.'

'Altogether a good haul,' said Poirot thoughtfully. 'Now, what about Lowen? Is it known what his business was with Davenheim that evening? '

'Well, the two men were apparently not on very good terms. Lowen is a speculator in quite small way. Nevertheless, he has been able once or twice to score a coup off Davenheim in the market, though it seems they seldom or never actually met. It was a matter concerning some South American shares which led the banker to make his appointment.'

'Had Davenheim interests in South America, then?'

'I believe so. Mrs Davenheim happened to mention that he spent all last autumn in Buenos Aires.'

'Any trouble in his home life? Were the husband and wife on good terms?'

'I should say his domestic life was quite peaceful and uneventful. Mrs Davenheim is a pleasant, rather unintelligent woman. Quite a nonentity, I think.'

'Then we must not look for the solution of the mystery there. Had he any enemies?'

'He had plenty of financial rivals, and no doubt there are many people whom he has got the better of who bear him no particular goodwill. But there was no one likely to make away with him - and, if they had, where is the body?'

'Exactly. As Hastings says, bodies have a habit of coming to light with fatal persistency.'

'By the way, one of the gardeners says he saw a figure going round to the side of the house towards the rose-garden. The long french window of the study opens on to the rose-garden, and Mr Davenheim frequently entered and left the house that way. But the man was a good way off, at work on some cucumber frames, and cannot even say whether it was the figure of his master or not. Also, he cannot fix the time with any accuracy. It must have been before six, as the gardeners cease work at that time.'

'And Mr Davenheim left the house?'

'About half-past five or thereabouts.'

'What lies beyond the rose-garden?'

'A lake.'

'With a boathouse?'

'Yes, a couple of punts are kept there. I suppose you're thinking of suicide, Monsieur Poirot? Well, I don't mind telling you that Miller's going down tomorrow expressly to see that piece of water dragged. That's the kind of man he is!'

Poirot smiled faintly, and turned to me. 'Hastings, I pray you, hand me that copy of *Daily Megaphone*. If I remember rightly, there is an unusually clear photograph there of the missing man.'

I rose, and found the sheet required. Poirot studied the features attentively.

'H'm!' he murmured. 'Wears his hair rather long and wavy, full moustache and pointed beard, bushy eyebrows. Eyes dark?'

'Yes.'

'Hair and beard turning grey?'

The detective nodded. 'Well, Monsieur Poirot, what have you got to say to it all? Clear as daylight, eh?'

'On the contrary, most obscure.'

The Scotland Yard man looked pleased.

'Which gives me great hopes of solving it,' finished Poirot placidly.

'Eh?'

'I find it a good sign when a case is obscure. If a thing is clear as daylight - *eh bien*, mistrust it! Someone has made it so.'

Japp shook his head almost pityingly. 'Well, each to their fancy. But it's not a bad thing to see your way clear ahead.'

'I do not see,' murmured Poirot. 'I shut my eyes - and think.'

Japp sighed. 'Well, you've got a clear week to think in.'

'And you will bring me any fresh developments that arise - the result of the labours of the hard-working and lynx-eyed Inspector Miller, for instance?'

'Certainly. That's in the bargain.'

'Seems a shame, doesn't it?' said Japp to me as I accompanied him to the door. 'Like robbing a child!'

I could not help agreeing with a smile. I was still smiling as I re-entered the room.

'*Eh bien!*' said Poirot immediately. To make fun of Papa Poirot, is it not so?' He shook his finger at me. 'You do not trust his grey cells? Ah, do not be confused! Let us discuss this little problem - incomplete as yet, I admit, but already showing one or two points of interest.'

'The lake!' I said significantly.

'And even more than the lake, the boathouse!'

I looked sidewise at Poirot. He was smiling in his most inscrutable fashion. I felt that, for the moment, it would be quite useless to question him further.

We heard nothing of Japp until the following evening, when he walked in about nine o'clock. I saw at once by his expression that he was bursting with news of some kind.

'*Eh bien*, my friend,' remarked Poirot. 'All goes well? But do not tell me that you have discovered the body of Mr Davenheim in your lake, because I shall not believe you.'

'We haven't found the body, but we did find his *clothes* - the identical clothes he was wearing that day. What do you say to that?'

'Any other clothes missing from the house?'

'No, his valet is quite positive on that point. The rest of his wardrobe is intact. There's more. We've arrested Lowen. One of the maids, whose business it is to fasten the bedroom windows, declares that she saw Lowen coming *towards* the study through the rose-garden about a quarter past six. That would be about ten minutes before he left the house.'

'What does he himself say to that? '

'Denied first of all that he had ever left the study. But the maid was positive, and he pretended afterwards that he had forgotten just stepping out of the window to examine an unusual species of rose. Rather a weak story ! And there's fresh evidence against him come to light. Mr Davenheim always wore a thick gold ring set with a solitaire diamond on the little finger of his right hand. Well, that ring was pawned in London on Saturday night by a man called Billy Kellett ! He's already known to the police - did three months last autumn for lifting an old gentleman's watch. It seems he tried to pawn the ring at no less than five different places, succeeded at the last one, got gloriously drunk on the proceeds, assaulted a policeman, and was run in in consequence. I went to Bow Street with Miller and saw him. He's sober enough now, and I don't mind admitting we pretty well frightened the life out of him, hinting he might be charged with murder. This is his yarn, and a very queer one it is.

'He was at Entfield races on Saturday, though I dare say scarfpins was his line of business, rather than betting. Anyway, he had a bad day, and was down on his luck. He was tramping along the road to Chingside, and sat down in a ditch to rest just before he got into the village. A few minutes later he noticed a man coming along the road to the village, "dark-complexioned gent, with a big moustache, one of them city toffs," is his description of the man.

'Kellett was half concealed from the road by a heap of stones. Just before he got abreast of him, the man looked quickly up and down the road, and seeing it apparently deserted he took a small object from his pocket and threw it over the hedge. Then he went on

towards the station. Now, the object he had thrown over the hedge had fallen with a slight "chink" which aroused the curiosity of the human derelict in the ditch. He investigated and, after a short search, discovered the ring! That is Kellett's story. It's only fair to say that Lowen denies it utterly, and of course the word of a man like Kellett can't be relied upon in the slightest. It's within the bounds of possibility that he met Davenheim in the lane and robbed and murdered him.'

Poirot shook his head.

'Very improbable, *mon ami*. He had no means of disposing of the body. It would have been found by now. Secondly, the open way in which he pawned the ring makes it unlikely that he did murder to get it. Thirdly, your sneak-thief is rarely a murderer. Fourthly, as he has been in prison since Saturday, it would be too much of a coincidence that he is able to give so accurate a description of Lowen.'

Japp nodded. 'I don't say you're not right. But all the same, you won't get a jury to take much note of a jailbird's evidence. What seems odd to me is that Lowen couldn't find a cleverer way of disposing of the ring.'

Poirot shrugged his shoulders. 'Well, after all, if it were found in the neighbourhood, it might be argued that Davenheim himself had dropped it.'

'But why remove it from the body at all?' I cried.

'There might be a reason for that,' said Japp. 'Do you know that just beyond the lake, a little gate leads out on to the hill, and not three minutes' walk brings you to - what do you think? - *a lime kiln*.'

'Good heavens!' I cried. 'You mean that the lime which destroyed the body would be powerless to affect the metal of the ring?'

'Exactly.'

'It seems to me,' I said, 'that that explains everything. What a horrible crime!'

By common consent we both turned and looked at Poirot. He seemed lost in reflection, his brow knitted, as though with some supreme mental effort. I felt that at last his keen intellect was asserting itself. What would his first words be? We were not long left in doubt. With a sigh, the tension of his attitude relaxed and turning to Japp, he asked:

'Have you any idea, my friend, whether Mr and Mrs Davenheim occupied the same bedroom?'

The question seemed so ludicrously inappropriate that for a moment we both stared in silence. Then Japp burst into a laugh. 'Good Lord, Monsieur Poirot, I thought you were coming out with something startling. As to your question, I'm sure I don't know.'

'You could find out?' asked Poirot with curious persistence.

'Oh, certainly - if you *really* want to know.'

'*Merci, mon ami*. I should be obliged if you would make a point of it.'

Japp stared at him a few minutes longer, but Poirot seemed to have forgotten us both. The detective shook his head sadly at me, and murmuring, 'Poor old fellow! War's been too much for him!' gently withdrew from the room.

As Poirot still seemed sunk in a daydream, I took a sheet of paper, and amused myself by scribbling notes upon it. My friend's voice aroused me. He had come out of his reverie, and was looking brisk and alert.

'*Que faites vous là, mon ami?*

'I was jotting down what occurred to me as the main points of interest in this affair.'

'You become methodical - at last!' said Poirot approvingly.

I concealed my pleasure. 'Shall I read them to you?'

'By all means.'

I cleared my throat.

'"One: All the evidence points to Lowen having been the man who forced the safe.

'"Two: He had a grudge against Davenheim.

'"Three: He lied in his first statement that he had never left the study.

'"Four: If you accept Billy Kellett's story as true, Lowen is unmistakably implicated."'

I paused. 'Well?' I asked, for I felt that I had put my finger on all the vital facts.

Poirot looked at me pityingly, shaking his head very gently. '*Mon pauvre ami!* But it is that you have not the gift! The important detail, you appreciate him never! Also, your reasoning is false.'

'How?'

'Let me take your four points.

'One: Mr Lowen could not possibly know that he would have the chance to open the safe. He came for a business interview. He could not know beforehand that Mr Davenheim would be absent posting a letter, and that he would consequently be alone in the study!'

'He might have seized his opportunity,' I suggested.

'And the tools? City gentlemen do not carry round housebreaker's tools on the off chance! And one could not cut into that safe with a penknife, *bien entendu!*'

'Well, what about Number Two?'

'You say Lowen had a grudge against Mr Davenheim. What you mean is that he had once or twice got the better of him. And presumably those transactions were entered into with the view of benefiting himself. In any case you do not as a rule bear a grudge against a man you have got the better of - it is more likely to be the other way about. Whatever grudge there might have been would have been on Mr Davenheim's side.'

'Well, you can't deny that he lied about never having left the study?'

'No. But he may have been frightened. Remember, the missing man's clothes had just been discovered in the lake. Of course, as usual, he would have done better to speak the truth.'

'And the fourth point?'

'I grant you that. If Kellett's story is true, Lowen is undeniably implicated. That is what makes the affair so very interesting.'

'Then I *did* appreciate one vital fact?'

'Perhaps - but you have entirely overlooked the two most important points, the ones which undoubtedly hold the clue to the whole matter.'

'And pray, what are they?'

'One, the passion which has grown upon Mr Davenheim in the last few years for buying jewellery. Two, his trip to Buenos Aires last autumn.'

'Poirot, you are joking!'

'I am most serious. Ah, sacred thunder, but I hope Japp will not forget my little commission.'

But the detective, entering into the spirit of the joke, had remembered it so well that a telegram was handed to Poirot about eleven o'clock the next day. At his request I opened it and read it out:

'"Husband and wife have occupied separate rooms since last winter."'

'Aha!' cried Poirot, 'And now we are in mid June! All is solved!'

I stared at him.

'You have no money in the bank of Davenheim and Salmon, *mon ami*?'

'No,' I said, wondering. 'Why?'

'Because I should advise you to withdraw it - before it is too late.'

'Why, what do you expect?'

'I expect a big smash in a few days - perhaps sooner. Which reminds me, we will return the compliment of a *dépêche* to Japp. A pencil, I pray you, and a form. *Voilà!* 'Advise you to withdraw any money deposited with firm in question.' That will intrigue him, the good Japp! His eyes will open wide - wide! He will not comprehend in the slightest - until to-morrow, or the next day!'

I remained sceptical, but the morrow forced me to render tribute to my friend's remarkable powers. In every paper was a huge headline telling of the sensational future of the Davenheim bank. The disappearance of the famous financier took on a totally different aspect in the light of the revelation of the financial affairs of the bank.

Before we were half-way through breakfast, the door flew open and Japp rushed in. In his left hand was a paper; in his right was Poirot's telegram, which he banged down on the table in front of my friend.

'How did you know, Monsieur Poirot? How the blazes could you know?'

Poirot smiled placidly at him. 'Ah, *mon ami*, after your wire, it was a certainty! From the commencement, see you, it struck me that the safe burglary was somewhat remarkable. Jewels, ready money, bearer bonds - all so conveniently arranged for - whom? Well, the good Monsieur Davenheim was of those who "look after Number One" as your saying goes! It seemed almost certain that it was arranged for - himself! Then his passion of late years for buying jewellery! How simple! The funds he embezzled, he converted into jewels, very likely replacing them in turn with paste duplicates, and so he put away in a safe place, under another name, a considerable fortune to be enjoyed all in good time when everyone has been thrown off the track. His arrangements completed, he makes an appointment with Mr Lowen (who has been imprudent enough in the past to cross the great man once or twice), drills a hole in the safe, leaves orders that the guest is to be shown into the study, and walks out of the house - where?' Poirot stopped, and stretched out his hand for another boiled egg. He frowned. 'It is really insupportable,' he murmured, 'that every hen lays an egg of a different size! What symmetry can there be on the breakfast table? At least they should sort them in dozens at the shop!'

'Never mind the eggs,' said Japp impatiently. 'Let 'em lay 'em square if they like. Tell us where our customer went to when he left The Cedars - that is, if you know!'

'*Eh bien*, he went to his hiding-place. Ah, this Monsieur Davenheim, there may be some malformation in his grey cells, but they are of the first quality!'

'Do you know where he is hiding?'

'Certainly! It is most ingenious.'

'For the Lord's sake, tell us, then!'

Poirot gently collected every fragment of shell from his plate, placed them in the egg-cup, and reversed the empty egg-shell on top of them. This little operation concluded, he smiled on the neat effect, and then beamed affectionately on us both.

'Come, my friends, you are men of intelligence. Ask yourself the question which I asked myself. "If I were this man, where should *I* hide?" Hastings, what do you say?'

'Well,' I said, 'I'm rather inclined to think I'd not do a bolt at all. I'd stay in London - in the heart of things, travel by tubes and buses; ten to one I'd never be recognized. There's safety in a crowd.'

Poirot turned inquiringly to Japp.

'I don't agree. Get clear away at once - that's the only chance. I would have had plenty of time to prepare things beforehand. I'd have a yacht waiting, with steam up, and I'd be off to one of the most out-of-the-way corners of the world before the hue and cry began!'

We both looked at Poirot. 'What do *you* say, monsieur?'

For a moment he remained silent. Then a very curious smile flitted across his face.

'My friends, if *I* were hiding from the police, do you know *where* I should hide? *In a prison!*'

'*What?*'

'You are seeking Monsieur Davenheim in order to put him in prison, so you never dream of looking to see if he may not be already there!'

'What do you mean?'

'You tell me Madame Davenheim is not a very intelligent woman. Nevertheless I think that if you took her to Bow Street and confronted her with the man Billy Kellett, she would recognize him! In spite of the fact that he has shaved his beard and moustache and those bushy eyebrows, and has cropped his hair close. A woman nearly always knows her husband, though the rest of the world may be deceived!'

'Billy Kellett? But he's known to the police!'

'Did I not tell you Davenheim was a clever man? He prepared his alibi long beforehand. He was not in Buenos Aires last autumn - he was creating the character of Billy Kellett, "doing three months," so that the police should have no suspicions when the time came. He was playing, remember, for a large fortune, as well as liberty. It was worth while doing the thing thoroughly. Only - '

'Yes?'

'*Eh bien*, afterwards he had to wear a false beard and wig, had to *make up as himself* again, and to sleep with a false beard is not easy - it invites detection! He cannot risk continuing to share the chamber of madame his wife. You found out for me that for the last six months, or ever since his supposed return from Buenos Aires, he and Mrs Davenheim occupied separate rooms. Then I was sure! Everything fitted in. The gardener who fancied he saw his master

going round to the side of the house was quite right. He went to the boathouse, donned his "tramp" clothes, which you may be sure had been safety hidden from the eyes of his valet, dropped the others in the lake, and proceeded to carry out his plan by pawning the ring in an obvious manner, and then assaulting a policeman, getting himself safely into the haven of Bow Street, where nobody would ever dream of looking for him!'

'It's impossible,' murmured Japp.

'Ask Madame,' said my friend, smiling. The next day a registered letter lay beside Poirot's plate.

He opened it, and a five-pound note fluttered out. My friend's brow puckered.

'*Ah, sacré!* But what shall I do with it? I have much remorse! *Ce pauvre Japp?* Ah, an idea! We will have a little dinner, we three! That consoles me. It was really too easy. I am ashamed. I, who would not rob a child - *mille tonnerres! Mon ami*, what have you, that you laugh so heartily?'

The Adventure of the Italian Nobleman

Poirot and I had many friends and acquaintances of an informal nature. Amongst these was to be numbered Dr Hawker, a near neighbour of ours, and a member of the medical profession. It was the genial doctor's habit to drop in sometimes of an evening and have a chat with Poirot, of whose genius he was an ardent admirer.

The doctor himself, frank and unsuspicious to the last degree, admired the talents so far removed from his own.

On one particular evening in early June, he arrived about half past eight and settled down to a comfortable discussion on the cheery topic of the prevalence of arsenical poisoning in crimes. It must have been about a quarter of an hour later when the door of our sitting-room flew open, and a distracted female precipitated herself into the room.

'Oh, doctor, you're wanted! Such a terrible voice. It gave me a turn, it did indeed.'

I recognized in our new visitor Dr Hawker's house-keeper, Miss Rider. The doctor was a bachelor, and lived in a gloomy old house a few streets away. The usually placid Miss Rider was now in a state bordering on incoherence.

'What terrible voice? Who is it, and what's the trouble?'

'It was the telephone, doctor. I answered it - and a voice spoke. "Help," it said. "Doctor - help. They've killed me!" Then it sort of tailed away. "Who's speaking?" I said. "Who's speaking?" Then I got a reply, just a whisper, it seemed, "Foscatine" - something like that - "Regent's Court".'

The doctor uttered an exclamation.

'Count Foscatini. He has a flat in Regent's Court. I must go at once. What can have happened?'

'A patient of yours?' asked Poirot.

'I attended him for some slight ailment a few weeks ago. An Italian, but he speaks English perfectly. Well, I must wish you good night. Monsieur Poirot, unless - ' He hesitated.

'I perceive the thought in your mind,' said Poirot, smiling. 'I shall be delighted to accompany you. Hastings, run down and get hold of a taxi.'

Taxis always make themselves sought for when one is particularly pressed for time, but I captured one at last, and we were soon bowling along in the direction of Regent's Park. Regent's Court was a new block of flats, situated just off St John's Wood Road. They had only recently been built, and contained the latest service devices.

There was no one in the hall. The doctor pressed the lift-bell impatiently, and when the lift arrived questioned the uniformed attendant sharply.

'Flat 11. Count Foscatini. There's been an accident there, I understand.'

The man stared at him.

'First I've heard of it. Mr Graves - that's Count Foscatini's man - went out about half an hour ago, and he said nothing.'

'Is the Count alone in the flat?'

'No, sir, he's got two gentlemen dining with him.'

'What are they like?' I asked eagerly.

We were in the lift now, ascending rapidly to the second floor, on which Flat 11 was situated.

'I didn't see them myself, sir, but I understand that they were foreign gentlemen.'

He pulled back the iron door, and we stepped out on the landing. No 11 was opposite to us. The doctor rang the bell. There was no reply, and we could hear no sound from within. The doctor rang again and again; we could hear the bell trilling within, but no sign of life rewarded us.

'This is getting serious,' muttered the doctor. He turned to the lift attendant.

'Is there any pass-key to this door?'

'There is one in the porter's office downstairs.'

'Get it, then, and, look here, I think you'd better send for the police.'

Poirot approved with a nod of the head.

The man returned shortly; with him came the manager.

'Will you tell me, gentlemen, what is the meaning of all this?'

'Certainly. I received a telephone message from Count Foscatini stating that he had been attacked and was dying. You can understand that we must lose no time - if we are not already too late.'

The manager produced the key without more ado, and we all entered the flat.

We passed first into a small square lounge hall. A door on the right of it was half open. The manager indicated it with a nod.

'The dining room.'

Dr Hawker led the way. We followed close on his heels. As we entered the room I gave a gasp. The round table in the centre bore the remains of a meal; three chairs were pushed back, as though their occupants had just risen. In the corner, to the right of the fireplace, was a big writing-table, and sitting at it was a man - or what had been a man. His right hand still grasped the base of the telephone, but he had fallen forward, struck down by a terrific blow on the head from behind. The weapon was not far to seek. A marble statue stood where it had been hurriedly put down, the base of it stained with blood.

The doctor's examination did not take a minute. 'Stone dead. Must have been almost instantaneous. I wonder he even managed to telephone. It will be better not to move him until the police arrive.'

On the manager's suggestion we searched the flat, but the result was a foregone conclusion. It was not likely that the murderers would be concealed there when all they had to do was to walk out.

We came back to the dining room. Poirot had not accompanied us in our tour. I found him studying the centre table with close attention. I joined him. It was a well-polished round mahogany table. A bowl of roses decorated the centre, and white lace mats reposed on the gleaming surface. There was a dish of fruit, but the three dessert plates were untouched. There were three coffee-cups with remains of coffee in them - two black, one with milk. All three men had taken port, and the decanter, half-full, stood before

the centre plate. One of the men had smoked a cigar, the other two cigarettes. A tortoiseshell-and-silver box, holding cigars and cigarettes, stood open upon the table.

I enumerated all these facts to myself, but I was forced to admit that they did not shed any brilliant light on the situation. I wondered what Poirot saw in them to make him so intent. I asked him.

'*Mon ami*,' he replied, 'you miss the point. I am looking for something that I do *not* see.'

'What is that?'

'A mistake - even a little mistake - on the part of the murderer.'

He stepped swiftly to the small adjoining kitchen, looked in, and shook his head.

'Monsieur,' he said to the manager, 'explain to me, I pray, your system of serving meals here.'

The manager stepped to a small hatch in the wall.

'This is the service lift,' be explained. 'It runs to the kitchens at the top of the building. You order through the telephone, and the dishes are sent down in the lift, one course at a time. The dirty plates and dishes are sent up in the same manner. No domestic worries, you understand, and at the same time you avoid the wearying publicity of always dining in a restaurant.'

Poirot nodded.

'Then the plates and dishes that were used tonight are on high in the kitchen. You permit that I mount there?'

'Oh, certainly, if you like! Roberts, the lift man, will take you up and introduce you; but I'm afraid you won't find anything that's of any use. They're handling hundreds of plates and dishes, and they'll be all lumped together.'

Poirot remained firm, however, and together we visited the kitchens and questioned the man who had taken the order from Flat 11.

'The order was given from the à la carte menu - for three,' he explained. 'Soup julienne, filet de sole normande, tournedos of beef, and a rice soufflé. What time? Just about eight o'clock, I should say. No, I'm afraid the plates and dishes have been all washed up by now. Unfortunate. You were thinking of fingerprints, I suppose?'

'Not exactly,' said Poirot, with an enigmatical smile. 'I am more interested in Count Foscatini's appetite. Did he partake of every dish?'

'Yes; but of course I can't say how much of each he ate. The plates were all soiled, and the dishes empty - that is to say, with the exception of the rice soufflé. There was a fair amount of that left.'

'Ah!' said Poirot, and seemed satisfied with the fact.

As we descended to the flat again he remarked in a low tone:

'We have decidedly to do with a man of method.'

'Do you mean the murderer, or Count Foscatini?'

'The latter was undoubtedly an orderly gentleman. After imploring help and announcing his approaching demise, he carefully hung up the telephone receiver.'

I stared at Poirot. His words now and his recent inquiries gave me the glimmering of an idea.

'You suspect poison?' I breathed. 'The blow on the head was a blind.'

Poirot merely smiled.

We re-entered the flat to find the local inspector of police had arrived with two constables. He was inclined to resent our appearance, but Poirot calmed him with the mention of our Scotland Yard friend, Inspector Japp, and we were accorded a grudging permission to remain. It was a lucky thing we were, for we had not been back five minutes before an agitated middle-aged man came rushing into the room with every appearance of grief and agitation.

This was Graves, valet-butler to the late Count Foscatini. The story he had to tell was a sensational one.

On the previous morning, two gentlemen had called to see his master. They were Italians, and the elder of the two, a man of about forty, gave his name as Signer Ascanio. The younger was a well-dressed lad of about twenty-four.

Count Foscatini was evidently prepared for their visit and immediately sent Graves out upon some trivial errand. Here the man paused and hesitated in his story. In the end, however, he admitted that, curious as to the purport of the interview, he had not

obeyed immediately, but had lingered about endeavouring to hear something of what was going on.

The conversation was carried on in so low a tone that he was not as successful as he had hoped; but he gathered enough to make it clear that some kind of monetary proposition was being discussed, and that the basis of it was a threat. The discussion was anything but amicable. In the end, Count Foscatini raised his voice slightly, and the listener heard these words clearly:

'I have no time to argue further now, gentlemen. If you will dine with me tomorrow night at eight o'clock, we will resume the discussion.'

Afraid of being discovered listening, Graves had then hurried out to do his master's errand. This evening the two men had arrived punctually at eight. During dinner they had talked of indifferent matters - politics, the weather, and the theatrical world. When Graves had placed the port upon the table and brought in the coffee his master told him that he might have the evening off.

'Was that a usual proceeding of his when he had guests?' asked the inspector.

'No, sir; it wasn't. That's what made me think it must be some business of a very unusual kind that he was going to discuss with these gentlemen.'

That finished Graves' story. He had gone out about 8.30, and, meeting a friend, had accompanied him to the Metropolitan Music Hall in Edgware Road.

Nobody had seen the two men leave, but the time of the murder was fixed clearly enough at 8.47. A small clock on the writing-table had

been swept off by Foscatini's arm, and had stopped at that hour, which agreed with Miss Rider's telephone summons.

The police surgeon had made his examination of the body, and it was now lying on the couch. I saw the face for the first time - the olive complexion, the long nose, the luxuriant black moustache, and the full red lips drawn back from the dazzlingly white teeth. Not altogether a pleasant face.

'Well,' said the inspector, refastening his notebook. 'The case seems clear enough. The only difficulty will be to lay our hands on this Signer Ascanio. I suppose his address is not in the dead man's pocket-book by any chance?'

As Poirot had said, the late Foscatini was an orderly man. Neatly written in small, precise handwriting was the inscription, 'Signer Paolo Ascanio, Grosvenor Hotel.'

The inspector busied himself with the telephone, then turned to us with a grin.

'Just in time. Our fine gentleman was off to catch the boat train to the Continong. Well, gentlemen, that's about all we can do here. It's a bad business, but straightforward enough. One of these Italian vendetta things, as likely as not.'

Thus airily dismissed, we found our way downstairs. Dr Hawker was full of excitement.

'Like the beginning of a novel, eh? Real exciting stuff. Wouldn't believe it if you read about it.'

Poirot did not speak. He was very thoughtful. All the evening he had hardly opened his lips.

'What says the master detective, eh?' asked Hawker, clapping him on the back. 'Nothing to work your grey cells over this time.'

'You think not?'

'What could there be?'

'Well, for example, there is the window.'

'The window? But it was fastened. Nobody could have got out or in that way. I noticed it specially.'

'And why were you able to notice it?'

The doctor looked puzzled. Poirot hastened to explain.

'It is to the curtains I refer. They were not drawn. A little odd, that. And then there was the coffee. It was very black coffee.'

'Well, what of it?'

'Very black,' repeated Poirot. 'In conjunction with that let us remember that very little of the rice soufflé was eaten, and we get - what?'

'Moonshine,' laughed the doctor. 'You're pulling my leg.'

'Never do I pull the leg. Hastings here knows that I am perfectly serious.'

'I don't know what you are getting at, the same,' I confessed. 'You don't suspect the manservant, do you? He might have been in with

the gang, and put some dope in the coffee. I suppose they'll test his alibi?'

'Without doubt, my friend; but it is the alibi of Signor Ascanio that interests me.'

'You think he has an alibi?'

'That is just what worries me. I have no doubt that we shall soon be enlightened on that point.'

The *Daily Newsmonger* enabled us to become conversant with succeeding events.

Signer Ascanio was arrested and charged with the murder of Count Foscatini. When arrested, he denied knowing the Count, and declared he had never been near Regent's Court either on the evening of the crime or on the previous morning. The younger man had disappeared entirely. Signer Ascanio had arrived alone at the Grosvenor Hotel from the Continent two days before the murder. All efforts to trace the second man failed.

Ascanio, however, was not sent for trial. No less a personage than the Italian Ambassador himself came forward and testified at the police-court proceedings that Ascanio had been with him at the Embassy from eight till nine that evening. The prisoner was discharged. Naturally, a lot of people thought that the crime was a political one, and was being deliberately hushed up.

Poirot had taken a keen interest in all these points. Nevertheless, I was somewhat surprised when he suddenly informed me one morning that he was expecting a visitor at eleven o'clock, and that the visitor was none other than Ascanio himself.

'He wishes to consult you?'

'*Du tout*, Hastings. I wish to consult him.'

'What about?'

'The Regent's Court murder.'

'You are going to prove that he did it?'

'A man cannot be tried twice for murder, Hastings. Endeavour to have the common sense. Ah, that is our friend's ring.'

A few minutes later Signer Ascanio was ushered in - a small, thin man with a secretive and furtive glance in his eyes. He remained standing, darting suspicious glances from one to the other of us.

'Monsieur Poirot?'

My little friend tapped himself gently on the chest.

'Be seated, signor. You received my note. I am determined to get to the bottom of this mystery. In some small measure you can aid me. Let us commence. You - in company with a friend - visited the late Count Foscatini on the morning of Tuesday the 9th - '

The Italian made an angry gesture.

'I did nothing of the sort. I have sworn in court - '

'*Précisément* - and I have a little idea that you have sworn falsely.'

'You threaten me? Bah! I have nothing to fear from you. I have been acquitted.'

'Exactly; and as I am not an imbecile, it is not with the gallows I threaten you - but with publicity. Publicity! I see that you do not like the word. I had an idea that you would not. My little ideas, you know, they are very valuable to me. Come, signer, your only chance is to be frank with me. I do not ask to know whose indiscretions brought you to England. I know this much, you came for the special purpose of seeing Count Foscatini.'

'He was not a count,' growled the Italian.

'I have already noted the fact that his name does not appear in the *Almanach de Gotha*. Never mind, the title of count is often useful in the profession of blackmailing.'

'I suppose I might as well be frank. You seem to know a good deal.'

'I have employed my grey cells to some advantage. Come, Signer Ascanio, you visited the dead man on the Tuesday morning - that is so, is it not?'

'Yes; but I never went there on the following evening. There was no need. I will tell you all. Certain information concerning a man of great position in Italy had come into this scoundrel's possession. He demanded a big sum of money in return for the papers. I came over to England to arrange the matter. I called upon him by appointment that morning. One of the young secretaries of the Embassy was with me. The Count was more reasonable than I had hoped, although even then the sum of money I paid him was a huge one.'

'Pardon, how was it paid?'

'In Italian notes of comparatively small denomination. I paid over the money then and there. He handed me the incriminating papers. I never saw him again.'

'Why did you not say all this when you were arrested?'

'In my delicate position I was forced to deny any association with the man.'

'And how do you account for the events of the evening, then?'

'I can only think that someone must have deliberately impersonated me. I understand that no money was found in the flat.'

Poirot looked at him and shook his head.

'Strange,' he murmured. 'We all have the little grey cells. And so few of us know how to use them. Good morning, Signor Ascanio. I believe your story. It is very much as I had imagined. But I had to make sure.'

After bowing his guest out, Poirot returned to his armchair and smiled at me.

'Let us hear M. le Capitaine Hastings on the case.'

'Well, I suppose Ascanio is right - somebody impersonated him.'

'Never, never will you use the brains the good God has given you. Recall to yourself some words I uttered after leaving the flat that night. I referred to the window-curtains not being drawn. We are in the month of June. It is still light at eight o'clock. The light is failing by half-past. *Ça vous dit quelque chose?* I perceive a struggling impression that you will arrive some day. Now let us continue. The

coffee was, as I said, very black. Count Foscatini's teeth were magnificently white. Coffee stains the teeth. We reason from that that Count Foscatini did not drink any coffee. Yet there was coffee in all three cups. Why should anyone pretend Count Foscatini had drunk coffee when he had not done so?'

I shook my head, utterly bewildered.

'Come, I will help you. What evidence have we that Ascanio and his friend, or two men posing as them, ever came to the flat that night? Nobody saw them go in; nobody saw them go out. We have the evidence of one man and of a host of inanimate objects.'

'You mean?'

'I mean knives and forks and plates and empty dishes. Ah, but it was a clever idea! Graves is a thief and a scoundrel, but what a man of method! He overhears a portion of the conversation in the morning, enough to realize that Ascanio will be in awkward position to defend himself. The following evening, about eight o'clock, he tells his master he is wanted at the telephone. Foscatini sits down, stretches out his hand to the telephone, and from behind Graves strikes him down with the marble figure. Then quickly to the service telephone - dinner for three! It comes, he lays the table, dirties the plates, knives, and forks, etc. But he has to get rid of the food too. Not only is he a man of brain; he has a resolute and capacious stomach! But after eating three tournedos, the rice soufflé is too much for him! He even smokes a cigar and two cigarettes to carry out the illusion. Ah, but it was magnificently thorough! Then, having moved on the hands of the clock to 8.47, he smashes it and stops it. The one thing he does not do is to draw the curtains. But if there had been a real dinner party the curtains would have been drawn

as soon as the light began to fail. Then he hurries out, mentioning the guests to the lift man in passing. He hurries to a telephone box, and as near as possible to 8.47 rings up the doctor with his master's dying cry. So successful is his idea that no one ever inquires if a call was put through from Flat 11 at that time.'

'Except Hercule Poirot, I suppose?' I said sarcastically.

'Not even Hercule Poirot,' said my friend, with a smile. 'I am about to inquire now. I had to prove my point to you first. But you will see, I shall be right; and then Japp, to whom I have already given a hint, will be able to arrest the respectable Graves. I wonder how much of the money he has spent.'

Poirot *was* right. He always is, confound him!

The Case of the Missing Will

The problem presented to us by Miss Violet Marsh made rather a pleasant change from our usual routine work. Poirot had received a brisk and businesslike note from the lady asking for an appointment, and he had replied asking her to call upon him at eleven o'clock the following day.

She arrived punctually - a tall, handsome young woman, plainly but neatly dressed, with an assured and business-like manner. Clearly a young woman who meant to get on in the world. I am not a great admirer of the so-called New Woman myself, and, in spite of her good looks, I was not particularly prepossessed in her favour.

'My business is of a somewhat unusual nature, Monsieur Poirot,' she began, after she had accepted a chair. 'I had better begin at the beginning and tell you the whole story.'

'If you please, mademoiselle.'

'I am an orphan. My father was one of two brothers, sons of a small yeoman farmer in Devonshire. The farm was a poor one, and the elder brother, Andrew, emigrated to Australia, where he did very well indeed, and by means of successful speculation in land became a very rich man. The younger brother, Roger (my father), had no leanings towards the agricultural life. He managed to educate himself a little, and obtained a post as a clerk with a small firm. He married slightly above him; my mother was the daughter of a poor artist. My father died when I was six years old. When I was fourteen, my mother followed him to the grave. My only living relation then was my Uncle Andrew, who had recently returned from Australia and bought a small place, Crabtree Manor, in his native county. He was exceedingly kind to his brother's orphan child, took me to live with him, and treated me in every way as though I was his own daughter.

'Crabtree Manor, in spite of its name, is really only an old farmhouse. Farming was in my uncle's blood, and he was intensely interested in various modern farming experiments. Although kindness itself to me, he had certain peculiar and deeply-rooted ideas as to the upbringing of women. Himself a man of little or no education, though possessing remarkable shrewdness, he placed little value on what he called "book knowledge". He was especially opposed to the education of women. In his opinion, girls should learn practical housework and dairy-work, be useful about the

home, and have as little to do with book learning as possible. He proposed to bring me up on these lines, to my bitter disappointment and annoyance. I rebelled frankly. I knew that I possessed a good brain, and had absolutely no talent for domestic duties. My uncle and I had many bitter arguments on the subject, for, though much attached to each other, we were both self-willed. I was lucky enough to win a scholarship, and up to a certain point was successful in getting my own way. The crisis arose when I resolved to go to Girton. I had a little money of my own, left me by my mother, and I was quite determined to make the best use of the gifts God had given me. I had one long final argument with my uncle. He put the facts plainly before me. He had no other relations, and he had intended me to be his sole heiress. As I have told you, he was a very rich man. If I persisted in these "new-fangled notions" of mine, however, I need look for nothing from him. I remained polite, but firm. I should always be deeply attached to him, I told him, but I must lead my own life. We parted on that note. "You fancy your brains, my girl," were his last words. "I've no book learning, but, for all that, I'll pit mine against yours any day. We'll see what we shall see."'

'That was nine years ago. I have stayed with him for a week-end occasionally, and our relations were perfectly amicable, though his views remained unaltered. He never referred to my having matriculated, nor to my BSc. For the last three years his health had been failing, and a month ago he died.

'I am now coming to the point of my visit. My uncle left a most extraordinary will. By its terms, Crabtree Manor and its contents are to be at my disposal for a year from his death - "during which time my clever niece may prove her wits", the actual words run. At

the end of that period, "my wits having proved better than hers", the house and all my uncle's large fortune pass to various charitable institutions.'

'That is a little hard on you, mademoiselle, seeing that you were Mr Marsh's only blood relation.'

'I do not look on it in that way. Uncle Andrew warned me fairly, and I chose my own path. Since I would not fall in with his wishes, he was at perfect liberty to leave his money to whom he pleased.'

'Was the will drawn up by a lawyer?'

'No; it was written on a printed will-form and witnessed by the man and his wife who live in the house and do for my uncle.'

'There might be a possibility of upsetting such a will?'

'I would not even attempt to do such a thing.'

'You regard it, then, as a sporting challenge on the part of your uncle?'

'That is exactly how I look upon it.'

'It bears that interpretation, certainly,' said Poirot thoughtfully. 'Somewhere in this rambling old manor-house your uncle has concealed either a sum of money in notes or possibly a second will, and has given you a year in which to exercise your ingenuity to find it.'

'Exactly, Monsieur Poirot; and I am paying you the compliment of assuming that your ingenuity will be greater than mine.'

'Eh, eh! but that is very charming of you. My grey cells are at your disposal. You have made no search yourself?'

'Only a cursory one; but I have too much respect for my uncle's undoubted abilities to fancy that the task will be an easy one.'

'Have you the will or a copy of it with you?'

Miss Marsh handed a document across the table. Poirot ran through it, nodding to himself.

'Made three years ago. Dated March 25; and the time is given also - 11 A.M.- that is very suggestive. It narrows the field of search. Assuredly it is another will we have to seek for. A will made even half an hour later would upset this. *Eh bien*, mademoiselle, it is a problem charming and ingenious that you have presented to me here. I shall have all the pleasure in the world in solving it for you. Granted that your uncle was a man of ability, his grey cells cannot have been of the quality of Hercule Poirot's!'

(Really, Poirot's vanity is blatant!)

'Fortunately, I have nothing of moment on hand at the minute. Hastings and I will go down to Crabtree Manor to-night. The man and wife who attended on your uncle are still there, I presume?'

'Yes, their name is Baker.'

II

The following morning saw us started on the hunt proper. We had arrived late the night before. Mr and Mrs Baker, having received a telegram from Miss Marsh, were expecting us. They were a pleasant couple, the man gnarled and pink-cheeked, like a shrivelled pippin, and his wife a woman of vast proportions and true Devonshire calm.

Tired with our journey and the eight-mile drive from the station, we had retired at once to bed after a supper of roast chicken, apple pie, and Devonshire cream. We had now disposed of an excellent breakfast, and were sitting in a small panelled room which had been the late Mr Marsh's study and living-room. A roll-top desk stuffed with papers, all neatly docketed, stood against the wall, and a big leather armchair showed plainly that it had been its owner's constant resting-place. A big chintz-covered settee ran along the opposite wall, and the deep low window seats were covered with the same faded chintz of an old-fashioned pattern.

'*Eh bien, mon ami*,' said Poirot, lighting one of his tiny cigarettes, 'we must map out our plan of campaign. Already I have made a rough survey of the house, but I am of opinion that any clue will be found in this room. We shall have to go through the documents in the desk with meticulous care. Naturally, I do not expect to find the will amongst them; but it is likely that some apparently innocent paper may conceal the clue to its hiding-place. But first we must have a little information. Ring the bell, I pray of you.'

I did so. While we were waiting for it to be answered, Poirot walked up and down, looking about him approvingly.

'A man of method this Mr Marsh. See how neatly the packets of papers are docketed; then the key to each drawer has its ivory

label - so has the key of the china cabinet on the wall; and see with what precision the china within is arranged. It rejoices the heart. Nothing here offends the eye - '

He came to an abrupt pause, as his eye was caught by the key of the desk itself, to which a dirty envelope was affixed. Poirot frowned at it and withdrew it from the lock. On it were scrawled the words: 'Key of Roll Top Desk,' in a crabbed handwriting, quite unlike the neat superscriptions on the other keys.

'An alien note,' said Poirot, frowning. 'I could swear that here we have no longer the personality of Mr Marsh. But who else has been in the house? Only Miss Marsh, and she, if I mistake not, is also a young lady of method and order.'

Baker came in answer to the bell.

'Will you fetch madame your wife, and answer a few questions?'

Baker departed, and in a few moments returned with Mrs Baker, wiping her hands on her apron and beaming all over her face.

In a few clear words Poirot set forth the object of his mission. The Bakers were immediately sympathetic.

'Us don't want to see Miss Violet done out of what's hers,' declared the woman. 'Cruel hard 'twould be for hospitals to get it all.'

Poirot proceeded with his questions. Yes, Mr and Mrs Baker remembered perfectly witnessing the will. Baker had previously been sent into the neighbouring town to get two printed will-forms.

'Two?' said Poirot sharply.

'Yes, sir, for safety like, I suppose, in case he should spoil one - and sure enough, so he did do. Us had signed one - '

'What time of day was that?'

Baker scratched his head, but his wife was quicker.

'Why, to be sure, I'd just put the milk on for the cocoa at eleven. Don't ee remember? It had all boiled over on the stove when us got back to kitchen.'

'And afterwards?'

"Twould be about an hour later. Us had to go in again. "I've made a mistake," says old master, "had to tear the whole thing up. I'll trouble you to sign again," and us did. And afterwards master give us a tidy sum of money each. "I've left you nothing in my will," says he, "but each year I live you'll have this to be a nest-egg when I'm gone": and sure enough, so he did.'

Poirot reflected.

'After you had signed the second time, what did Mr Marsh do? Do you know?'

'Went out to the village to pay tradesmen's books.'

That did not seem very promising. Poirot tried another tack. He held out the key of the desk.

'Is that your master's writing?'

I may have imagined it, but I fancied that a moment or two elapsed before Baker replied: 'Yes, sir, it is.'

'He's lying,' I thought. 'But why?'

'Has your master let the house? - have there been any strangers in it during the last three years?'

'No, sir.'

'No visitors?'

'Only Miss Violet.'

'No strangers of any kind been inside this room?'

'No, sir.'

'You forget the workmen, Jim,' his wife reminded him.

'Workmen?' Poirot wheeled round on her. 'What workmen?'

The woman explained that about two years and a half ago workmen had been in the house to do certain repairs. She was quite vague as to what the repairs were. Her view seemed to be that the whole thing was a fad of her master's and quite unnecessary. Part of the time the workmen had been in the study, but what they had done there she could not say, as her master had not let either of them into the room whilst the work was in progress. Unfortunately, they could not remember the name of the firm employed, beyond the fact that it was a Plymouth one.

'We progress, Hastings,' said Poirot, rubbing his hands as the Bakers left the room. 'Clearly he made a second will and then had workmen from Plymouth in to make a suitable hiding-place. Instead of wasting time taking up the floor and tapping the walls, we will go to Plymouth.'

With a little trouble, we were able to get the information we wanted. After one or two essays we found the firm employed by Mr Marsh.

Their employees had all been with them many years, and it was easy to find the two men who had worked under Mr Marsh's orders. They remembered the job perfectly. Amongst various other minor jobs, they had taken up one of the bricks of the old-fashioned fireplace, made a cavity beneath, and so cut the brick that it was impossible to see the join. By pressing on the second brick from the end, the whole thing was raised. It had been quite a complicated piece of work, and the old gentleman had been very fussy about it. Our informant was a man called Coghan, a big, gaunt man with a grizzled moustache. He seemed an intelligent fellow.

We returned to Crabtree Manor in high spirits, and, locking the study door, proceeded to put our newly acquired knowledge into effect. It was impossible to see any sign on the bricks, but when we pressed in the manner indicated, a deep cavity was at once disclosed.

Eagerly Poirot plunged in his hand. Suddenly his face fell from complacent elation to consternation. All he held was a charred fragment of stiff paper. But for it, the cavity was empty.

'*Sacré!*' cried Poirot angrily. 'Someone has been before us.'

We examined the scrap of paper anxiously. Clearly it was a fragment of what we sought. A portion of Baker's signature remained, but no indication of what the terms of the will had been.

Poirot sat back on his heels. His expression would have been comical if we had not been so overcome. 'I understand it not,' he growled. 'Who destroyed this? And what was their object?'

'The Bakers?' I suggested.

'*Pourquoi?* Neither will makes any provision for them, and they are more likely to be kept on with Miss Marsh than if the place became the property of a hospital. How could it be to anyone's advantage to destroy the will? The hospitals benefit - yes; but one cannot suspect institutions.'

'Perhaps the old man changed his mind and destroyed it himself,' I suggested.

Poirot rose to his feet, dusting his knees with his usual care.

'That may be,' he admitted. 'One of your more sensible observations, Hastings. Well, we can do no more here. We have done all that mortal man can do. We have successfully pitted our wits against the late Andrew Marsh's; but, unfortunately, his niece is no better off for our success.'

By driving to the station at once, we were just able to catch a train to London, though not the principal express. Poirot was sad and dissatisfied. For my part, I was tired and dozed in a corner. Suddenly, as we were just moving out of Taunton, Poirot uttered a piercing squeal.

'*Vite*, Hastings! Awake and jump! But jump I say!'

Before I knew where I was we were standing on the platform, bareheaded and minus our valises, whilst the train disappeared into the night. I was furious. But Poirot paid no attention.

'Imbecile that I have been!' he cried. 'Triple imbecile! Not again will I vaunt my little grey cells!'

'That's a good job at any rate,' I said grumpily. 'But what is this all about?'

As usual, when following out his own ideas, Poirot paid absolutely no attention to me.

'The tradesmen's books - I have left them entirely out of account! Yes, but where? Where? Never mind, I cannot be mistaken. We must return at once.'

Easier said than done. We managed to get a slow train to Exeter, and there Poirot hired a car. We arrived back at Crabtree Manor in the small hours of the morning. I pass over the bewilderment of the Bakers when we had at last aroused them. Paying no attention to anybody, Poirot strode at once to the study.

'I have been, not a triple imbecile, but thirty-six times one, my friend,' he deigned to remark. 'Now, behold!'

Going straight to the desk he drew out the key, and detached the envelope from it. I stared at him stupidly. How could he possibly hope to find a big will-form in that tiny envelope? With great care he cut open the envelope, laying it out flat. Then he lighted the fire and held the plain inside surface of the envelope to the flame. In a few minutes faint characters began to appear.

'Look, *mon ami*!' cried Poirot in triumph.

I looked. There were just a few lines of faint writing stating briefly that he left everything to his niece, Violet Marsh. It was dated March 25, 12.30 P.M., and witnessed by Albert Pike, confectioner, and Jessie Pike, married woman.

'But is it legal?' I gasped.

'As far as I know, there is no law against writing your will in a blend of disappearing and sympathetic ink. The intention of the testator is clear, and the beneficiary is his only living relation. But the cleverness of him! He foresaw every step that a searcher would take - that I, miserable imbecile, took. He gets two will-forms, makes the servants sign twice, then sallies out with his will written on the inside of a dirty envelope and a fountain-pen containing his little ink mixture. On some excuse he gets the confectioner and his wife to sign their names under his own signature, then he ties it to the key of his desk and chuckles to himself. If his niece sees through his little ruse, she will have justified her choice of life and elaborate education, and be thoroughly welcome to his money.'

'She didn't see through it, did she?' I said slowly. 'It seems rather unfair. The old man really won.'

'But no, Hastings. It is *your* wits that go astray. Miss Marsh proved the astuteness of her wits and the value of the higher education for women by at once putting the matter in *my* hands. Always employ the expert. She has amply proved her right to the money.'

I wonder - I very much wonder - what old Andrew Marsh would have thought!

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1. A FAIRY IN THE FLAT

Mrs. Thomas Beresford shifted her position on the divan and looked gloomily out of the window of the flat. The prospect was not an extended one, consisting solely of a small block of flats on the other side of the road. Mrs. Beresford sighed and then yawned.

"I wish," she said, "something would happen."

Her husband looked up reprovingly.

"Be careful, Tuppence, this craving for vulgar sensation alarms me."

Tuppence sighed and closed her eyes dreamily.

"So Tommy and Tuppence were married," she chanted, "and lived happily ever afterwards. And six years later they were still living together happily ever afterwards. It is extraordinary," she said, "how different everything always is from what you think it is going to be."

"A very profound statement, Tuppence. But not original. Eminent poets and still more eminent divines have said it before-and, if you will excuse me saying so, have said it better."

"Six years ago," continued Tuppence, "I would have sworn that with sufficient money to buy things with, and with you for a husband, all life would have been one grand sweet song, as one of the poets you seem to know so much about puts it."

"Is it me or the money that palls upon you?" inquired Tommy coldly.

"Palls isn't exactly the word," said Tuppence kindly. "I'm used to my blessings, that's all. Just as one never thinks what a boon it is to be able to breathe through one's nose until one has a cold in the head."

"Shall I neglect you a little?" suggested Tommy. "Take other women about to night clubs. That sort of thing."

"Useless," said Tuppence. "You would only meet me there with other men. And I should know perfectly well that you didn't care for the other women, whereas you would never be quite sure that I didn't care for the other men. Women are so much more thorough."

"It's only in modesty that men score top marks," murmured her husband. "But what is the matter with you, Tuppence? Why this yearning discontent?"

"I don't know. I want things to happen. Exciting things. Wouldn't you like to go chasing German spies again, Tommy? Think of the wild days of peril we went through once. Of course I know you're more or less in the Secret Service now, but it's pure office work."

"You mean you'd like them to send me into darkest Russia disguised as a Bolshevik bootlegger, or something of that

"That wouldn't be any good," said Tuppence. "They wouldn't let me go with you and I'm the person who wants something to do so badly. Something to do. That is what I keep saying all day long."

"Woman's sphere," suggested Tommy waving his hand.

"Twenty minutes' work after breakfast every morning keeps the flat going to perfection. You have nothing to complain of, have you?"

"Your housekeeping is so perfect, Tuppence, as to be almost monotonous."

"I do like gratitude," said Tuppence.

"You, of course, have got your work," she continued, "but tell me, Tommy, don't you ever have a secret yearning for excitement, for things to happen?"

"No," said Tommy, "at least I don't think so. It is all very well to want things to happen-they might not be pleasant things."

"How prudent men are," sighed Tuppence. "Don't you ever have a wild secret yearning for romance-adventure- life?"

"What have you been reading, Tuppence?" asked Tommy.

"Think how exciting it would be," went on Tuppence, "if we heard a wild rapping at the door and went to open it and in staggered a dead man."

"If he was dead he couldn't stagger," said Tommy critically.

"You know what I mean," said Tuppence. "They always stagger in just before they die and fall at your feet just gasping out a few enigmatic words. 'The Spotted Leopard' or something like that."

"I advise a course of Schopenhauer or Emmanuel Kant," said Tommy.

"That sort of thing would be good for you," said Tuppence. "You are getting fat and comfortable."

"I am not," said Tommy indignantly. "Anyway, you do slimming exercises yourself."

"Everybody does," said Tuppence. "When I said you were getting fat I was really speaking metaphorically, you are getting prosperous and sleek and comfortable."

"I don't know what has come over you," said her husband.

"The spirit of adventure," murmured Tuppence. "It is better than a longing for romance anyway. I have that sometimes, too. I think of meeting a man, a really handsome man-"

"You have met me," said Tommy. "Isn't that enough for you?"

"A brown lean man, terrifically strong, the kind of man who can ride anything and lassoos wild horses-"

"Complete with sheepskin trousers and a cowboy hat," interpolated Tommy sarcastically.

"-and has lived in the Wilds," continued Tuppence.

"I should like him to fall simply madly in love with me. I should, of course, rebuff him virtuously and be true to my marriage vows but my heart would secretly go out to him."

"Well," said Tommy, "I often wish that I may meet a really beautiful girl. A girl with corn-colored hair who will fall desperately in love with me. Only I don't think I rebuff her-in fact I am quite sure I don't."

"That," said Tuppence, "is naughty temper."

"What," said Tommy, "is really the matter with you, Tuppence? You have never talked like this before."

"No, but I have been boiling up inside for a long time," said Tuppence. "You see it is very dangerous to have everything you want-including enough money to buy things. Of course there are always hats."

"You have got about forty hats already," said Tommy “and they all look alike."

"Hats are like that," said Tuppence. "They are not really alike. There are nuances in them. I saw rather a nice one in Violette's this morning."

"If you haven't anything better to do than going on buying hats you don't need-"

"That's it," said Tuppence. "That's exactly it. If I had something better to do. I suppose I ought to take up good works. Oh, Tommy, I do wish something exciting would happen. I feel-I really do feel it would be good for us. If we could find a fairy-"

"Ah!" said Tommy. "It is curious your saying that."

He got up and crossed the room. Opening a drawer of the writing table he took out a small snapshot print and brought it to Tuppence.

"Oh!" said Tuppence, "So you have got them developed. Which is this, the one you took of this room or the one I took?"

"The one I took. Yours didn't come out. You under exposed it. You always do."

"It is nice for you," said Tuppence, "to think that there is one thing you can do better than me."

"A foolish remark," said Tommy, "but I will let it pass for the moment. What I wanted to show you was this."

He pointed to a small white speck on the photograph.

“That is a scratch on the film," said Tuppence.

"Not at all," said Tommy. "That, Tuppence, is a fairy."

"Tommy, you idiot."

"Look for yourself."

He handed her a magnifying glass. Tuppence studied the print attentively through it. Seen thus by a slight stretch of fancy the scratch on the film could be imagined to represent a small winged creature perched on the fender

"It has got wings!" cried Tuppence. "What fun, a real live fairy in our flat. Shall we write to Conan Doyle about it? Oh, Tommy. Do you think she'll give us wishes?"

"You will soon know," said Tommy. "You have been wishing hard enough for something to happen all the afternoon."

At that minute the door opened, and a tall lad of fifteen who seemed undecided as to whether he was a footman or a page boy inquired in a truly magnificent manner:

"Are you at Home, Madam? The front door bell has just rung."

"I wish Albert wouldn't go to the Pictures," sighed Tuppence after she had signified her assent, and Albert had withdrawn. "He's copying a Long Island butler now. Thank goodness I've cured him of asking for people's cards and bringing them to me on a salver."

The door opened again, and Albert announced: "Mr. Carter," much as though it were a Royal title.

"The Chief," muttered Tommy, in great surprise.

Tuppence jumped up with a glad exclamation, and greeted a tall gray-haired man with piercing eyes and a tired smile.

"Mr. Carter, I am glad to see you."

"That's good, Mrs. Tommy. Now answer me a question. How's life generally?"

"Satisfactory, but dull," replied Tuppence with a twinkle.

"Better and better," said Mr. Carter. "I'm evidently going to find you in the right mood."

"This," said Tuppence, "sounds exciting."

Albert, still copying the Long Island butler, brought in tea. When this operation was completed without mishap and the door had closed behind him Tuppence burst out once more.

"You did mean something, didn't you Mr. Carter? Are you going to send us on a mission into darkest Russia?"

"Not exactly that," said Mr. Carter.

"But there is something."

"Yes-there is something. I don't think you are the kind who shrinks from risks, are you, Mrs. Tommy?"

Tuppence's eyes sparkled with excitement.

"There is certain work to be done for the Department-and I fancied-I just fancied-that it might suit you two."

"Go on," said Tuppence.

"I see that you take the Daily Leader," continued Mr. Carter, picking up that journal from the table.

He turned to the advertisement column and indicating a certain advertisement with his finger pushed the paper across to Tommy.

"Read that out," he said.

Tommy complied.

"The International Detective Agency. Theodore Blunt, Manager. Private Inquiries. Large staff of confidential and highly skilled Inquiry Agents. Utmost discretion. Consultations free. 118 Haleham St. W.C."

He looked inquiringly at Mr. Carter. The latter nodded.

"That detective agency has been on its last legs for some time," he murmured. "Friend of mine acquired it for a mere song. We're thinking of setting it going again-say, for a six months' trial. And during that time, of course, it will have to have a Manager."

"What about Mr. Theodore Blunt?" asked Tommy.

"Mr. Blunt has been rather indiscreet, I'm afraid. In fact, Scotland Yard have had to interfere. Mr. Blunt is being detained at His Majesty's expense, and he won't tell us half of what we'd like to know."

"I see, sir," said Tommy. "At least, I think I see."

"I suggest that you have six months' leave from the office. Ill health. And of course if you like to run a detective agency under the name of Theodore Blunt, it's nothing to do with me."

Tommy eyed his Chief steadily.

"Any instructions, sir?"

"Mr. Blunt did some foreign business, I believe. Look out for blue letters with a Russian stamp on them. From a ham merchant anxious to find his wife who came as a Refugee to this country some years ago. Moisten the stamp and you'll find the number 16 written underneath. Make a copy of these letters and send the originals on to me. Also if anyone comes to the office and makes a reference to the number 16, inform me immediately."

"I understand, sir," said Tommy. "And apart from these instructions?"

Mr. Carter picked up his gloves from the table and prepared to depart.

"You can run the Agency as you please. I fancied-" his eyes twinkled a little-"that it might amuse Mrs. Tommy to try her hand at a little detective work."

2. A POT OF TEA

Mr. and Mrs. Beresford took possession of the offices of the International Detective Agency a few days later. They were on the second floor of a somewhat dilapidated building in Bloomsbury. In the small outer office, Albert relinquished the role of a Long Island butler, and took up that of office boy, a part which he played to perfection. A paper bag of sweets, inky hands, and a tousled head was his conception of the character.

From the outer office, two doors led into inner offices. On one door was painted the legend "Clerks." On the other "Private." Behind the latter was a small comfortable room furnished with an immense business like desk, a lot of artistically labeled files, all empty, and some solid leather-seated chairs. Behind the desk sat the pseudo Mr. Blunt trying to look as though he had run a detective agency all his life. A telephone, of course, stood at his elbow. Tuppence and he had rehearsed several good telephone effects, and Albert also had his instructions.

In the adjoining room was Tuppence, a typewriter, the necessary tables and chairs of an inferior type to those in the room of the great Chief, and a gas ring for making tea.

Nothing was wanting, in fact, save clients.

Tuppence, in the first ecstasies of initiation, had a few bright hopes.

"It will be too marvelous," she declared. "We will hunt down murderers, and discover the missing family jewels, and find people who've disappeared and detect embezzlers."

At this point Tommy felt it his duty to strike a more discouraging note.

"Calm yourself, Tuppence, and try and forget the cheap fiction you are in the habit of reading. Our clientele, if we have any clientele at all-will consist solely of husbands who want their wives shadowed, and wives who want their husbands shadowed. Evidence for divorce is the sole prop of private inquiry agents."

"Ugh!" said Tuppence wrinkling a fastidious nose. "We shan't touch divorce cases. We must raise the tone of our new profession."

"Ye-es," said Tommy doubtfully.

And now a week after installation they compare notes rather ruefully.

"Three idiotic women whose husbands go away for weekends," sighed Tommy. "Anyone come whilst I was out at lunch?"

"A fat old man with a flighty wife," sighed Tuppence sadly. "I've read in the papers for years that the divorce evil was growing, but somehow I never seemed to realize it until this last week. I'm sick and tired of saying 'We don't undertake divorce cases.' "

"We've put it in the advertisements now," Tommy reminded her. "So it won't be so bad."

"I'm sure we advertise in the most tempting way too," said Tuppence, in a melancholy voice. "All the same, I'm not going to be beaten. If necessary, I shall commit a crime myself, and you will detect it."

"And what good would that do? Think of my feelings when I bid you a tender farewell at Bow Street-or is it Vine Street?"

"You are thinking of your bachelor days," said Tuppence pointedly.

"The Old Bailey, that is what I mean," said Tommy.

"Well," said Tuppence, "something has got to be done about it. Here we are bursting with talent and no chance of exercising it."

"I always like your cheery optimism, Tuppence. You seem to have no doubt whatever that you have talent to exercise."

"Of course," said Tuppence opening her eyes very wide.

"And yet you have no expert knowledge whatever."

"Well, I have read every detective novel that has been published in the last ten years."

"So have I," said Tommy, "but I have a sort of feeling that that wouldn't really help us much."

"You always were a pessimist, Tommy. Belief in oneself-that is the great thing."

"Well, you have got it all right," said her husband.

"Of course it is all right in detective stories," said Tuppence thoughtfully, "because one works backwards. I mean if one knows the solution one can arrange the clues. I wonder now-"

She paused, wrinkling her brows.

"Yes?" said Tommy, inquiringly.

"I have got a sort of an idea," said Tuppence. "It hasn't quite come yet but it's coming." She rose resolutely. "I think I shall go and buy that hat I told you about."

"Oh God!" said Tommy. "Another hat!"

"It's a very nice one," said Tuppence with dignity.

She went out with a resolute look on her face.

Once or twice in the following days Tommy inquired curiously about the idea. Tuppence merely shook her head and told him to give her time.

And then, one glorious morning, the first client arrived, and all else was forgotten.

There was a knock on the outer door of the office Albert, who had just placed an acid drop between his lips, roared out an indistinct 'come in.' He then swallowed the acid drop whole in his surprise and delight. For this looked like the Real Thing.

A tall young man, exquisitely and beautifully dressed, stood hesitating in the doorway.

"A toff, if ever there was one," said Albert to himself. His judgment in such matters was good.

The young man was about twenty-four years of age, had beautifully slicked-back hair, a tendency to pink rims round the eyes, and practically no chin to speak of.

In an ecstasy, Albert pressed a button under his desk, and almost immediately a perfect fusilade of typing broke out from the direction of "Clerks." Tuppence had rushed to the post of duty. The effect of this hum of industry was to overawe the young man still further.

“I say,” he remarked. “Is this the whatnot-detective agency-Blunt's Brilliant Detectives? All that sort of stuff, you know? Eh?"

"Did you want, sir, to speak to Mr. Blunt himself?" inquired Albert, with an air of doubt as to whether such a thing could be managed.

"Well-yes, laddie, that was the jolly old idea. Can it be done?"

"You haven't an appointment, I suppose?"

The visitor became more and more apologetic.

"Afraid I haven't."

"It's always wise, sir, to ring up on the phone first. Mr. Blunt is so terribly busy. He's engaged on the telephone at the moment. Called into consultation by Scotland Yard."

The young man seemed suitably impressed.

Albert lowered his voice, and imported information in a friendly fashion.

"Important theft of documents from a Government Office. They want Mr. Blunt to take up the case."

"Oh! really. I say. He must be no end of a fellow."

"The Boss, sir," said Albert, "is It."

The young man sat down on a hard chair, completely unconscious of the fact that he was being subjected to keen scrutiny by two pairs of eyes looking through cunningly contrived peep holes-those of Tuppence, in the intervals of frenzied typing, and those of Tommy awaiting the suitable moment.

Presently a bell rang with violence on Albert's desk.

"The Boss is free now. I will find out whether he can see you," said Albert, and disappeared through the door marked "Private."

He reappeared immediately.

"Will you come this way, sir?"

The visitor was ushered into the private office, and a pleasant faced young man with red hair and an air of brisk capability rose to greet him.

"Sit down. You wished to consult me? I am Mr. Blunt."

"Oh! Really. I say, you're awfully young, aren't you?"

"The day of the Old Men is over," said Tommy waving his hand. "Who caused the War? The Old Men. Who is responsible for the present state of unemployment? The Old Men. Who is responsible for every single rotten thing that has happened? Again I say, the Old Men!"

"I expect you are right," said the client. "I know a fellow who is a poet-at least he says he is a poet-and he always talks like that."

"Let me tell you this, sir, not a person on my highly trained staff is a day over twenty-five. That is the truth."

Since the highly trained staff consisted of Tuppence and Albert, the statement was truth itself.

"And now-the facts," said Mr. Blunt.

"I want you to find someone that's missing," blurted out the young man.

"Quite so. Will you give me the details?"

"Well, you see, it's rather difficult. I mean, it's a frightfully delicate business and all that. She might be frightfully waxy about it. I mean-well, it's so dashed difficult to explain."

He looked helplessly at Tommy. Tommy felt annoyed. He had been on the point of going out to lunch, but he foresaw that getting the facts out of this client would be a long and tedious business.

"Did she disappear of her own free will, or do you suspect abduction?" he demanded crisply.

"I don't know," said the young man. "I don't know anything."

Tommy reached for a pad and pencil.

"First of all," he said, "will you give me your name? My office boy is trained never to ask names. In that way consultations can remain completely confidential."

"Oh! rather," said the young man. "Jolly good idea. My name-er-my name's Smith."

"Oh! no," said Tommy. "The real one, please."

His visitor looked at him in awe.

"Er-St. Vincent," he said. "Lawrence St. Vincent."

"It's a curious thing," said Tommy, "how very few people there are whose real name is Smith. Personally, I don't know anyone called Smith. But nine men out of ten who wish to conceal their real name give that of Smith. I am writing a monograph upon the subject."

At that moment a buzzer purred discreetly on his desk. That meant that Tuppence was requesting to take hold. Tommy, who wanted his lunch, and who felt profoundly unsympathetic towards Mr. St. Vincent, was only too pleased to relinquish the helm.

"Excuse me," he said, and picked up the telephone.

Across his face there shot rapid changes-surprise, consternation, slight elation.

"You don't say so," he said into the phone. "The Prime Minister himself? Of course, in that case, I will come round at once."

He replaced the receiver on the hook, and turned to his client.

"My dear sir, I must ask you to excuse me. A most urgent summons. If you will give the facts of the case to my confidential secretary, she will deal with them."

He strode to the adjoining door.

"Miss Robinson."

Tuppence, very neat and demure with smooth black head and dainty collar and cuffs, tripped in. Tommy made the necessary introductions and departed.

"A lady you take an interest in has disappeared, I understand, Mr. St. Vincent," said Tuppence, in her soft voice, as she sat down and took up Mr. Blunt's pad and pencil. "A young lady?"

"Oh! rather," said Mr. St. Vincent. "Young-and-and-awfully good-looking and all that sort of thing."

Tuppence's face grew grave.

"Dear me," she murmured. "I hope that-"

"You don't think anything's really happened to her?" demanded Mr. St. Vincent, in lively concern.

"Oh! we must hope for the best," said Tuppence, with a kind of false cheerfulness which depressed Mr. St. Vincent horribly.

"Oh! look here, Miss Robinson. I say, you must do something. Spare no expense. I wouldn't have anything happen to her for the world. You seem awfully sympathetic, and I don't mind telling you in confidence that I simply worship the ground that girl walks on. She's a topper, an absolute topper."

“Please tell me her name and all about her.”

"Her name's Janet-I don't know her second name. She works in a hat shop-Madame Violette's in Brook Street-but she's as straight as they make them. Has ticked me off no end of times-I went round there yesterday-waiting for her to come out-all the others came, but not her. Then I found that she'd never turned up that morning to work at all-sent no message either-old Madame was furious about it. I got the address of her lodgings, and I went round there. She hadn't come home the night before, and they didn't know where she was. I was

simply frantic. I thought of going to the police. But I knew that Janet would be absolutely furious with me for doing that if she were really all right and had gone off on her own. Then I remembered that she herself had pointed out your advertisement to me one day in the paper and told me that one of the women who'd been in buying hats had simply raved about your ability and discretion and all that sort of thing. So I toddled along here right away."

"I see," said Tuppence. "What is the address of her lodgings?"

The young man gave it to her.

"That's all, I think," said Tuppence reflectively. "That is to say-am I to understand that you are engaged to this young lady?"

Mr. St. Vincent turned a brick red.

"Well, no-not exactly. I never said anything. But I can tell you this, I mean to ask her to marry me as soon as ever I see her-if I ever do see her again."

Tuppence laid aside her pad.

"Do you wish for our special twenty-four hour service?" she asked, in business like tones.

"What's that?"

"The fees are doubled, but we put all our available staff on to the case. Mr. St. Vincent, if the lady is alive, I shall be able to tell you where she is by this time to-morrow."

"What? I say, that's wonderful."

"We only employ experts-and we guarantee results," said Tuppence crisply.

"But I say, you know. You must have the most topping staff."

"Oh! we have," said Tuppence. "By the way, you haven't given me a description of the young lady."

"She's got the most marvelous hair-sort of golden, but very deep, like a jolly old sunset-that's it, a, jolly old sunset. You know, I never noticed things like sunsets until lately. Poetry too, there's a lot more in poetry than I ever thought."

"Red hair," said Tuppence unemotionally, writing it down. "What height should you say the lady was?"

"Oh! tallish, and she's got ripping eyes, dark blue, I think. And a sort of decided manner with her-takes a fellow up short sometimes."

Tuppence wrote down a few words more, then closed her note book and rose.

"If you will call here to-morrow at two o'clock, I think we shall have news of some kind for you," she said. "Good morning, Mr. St. Vincent."

When Tommy returned Tuppence was just consulting a page of Debrett.

"I've got all the details," she said succinctly. "Lawrence St. Vincent is the nephew and heir of the Earl of Cheriton. If we pull this through we shall get publicity in the highest places."

Tommy read through the notes on the pad.

"What do you really think has happened to the girl?" he asked.

"I think," said Tuppence, "that she has fled at the dictates of her heart, feeling that she loves this young man too well for her peace of mind."

Tommy looked at her doubtfully.

"I know they do it in books," he said, "but I've never known any girl who did it in real life."

"No?" said Tuppence. "Well, perhaps you're right. But I daresay Lawrence St. Vincent will swallow that sort of slush. He's full of romantic notions just now. By the way, I guaranteed results in twenty-four hours-our special service."

"Tuppence-you congenital idiot, what made you do that?"

"The idea just came into my head. I thought it sounded rather well. Don't you worry. Leave it to Mother. Mother knows best."

She went out, leaving Tommy profoundly dissatisfied.

Presently he rose, sighed, and went out to do what could be done, cursing Tuppence's over fervent imagination.

When he returned weary and jaded at half past four, he found Tuppence extracting a bag of biscuits from their place of concealment in one of the files.

"You look hot and bothered," she remarked. "What have you been doing?"

Tommy groaned.

"Making a round of the Hospitals with that girl's description."

"Didn't I tell you to leave it to me?" demanded Tuppence.

"You can't find that girl single handed before two o'clock tomorrow."

"I can-and what's more, I have!"

"You have? What do you mean?"

"A simple problem, Watson, very simple indeed."

"Where is she now?"

Tuppence pointed a hand over her shoulder

"She's in my office next door."

"What is she doing there?"

Tuppence began to laugh.

"Well," she said, "early training will tell, and with a kettle, a gas ring, and half a pound of tea staring her in the face, the result is a foregone conclusion."

"You see," continued Tuppence gently. "Madame Violette's is where I go for my hats, and the other day I ran across an old pal of Hospital days amongst the girls there. She gave up nursing after the War and started a hat shop, failed, and took this job at Madame Violette's. We fixed up the whole thing between us. She was to rub the advertisement well into young St. Vincent, and then disappear. Wonderful efficiency of Blunt's Brilliant Detectives. Publicity for us and the necessary fillip to young St. Vincent to bring him to the point of proposing. Janet was in despair about it."

"Tuppence," said Tommy, "you take my breath away! The whole thing is the most immoral business I ever heard of. You aid and abet this young man to marry out of his class-"

"Stuff," said Tuppence. "Janet is a splendid girl-and the queer thing is that she really adores that weak kneed young man. You can see with half a glance what his family needs. Some good red blood in it. Janet will be the making of him. She'll look after him like a mother, ease down the cocktails and the night clubs and make him lead a good healthy country gentleman's life. Come and meet her."

Tuppence opened the door of the adjoining office and Tommy followed her.

A tall girl with lovely auburn hair, and a pleasant face, put down the steaming kettle in her hand, and turned with a smile that disclosed an even row of white teeth.

"I hope you'll forgive me, Nurse Cowley-Mrs. Beresford, I mean. I thought that very likely you'd be quite ready for a cup of tea yourself. Many's the pot of tea you've made for me in the Hospital at three o'clock in the morning."

"Tommy," said Tuppence. "Let me introduce you to my old friend, Nurse Smith."

"Smith, did you say? How curious!" said Tommy, shaking hands. "Eh? Oh! nothing-a little monograph that I was thinking of Writing."

"Pull yourself together, Tommy," said Tuppence.

She poured him out a cup of tea.

"Now, then, let's all drink together. Here's to the success of the International Detective Agency. Blunt's Brilliant Detectives! May they never know failure!"

3. THE AFFAIR OF THE PINK PEARL

"What on earth are you doing?" demanded Tuppence, as she entered the inner sanctum of the International Detective Agency-(Slogan-Blunt's Brilliant Detectives) and discovered her lord and master prone on the floor in a sea of books.

Tommy struggled to his feet.

"I was trying to arrange these books on the top shelf of that cupboard," he complained. "And the damned chair gave way."

"What are they, anyway?" asked Tuppence, picking up a volume. “’The Hound of the Baskervilles.' I wouldn't mind reading that again some time."

"You see the idea?" said Tommy, dusting himself with care. "Half hours with the Great Masters-that sort of thing. You see, Tuppence, I can't help feeling that we are more or less amateurs at this business-of course amateurs in one sense we cannot help being, but it would do no harm to acquire the technique, so to speak. These books are detective stories by the leading masters of the art. I intend to try different styles, and compare results."

"H'm," said Tuppence. "I often wonder how those detectives would have got on in real life." She picked up another volume. "You'll find a difficulty in being a Thorndyke. You've no medical experience, and less legal, and I never heard that science was your strong point."

"Perhaps not," said Tommy. "But at any rate I've bought a very good camera, and I shall photograph footprints and enlarge the negatives and all that sort of thing. Now, mon ami, use your little grey cells-what does this convey to you?"

He pointed to the bottom shelf of the cupboard. On it lay a somewhat futuristic dressing gown, a turkish slipper, and a violin.

"Obvious, my dear Watson," said Tuppence.

"Exactly," said Tommy. "The Sherlock Holmes touch."

He took up the violin and drew the bow idly across the strings, causing Tuppence to give a wail of agony.

At that moment the buzzer rang on the desk, a sign that a client had arrived in the outer office and was being held in parley by Albert, the office boy.

Tommy hastily replaced the violin in the cupboard and kicked the books behind the desk.

"Not that there's any great hurry," he remarked. "Albert will be handing them out the stuff about my being engaged with Scotland Yard on the phone. Get into your office and start typing, Tuppence. It makes the office sound busy and active. No, on second thoughts, you shall be taking notes in shorthand from my dictation. Let's have a look before we get Albert to send the victim in."

They approached the peephole which had been artistically contrived so as to command a view of the outer office.

The client was a girl of about Tuppence's age, tall and dark with a rather haggard face and scornful eyes.

"Clothes cheap and striking," remarked Tuppence. "Have her in, Tommy."

In another minute the girl was shaking hands with the celebrated Mr. Blunt, whilst Tuppence sat by with eyes demurely downcast, and pad and pencil in hand.

"My confidential secretary, Miss Robinson," said Mr. Blunt with a wave of the hand. "You may speak freely before her." Then he lay back for a minute, half closed his eyes and remarked in a tired tone: "You must find traveling in a bus very crowded at this time of day."

"I came in a taxi," said the girl.

"Oh!" said Tommy aggrieved. His eyes rested reproachfully on a blue bus ticket protruding from her glove. The girl's eyes followed his glance, and she smiled and drew it out.

"You mean this? I picked it up on the pavement. A little neighbor of ours collects them."

Tuppence coughed, and Tommy threw a baleful glare at her.

"We must get to business," he said briskly. "You are in need of our services, Miss-?"

"Kingston Bruce is my name," said the girl. "We live at Wimbledon. Last night a lady who is staying with us lost a valuable pink pearl. Mr. St. Vincent was also dining with us, and during dinner he happened to mention your firm. My mother sent me off to you this morning to ask you if you would look into the matter for us."

The girl spoke sullenly, almost disagreeably. It was clear as daylight that she and her mother had not agreed over the matter. She was here under protest.

"I see," said Tommy, a little puzzled. "You have not called in the police?"

"No," said Miss Kingston Bruce, "we haven't. It would be idiotic to call in the police and then find that the silly thing had rolled under the fireplace, or something like that."

"Oh!" said Tommy. "Then the jewel may only be lost after all?"

Miss Kingston Bruce shrugged her shoulders.

"People make such a fuss about things," she murmured.

Tommy cleared his throat.

"Of course," he said doubtfully. "I am extremely busy just now-"

"I quite understand," said the girl rising to her feet. There was a quick gleam of satisfaction in her eyes which Tuppence, for one, did not miss.

"Nevertheless," continued Tommy, "I think I can manage to run down to Wimbledon. Will you give me the address, please?"

"The Laurels, Edgeworth Road."

"Make a note of it, please, Miss Robinson."

Miss Kingston Bruce hesitated, then said rather ungraciously:

"We'll expect you then. Good morning."

"Funny girl," said Tommy. "I couldn't quite make her out."

"I wonder if she stole the thing herself," remarked Tuppence meditatively. "Come on, Tommy, let's put away these books and take the car and go down there. By the way, who are you going to be, Sherlock Holmes still?"

"I think I need practice for that," said Tommy. "I came rather a cropper over that bus ticket, didn't I?"

"You did," said Tuppence. "If I were you I shouldn't try too much on that girl-she's as sharp as a needle. She's unhappy too, poor devil."

“I suppose you know all about her already," said Tommy with sarcasm, "simply from looking at the shape of her nose!"

"I'll tell you my idea of what we shall find at The Laurels," said Tuppence, quite unmoved. "A household of snobs, very keen to move in the best society; the father, if there is a father, is sure to have a military title. The girl falls in with their way of life and despises herself for doing so."

Tommy took a last look at the books now neatly ranged upon a shelf.

"I think," he said thoughtfully, "that I shall be Thorndyke to-day."

"I shouldn't have thought there was anything medico-legal about this case," remarked Tuppence.

"Perhaps not," said Tommy. "But I'm simply dying to use that new camera of mine! It's supposed to have the most marvelous lens that ever was or ever could be."

"I know those kind of lenses," said Tuppence. "By the time you've adjusted the shutter and stopped down and calculated the exposure and kept your eyes on the spirit level, your brain gives out, and you yearn for the simple Brownie."

"Only an unambitious soul is content with the simple Brownie."

"Well, I bet I shall get better results with it than you will."

Tommy ignored this challenge.

"I ought to have a 'Smoker's Companion,' " he said regretfully. "I wonder where one buys them?"

"There's always the patent corkscrew Aunt Araminta gave you last Xmas," said Tuppence helpfully.

"That's true," said Tommy. "A curious looking engine of destruction I thought it at the time, and rather a humorous present to get from a strictly teetotal aunt."

"I," said Tuppence, "shall be Polton."

Tommy looked at her scornfully.

"Polton indeed. You couldn't begin to do one of the things that he does."

"Yes, I can," said Tuppence. “I can rub my hands together when I'm pleased. That's quite enough to get on with. I hope you're going to take plaster casts of footprints?"

Tommy was reduced to silence. Having collected the corkscrew they went round to the garage, got out the car and started for Wimbledon.

The Laurels was a big house. It ran somewhat to gables and turrets, had an air of being very newly painted, and was surrounded with neat flower beds filled with scarlet geraniums.

A tall man with a close cropped white moustache, and an exaggeratedly martial bearing opened the door before Tommy had time to ring.

"I've been looking out for you," he explained fussily. "Mr. Blunt, is it not? I am Colonel Kingston Bruce. Will you come into my study?"

He led them into a small room at the back of the house.

"Young St. Vincent was telling me wonderful things about your firm. I've noticed your advertisements myself. This guaranteed twenty-four hours service of yours-a marvelous notion. That's exactly what I need."

Inwardly anathematizing Tuppence for her irresponsibility in inventing this brilliant detail, Tommy replied: "Just so Colonel."

“The whole thing is most distressing, sir, most distressing."

"Perhaps you would kindly give me the facts," said Tommy, with a hint of impatience.

"Certainly I will-at once. We have at the present moment staying with us a very old and dear friend of ours, Lady Laura Barton. Daughter of the late Earl of Carrowway. The present Earl, her brother, made a striking speech in the House of Lords the other day. As I say, she is an old and dear friend of ours. Some American friends of mine who have just come over, the Hamilton Betts, were most anxious to meet her. 'Nothing easier,' I said. 'She is staying with me now. Come down for the week-end.' You know what Americans are about titles, Mr. Blunt."

"And others besides Americans sometimes, Colonel Kingston Bruce."

"Alas! only too true, my dear sir. Nothing I hate more than a snob. Well, as I was saying, the Betts came down for the week-end. Last night-we were playing Bridge at the time-the clasp of a pendant Mrs. Hamilton Betts was wearing broke, so she took it off and laid it down on a small table, meaning to take it upstairs with her when she went. This, however, she forgot to do. I must explain, Mr. Blunt, that the pendant consisted of two small diamond wings, and a big pink pearl depending from them. The pendant was found this morning lying where Mrs. Betts had left it, but the pearl, a pearl of enormous value, had been wrenched off."

"Who found the pendant?"

”The parlormaid-Gladys Hill."

"Any reason to suspect her?"

"She has been with us some years, and we have always found her perfectly honest. But, of course, one never knows-"

"Exactly. Will you describe your staff, and also tell me who was present at dinner last night?"

"There is the cook-she has been with us only two months, but then she would have no occasion to go near the drawingroom-the same applies to the kitchen maid. Then there is the housemaid, Alice Cummings. She also has been with us for some years. And Lady Laura's maid, of course. She is French."

Colonel Kingston Bruce looked very impressive as he said this. Tommy, unaffected by the revelation of the maid's nationality, said: "Exactly. And the party at dinner?"

"Mr. and Mrs. Betts, ourselves-(my wife and daughter)-and Lady Laura. Young St. Vincent was dining with us, and Mr. Rennie looked in after dinner for a while."

"Who is Mr. Rennie?"

"A most pestilential fellow-an arrant socialist. Good looking, of course, and with a certain specious power of argument. But a man, I don't mind telling you, whom I wouldn't trust a yard. A dangerous sort of fellow."

"In fact," said Tommy drily, "it is Mr. Rennie whom you suspect?"

“I do, Mr. Blunt. I'm sure, holding the views he does, that he can have no principles whatsoever. What could have been easier for him than to have quietly wrenched off the pearl at a moment when we were all absorbed in our game? There were several absorbing moments-a redoubled No Trump hand, I remember, and also a painful argument when my wife had the misfortune to revoke."

"Quite so," said Tommy. "I should just like to know one thing-what is Mrs. Bett's attitude in all this?"

"She wanted me to call in the police," said Colonel Kingston Bruce reluctantly. "That is, when we had searched everywhere in case the pearl had only dropped off."

"But you dissuaded her?"

"I was very averse to the idea of publicity and my wife and daughter backed me up. Then my wife remembered young St. Vincent speaking about your firm at dinner last night-and the twenty-four hours special service."

"Yes," said Tommy with a heavy heart.

"You see, in any case no harm will be done. If we call in the police to-morrow, it can be supposed that we thought the jewel merely lost and were hunting for it. By the way, nobody has been allowed to leave the house this morning."

"Except your daughter, of course," said Tuppence, speaking for the first time.

"Except my daughter," agreed the Colonel. "She volunteered at once to go and put the case before you."

Tommy rose.

"We will do our best to give you satisfaction, Colonel," he said. "I should like to see the drawing-room, and the table on which the pendant was laid down. I should also like to ask Mrs. Betts a few

questions. After that, I will interview the servants-or rather my assistant, Miss Robinson, will do so."

He felt his nerve quailing before the terrors of questioning the servants.

Colonel Kingston Bruce threw open the door, and led them across the hall. As he did so, a remark came to them clearly through the open door of the room they were approaching, and the voice that uttered it was that of the girl who had come to see them that morning.

"You know perfectly well, mother," she was saying, "that she did bring home a teaspoon in her muff."

In another minute they were being introduced to Mrs. Kingston Bruce, a plaintive lady with a languid manner. Miss Kingston Bruce acknowledged their presence with a short inclination of the head. Her face was more sullen than ever.

Mrs. Kingston Bruce was voluble.

"-but I know who I think took it," she ended. "That dreadful socialist young man. He loves the Russians and the Germans and hates the English-what else can you expect?"

"He never touched it," said Miss Kingston Bruce fiercely. "I was watching him-all the time. I couldn't have failed to see if he had."

She looked at them defiantly with her chin up.

Tommy created a diversion by asking for an interview with Mrs. Betts. When Mrs. Kingston Bruce had departed accompanied by her husband and daughter to find Mrs. Betts, he whistled thoughtfully.

"I wonder," he said gently, "who it was who had a teaspoon in her muff?"

"Just what I was thinking," replied Tuppence.

Mrs. Betts, followed by her husband, burst into the room. She was a big woman with a determined voice. Mr. Hamilton Betts looked dyspeptic and subdued.

"I understand, Mr. Blunt, that you are a private inquiry agent, and one who hustles things through at a great rate?"

"Hustle," said Tommy, "is my middle name, Mrs. Betts. Let me ask you a few questions."

Thereafter things proceeded rapidly. Tommy was shown the damaged pendant, the table on which it had lain, and Mr. Betts emerged from his taciturnity to mention the value, in dollars, of the stolen pearl.

And withal, Tommy felt an irritating certainty that he was not getting on.

"I think that will do," he said at length. "Miss Robinson, will you kindly fetch the special photographic apparatus from the hall?"

Miss Robinson complied.

"A little invention of my own," said Tommy. "In appearance, you see, it is just like an ordinary camera."

He had some slight satisfaction in seeing that the Betts were impressed.

He photographed the pendant, the table on which it had lain, and took several general views of the apartment. Then "Miss Robinson" was delegated to interview the servants, and in view of the eager expectancy on the faces of Colonel Kingston Bruce and Mrs. Betts, Tommy felt called upon to say a few authoritative words.

"The position amounts to this," he said. "Either the pearl is still in the house, or it is not still in the house."

"Quite so," said the Colonel with more respect than was, perhaps, quite justified by the nature of the remark.

"If it is not in the house, it may be anywhere-but if it is in the house, it must necessarily be concealed somewhere-"

"And a search must be made," broke in Colonel Kingston Bruce. "Quite so. I give you carte Blanche, Mr. Blunt. Search the house from attic to cellar."

"Oh! Charles," murmured Mrs. Kingston Bruce tearfully. "Do you think that is wise? The servants won't like it. I'm sure they'll leave."

"We will search their quarters last," said Tommy soothingly. ”The thief is sure to have hidden the gem in the most unlikely place."

"I seem to have read something of the kind," agreed the Colonel.

"Quite so," said Tommy. "You probably remember the case of Rex. v. Bailey which created a precedent."

"Oh-er-yes," said the Colonel looking puzzled.

"Now, the most unlikely place is in the apartments of Mrs. Betts," continued Tommy.

"My! Wouldn't that be too cute?" said Mrs. Betts admiringly.

Without more ado, she took him up to her room where Tommy once more made use of the special photographic apparatus.

Presently Tuppence joined him there.

"You have no objection, I hope, Mrs. Betts, to my assistant's looking through your wardrobe?"

"Why, not at all. Do you need me here any longer?"

Tommy assured her that there was no need to detain her, and Mrs. Betts departed.

"We might as well go on bluffing it out," said Tommy. "But personally I don't believe we've a dog's chance of finding the thing. Curse you and your twenty-four hours stunt, Tuppence."

"Listen," said Tuppence. "The servants are all right, I'm sure, but I managed to get something out of the French maid. It seems that when Lady Laura was staying here a year ago, she went out to tea with some friends of the Kingston Bruces', and when she got home a teaspoon fell out of her muff. Everyone thought it must have fallen in by accident. But, talking about similar robberies, I got hold of a lot more. Lady Laura is always staying about with people. She hasn't got a bean, I gather, and she's out for comfortable quarters with people to whom a title still means something. It may be a coincidence-or it may be something more, but five distinct thefts have taken place whilst she has been staying in various houses, sometimes trivial things, sometimes valuable jewels."

"Whew!" said Tommy, and gave vent to a prolonged whistle. "Where's the old bird's room, do you know?"

"Just across the passage."

"Then I think, I rather think, that we'll just slip across and investigate."

The room opposite stood with its door ajar. It was a spacious apartment, with white enameled fitments and rose pink curtains. An inner door led to a bathroom. At the door of this appeared a slim dark girl, very neatly dressed.

Tuppence checked the exclamation of astonishment on the girl's lips.

"This is Elise, Mr. Blunt," she said primly. "Lady Laura's maid."

Tommy stepped across the threshold of the bathroom, and approved inwardly its sumptuous and up to date fittings. He set to work to dispel the wide stare of suspicion on the French girl's face.

"You are busy with your duties, eh, Mademoiselle Elise?"

"Yes, Monsieur, I clean Milady's bath."

"Well, perhaps you'll help me with some photography instead. I have a special kind of camera here, and I am photographing the interiors of all the rooms in this house."

He was interrupted by the communicating door to the bedroom banging suddenly behind him. Elise jumped at the sound.

"What did that?"

"It must have been the wind," said Tuppence.

"We will come into the other room," said Tommy.

Elise went to open the door for them, but the door knob rattled aimlessly.

"What's the matter?" said Tommy sharply.

"Ah, Monsieur, but somebody must have locked it on the other side." She caught up a towel and tried again. But this time the door handle turned easily enough, and the door swung open.

"Voila ce qui est curieux. It must have stuck," said Elise.

There was no one in the bedroom.

Tommy fetched his apparatus. Tuppence and Elise worked under his orders. But again and again his glance went back to the communicating door.

"I wonder," he said between his teeth. "I wonder why that door stuck?"

He examined it minutely, shutting and opening it. It fitted perfectly.

"One picture more," he said with a sigh. "Will you loop back that rose curtain, Mademoiselle Elise? Thank you. Just hold it so."

The familiar click occurred. He handed a glass slide to Elise to hold, relinquished the tripod to Tuppence, and carefully readjusted and closed the camera.

He made some easy excuse to get rid of Elise, and as soon as she was out of the room, he caught hold of Tuppence and spoke rapidly.

"Look here, I've got an idea. Can you hang on here? Search all the rooms-that will take some time. Try and get an interview with the old bird-Lady Laura-but don't alarm her. Tell her you suspect the

parlormaid. But whatever you do, don't let her leave the house. I'm going off in the car. I'll be back as soon as I can."

"All right," said Tuppence. "But don't be too cocksure. You've forgotten one thing."

"What's that?"

"The girl. There's something funny about that girl. Listen, I've found out the time she started from the house this morning. It took her two hours to get to our office. That's nonsense. Where did she go before she came to us?"

"There's something in that," admitted her husband. "Well, follow up any old clue you like, but don't let Lady Laura leave the house. What's that?"

His quick ear had caught a faint rustle outside on the landing. He strode across to the door, but there was no one to be seen.

"Well, so long," he said. "I'll be back as soon as I can."

4. THE AFFAIR OF THE PINK PEARL (continued)

Tuppence watched him drive off in the car with a faint misgiving. Tommy was very sure-she herself was not so sure. There were one or two things she did not quite understand.

She was still standing by the window, watching the road, when she saw a man leave the shelter of a gateway opposite, cross the road and ring the bell.

In a flash Tuppence was out of the room and down the stairs. Gladys Hill the parlormaid, was emerging from the back part of the house, but Tuppence motioned her back authoritatively. Then she went to the front door and opened it.

A lanky young man with ill-fitting clothes, and eager dark eyes was standing on the step.

He hesitated a moment, and then said.

"Is Miss Kingston Bruce in?"

"Will you come inside?" said Tuppence.

She stood aside to let him enter, closing the door.

"Mr. Rennie, I think?" she said sweetly.

He shot a quick glance at her.

"Er-yes."

"Will you come in here, please?"

She opened the study door. The room was empty, and Tuppence entered it after him, closing the door behind her. He turned on her with a frown.

"I want to see Miss Kingston Bruce."

"I am not quite sure that you can," said Tuppence composedly.

"Look here, who the devil are you?" said Mr. Rennie rudely.

"International Detective Agency," said Tuppence succinctly-and noticed Mr. Rennie's uncontrollable start.

"Please sit down, Mr. Rennie," she went on. "To begin with, we know all about Miss Kingston Bruce's visit to you this morning."

It was a bold guess, but it succeeded. Perceiving his consternation, Tuppence went on quickly.

"The recovery of the pearl is the great thing, Mr. Rennie. No one in this house is anxious for-publicity. Can't we come to some arrangement?"

The young man looked at her keenly.

"I wonder how much you know," he said thoughtfully. "Let me think for a moment."

He buried his head in his hands-then asked a most unexpected question.

"I say, is it really true that young St. Vincent is engaged to be married?"

"Quite true," said Tuppence. "I know the girl."

Mr. Rennie suddenly became confidential.

"It's been hell," he confided. "They've been asking him here morning, noon and night-chucking Beatrice at his head. All because he'll come into a title some day. If I had my way-"

"Don't let's talk politics," said Tuppence hastily. "Do you mind telling me, Mr. Rennie, why you think Miss Kingston Bruce took the pearl?"

"I-I don't."

"You do," said Tuppence calmly. “You wait to see the detective, as you think, drive off and the coast clear, and then you come and ask for her. It's obvious. If you'd taken the pearl yourself, you wouldn't be half so upset."

"Her manner was so odd," said the young man. "She came this morning and told me about the robbery, explaining that she was on her way to a firm of private detectives. She seemed anxious to say something, and yet not able to get it out."

"Well," said Tuppence. "All I want is the pearl. You'd better go and talk to her."

But at that moment Colonel Kingston Bruce opened the door.

"Lunch is ready, Miss Robinson. You will lunch with us, I hope. The-"

Then he stopped and glared at the guest.

"Clearly," said Mr. Rennie, "you don't want to ask me to lunch. All right, I'll go."

"Come back later," whispered Tuppence, as he passed her.

Tuppence followed Colonel Kingston Bruce, still growling into his moustache about the pestilential impudence of some people, into a massive dining-room where the family was already assembled. Only one person present was unknown to Tuppence.

"This, Lady Laura, is Miss Robinson who is kindly assisting us."

Lady Laura bent her head, and then proceeded to stare at Tuppence through her pince nez. She was a tall thin woman, with a sad smile, a gentle voice, and very hard shrewd eyes. Tuppence returned her stare, and Lady Laura's eyes dropped.

After lunch Lady Laura entered into conversation with an air of gentle curiosity. How was the inquiry proceeding? Tuppence laid suitable stress on the suspicion attaching to the parlormaid, but her mind was not really on Lady Laura. Lady Laura might conceal teaspoons and other articles in her clothing, but Tuppence felt fairly sure that she had not taken the pink pearl.

Presently Tuppence proceeded with her search of the house. Time was going on. There was no sign of Tommy and, what mattered far more to Tuppence, there was no sign of Mr. Rennie. Suddenly Tuppence came out of a bedroom and collided with Beatrice Kingston Bruce who was going down stairs. She was fully dressed for the street.

"I'm afraid," said Tuppence, "that you mustn't go out just now."

The other girl looked at her haughtily.

"Whether I go out or not is no business of yours," she said coldly.

"It is my business whether I communicate with the police or not, though," said Tuppence.

In a minute the girl had turned ashy pale.

"You mustn't-you mustn't-I won't go out-but don't do that." She clung to Tuppence beseechingly.

"My dear Miss Kingston Bruce," said Tuppence smiling.

“The case has been perfectly clear to me from the start-I-“

But she was interrupted. In the stress of her encounter with the girl, Tuppence had not heard the front door bell. Now, to her astonishment, Tommy came bounding up the stairs, and in the hall below she caught sight of a big burly man in the act of removing a bowler hat.

"Detective Inspector Marriot of Scotland Yard," he said with a grin.

With a cry, Beatrice Kingston Bruce tore herself from Tuppence's grasp and dashed down the stairs, just as the front door was opened once more to admit Mr. Rennie.

"Now you have torn it," said Tuppence bitterly.

"Eh?" said Tommy, hurrying into Lady Laura's room. He passed on into the bathroom, and picked up a large cake of soap which he brought out in his hands. The Inspector was just mounting the stairs.

"She went quite quietly," he announced. "She's an old hand, and knows when the game is up. What about the pearl?"

"I rather fancy," said Tommy, handing him the soap, "that you'll find it in here."

The Inspector's eyes lit up appreciatively.

"An old trick, and a good one. Cut a cake of soap in half, scoop out a place for the jewel, clap it together again, and smooth the join wed over with hot water. A very smart piece of work on your part, sir."

Tommy accepted the compliment gracefully. He and Tuppence descended the stairs. Colonel Kingston Bruce rushed at him and shook him warmly by the hand.

"My dear sir, I can't thank you enough. Lady Laura wants to thank you also-"

"I am glad we have given you satisfaction," said Tommy. "But I'm afraid I can't stop. I have a most urgent appointment. Member of the Cabinet."

He hurried out to the car and jumped in. Tuppence jumped in beside him.

"But Tommy," she cried. "Haven't they arrested Lady Laura, after all?"

"Oh!" said Tommy. "Didn't I tell you? They've not arrested Lady Laura. They've arrested Elise."

"You see," he went on, as Tuppence sat dumbfounded, "I've often tried to open a door with soap on my hands myself. It can't be done-your hands slip. So I wondered what Elise could have been doing with the soap to get her hands as soapy as all that. She caught up a towel, you remember, so there were no traces of soap on the handle afterwards. But it occurred to me that if you were a professional thief, it wouldn't be a bad plan to be maid to a lady suspected of kleptomania who stayed about a good deal in different houses. So I managed to get a photo of her as well as of the room, induced her to handle a glass slide and toddled off to dear old Scotland Yard. Lightning development of negative, successful identification of fingerprints-and photo. Elise was a long lost friend. Useful place, Scotland Yard."

"And to think," said Tuppence, finding her voice, "that those two young idiots were only suspecting each other in that weak way they do it in books. But why didn't you tell me what you were up to when you went off?"

"In the first place, I suspected that Elise was listening on the landing, and in the second place-"

"Yes?"

"My learned friend forgets," said Tommy. "Thorndyke never tells until the last moment. Besides, Tuppence, you and your pal Janet Smith put one over on me last time. This makes us an square."

5. THE ADVENTURE OF THE SINISTER STRANGER

"It's been a darned dull day," said Tommy, and yawned widely.

"Nearly tea time," said Tuppence and also yawned.

Business was not brisk in the International Detective Agency. The eagerly expected letter from the ham merchant had not arrived and bona fide cases were not forthcoming.

Albert, the office boy, entered with a sealed package which he laid on the table.

"The Mystery of the Sealed Packet," murmured Tommy. "Did it contain the fabulous pearls of the Russian Grand Duchess? Or was it an infernal machine destined to blow Blunt's Brilliant Detectives to pieces?"

"As a matter of fact," said Tuppence, tearing open the package, "it's my wedding present to Francis Haviland. Rather nice, isn't it?"

Tommy took a slender silver cigarette case from her outstretched hand, noted the inscription engraved in her own handwriting: Francis from Tuppence, opened and shut the case, and nodded approvingly.

"You do throw your money about, Tuppence," he remarked. "I'll have one like it, only in gold, for my birthday next month. Fancy wasting a thing like that on Francis Haviland, who always was and always will be one of the most perfect asses God ever made!"

"You forget I used to drive him about during the War, when he was a General. Ah! those were the good old days."

"They were," agreed Tommy. "Beautiful women used to come and squeeze my hand in Hospital, I remember. But I don't send them all wedding presents. I don't believe the bride will care much for this gift of yours, Tuppence."

"It's nice and slim for the pocket, isn't it?" said Tuppence disregarding his remarks.

Tommy slipped it into his own pocket.

"Just right," he said approvingly. "Hullo, here is Albert with the afternoon post. Very possibly the Duchess of Pertheshire is commissioning us to find her prize Peke."

They sorted through the letters together. Suddenly Tommy gave vent to a prolonged whistle, and held up one of them in his hand.

"A blue letter with a Russian stamp on it. Do you remember what the Chief said? We were to look out for letters like that."

"How exciting," said Tuppence. "Something has happened at last. Open it and see if the contents are up to schedule. A ham merchant, wasn't it? Half a minute. We shall want some milk for tea. They forgot to leave it this morning. I'll send Albert out for it."

She returned from the outer office, after despatching Albert on his errand, to find Tommy holding the blue sheet of paper in his hand.

"As we thought, Tuppence," he remarked. "Almost word for word what the Chief said."

Tuppence took the letter from him and read it.

It was couched in careful stilted English, and purported to be from one Gregor Feodorsky who was anxious for news of his wife. The International Detective Agency was urged to spare no expense in doing their utmost to trace her. Feodorsky himself was unable to leave Russia at the moment owing to a crisis in the Pork trade.

"I wonder what it really means," said Tuppence thoughtfully, smoothing out the sheet on the table in front of her.

"Code of some kind, I suppose," said Tommy. "That's not our business. Our business is to hand it over to the Chief as soon as possible. Better just verify it by soaking off the stamp and seeing if the number 16 is underneath."

"All right," said Tuppence. "But I should think-"

She stopped dead, and Tommy, surprised by her sudden pause, looked up to see a man's burly figure blocking the doorway.

The intruder was a man of commanding presence, squarely built, with a very round head and a powerful jaw. He might have been about forty-five years of age.

"I must beg your pardon," said the stranger, advancing into the room, hat in hand. "I found your outer office empty, and this door open, so I ventured to intrude. This is Blunt's International Detective Agency, is it not?"

"Certainly it is."

"And you are, perhaps, Mr. Blunt? Mr. Theodore Blunt?"

"I am Mr. Blunt. You wished to consult me? This is my secretary, Miss Robinson."

Tuppence inclined her head gracefully, but continued to scrutinise the stranger narrowly through her downcast eyelashes. She was wondering how long he had been standing in the doorway, and how much he had seen and heard. It did not escape her observation that even while he was talking to Tommy, his eyes kept coming back to the blue paper in her hand.

Tommy's voice, sharp with a warning note, recalled her to the needs of the moment.

"Miss Robinson, please, take notes. Now, sir, will you kindly state the matter on which you wish to have my advice?"

Tuppence reached for her pad and pencil.

The big man began in rather a harsh voice.

"My name is Bower. Dr. Charles Bower. I live in Hampstead where I have a practice. I have come to you, Mr. Blunt, because several rather strange occurrences have happened lately."

"Yes, Dr. Bower?"

"Twice in the course of the last week, I have been summoned by telephone to an urgent case-in each case to find that the summons has been a fake. The first time I thought a practical joke had been played upon me, but on my return the second time, I found that some of my private papers had been displaced and disarranged, and I now believe that the same thing had happened the first time. I made an exhaustive search and came to the conclusion that my whole desk had been thoroughly ransacked, and the various papers replaced hurriedly."

Dr. Bower paused, and gazed at Tommy.

"Well, Mr. Blunt?"

"Well, Dr. Bower," replied the young man smiling.

"What do you think of it, eh?"

"Well, first I should like the facts. What do you keep in your desk?"

"My private papers."

"Exactly. Now, what do those private papers consist of? What value are they to the common thief-or any particular person?"

"To the common thief I cannot see that they would have any value at all, but my notes on certain obscure alkaloids would be of interest to anyone possessed of technical knowledge on the subject. I have been making a study of such matters for the last few years. These alkaloids are deadly and virulent poisons, and are, in addition, almost untraceable. They yield no known reactions."

"The secret of them would be worth money, then?"

“To unscrupulous persons, yes."

"And you suspect-whom?"

The doctor shrugged his massive shoulders.

"As far as I can tell, the house was not entered forcibly from the outside. That seems to point to some member of my household, and yet I cannot believe-" He broke off abruptly, then began again, his face very grave.

"Mr. Blunt, I must place myself in your hands unreservedly. I dare not go to the police in the matter. Of my three servants I am almost entirely

sure. They have served me long and faithfully. Still, one never knows. Then I have living with me my two nephews, Bertram and Henry. Henry is a good boy-a very good boy-he has never caused me any anxiety, an excellent hard-working young fellow. Bertram, I regret to say, is of quite a different character-wild, extravagant, and persistently idle."

"I see," said Tommy thoughtfully. "You suspect your nephew Bertram of being mixed up in this business. Now I don't agree with you. I suspect the good boy-Henry."

"But why?"

"Tradition. Precedent." Tommy waved his hand airily. "In my experience, the suspicious characters are always innocent-and vice versa, my dear sir. Yes, decidedly, I suspect Henry."

"Excuse me, Mr. Blunt," said Tuppence, interrupting in a deferential voice. "Did I understand Dr. Bower to say that these notes on-er-obscure alkaloids-are kept in the desk with the other papers?"

"They are kept in the desk, my dear young lady, but in a secret drawer, the position of which is known only to myself. Hence they have so far defied the search."

"And what exactly do you want me to do, Dr. Bower?" asked Tommy. "Do you anticipate that a further search will be made?"

"I do, Mr. Blunt. I have every reason to believe so. This afternoon, I received a telegram from a patient of mine whom I ordered to Bournemouth a few weeks ago. The telegram states that my patient is

in a critical condition, and begs me to come down at once. Rendered suspicious by the events I have told you of, I myself despatched a telegram, prepaid, to the patient in question, and elicited the fact that he was in good health and had sent no summons to me of any kind. It occurred to me that if I pretended to have been taken in, and duly departed to Bournemouth, we should have a very good chance of finding the miscreants at work. They-or he -will doubtless wait until the household has retired to bed before commencing operations. I suggest that you should meet me outside my house at eleven o'clock this evening, and we will investigate the matter together."

"Hoping, in fact, to catch them in the act." Tommy drummed thoughtfully on the table with a paper knife. "Your plan seems to me an excellent one, Dr. Bower. I cannot see any hitch in it. Let me see, your address is-?"

"The Larches, Hangman's Lane-rather a lonely part, I am afraid. But we command magnificent views over the Heath."

"Quite so," said Tommy.

The visitor rose.

"Then I shall expect you to-night, Mr. Blunt. Outside The Larches at-shall we say, five minutes to eleven-to be on the safe side?"

"Certainly. Five minutes to eleven. Good afternoon, Dr. Bower."

Tommy rose, pressed the buzzer on his desk, and Albert appeared to show the client out. The doctor walked with a decided limp, but his powerful physique was evident in spite of it.

"An ugly customer to tackle," murmured Tommy to himself. "Well, Tuppence, old girl, what do you think of it?"

"I'll tell you in one word," said Tuppence. "Clubfoot!"

"What?"

"I said Clubfoot! My study of the Classics has not been in vain. Tommy, this thing's a plant. Obscure alkaloids indeed-I never heard a weaker story."

"Even I did not find it very convincing," admitted her husband.

"Did you see his eyes on the letter? Tommy, he's one of the gang. They've got wise to the fact that you're not the real Mr. Blunt, and they're out for our blood."

"In that case," said Tommy, opening the side cupboard, and surveying his rows of books with an affectionate eye. "Our role is easy to select. We are the brothers Okewood! And I am Desmond," he added firmly.

Tuppence shrugged her shoulders.

"All right. Have it your own way. I'd just as soon be Francis. Francis was much the more intelligent of the two. Desmond always gets into a

mess, and Francis turns up as the gardener or something in the nick of time, and saves the situation."

"Ah!" said Tommy, "but I shall be a super Desmond! When I arrive at The Larches-"

Tuppence interrupted him unceremoniously.

"You're not going to Hampstead to-night?"

`"Why not?"

"Walk into a trap with your eyes shut!"

"No, my dear girl, walk into a trap with my eyes open. There's a lot of difference. I think our friend Dr. Bower will get a little surprise."

"I don't like it," said Tuppence. "You know what happens when Desmond disobeys the Chief's orders, and acts on his own. Our orders were quite clear. To send on the letters at once and to report immediately on anything that happened."

"You've not got it quite right," said Tommy. "We were to report immediately if anyone came in and mentioned the number 16. Nobody has."

"That's a quibble," said Tuppence.

"It's no good. I've got a fancy for playing a lone hand. My dear old Tuppence, I shall be all right. I shall go armed to the teeth. The

essence of the whole thing is that I shall be on my guard and they won't know it. The Chief will be patting me on the back for a good night's work."

"Well," said Tuppence. "I don't like it. That man's as strong as a gorilla."

"Ah!" said Tommy, "but think of my blue-nosed automatic."

The door of the outer office opened and Albert appeared. Closing the door behind him, he approached them with an envelope in his hand.

"A gentleman to see you," said Albert. "When I began the usual stunt of saying you were engaged with Scotland Yard, he told me he knew all about that. Said he came from Scotland Yard himself! And he wrote something on a card and stuck it up in this envelope."

Tommy took the envelope and opened it. As he read the card, a grin passed across his face.

"The gentleman was amusing himself at your expense by speaking the truth, Albert," he remarked. "Show him in."

He tossed the card to Tuppence. It bore the name Detective Inspector Dymchurch, and across it was scrawled in pencil-"A friend of Marriot's."

In another minute the Scotland Yard detective was entering the inner office. In appearance, Inspector Dymchurch was of the same type as Inspector Marriot, short and thick set, with shrewd eyes.

"Good afternoon," said the detective breezily. "Marriot's away in South Wales, but before he went, he asked me to keep an eye on you two, and on this place in general. Oh! bless you, sir," he went on, as Tommy seemed about to interrupt him, "we know all about it. It's not our department, and we don't interfere. But somebody's got wise lately to the fact that all is not what it seems. You've had a gentleman here this afternoon. I don't know what he called himself, and I don't know what his real name is, but I know just a little about him. Enough to want to know more. Am I right in assuming that he made a date with you for some particular spot this evening?"

"Quite right."

"I thought as much. 16 Westerham Road, Finsbury Park? Was that it?"

"You're wrong there," said Tommy with a smile. "Dead wrong. The Larches, Hampstead."

Dymchurch seemed honestly taken aback. Clearly he had not expected this.

"I don't understand it," he muttered. "It must be a new layout. The Larches, Hampstead, you said?"

"Yes. I'm to meet him there at eleven o'clock to-night."

"Don't you do it, sir."

"There!" burst from Tuppence.

Tommy flushed.

"If you think, Inspector-" he began heatedly.

But the Inspector raised a soothing hand.

"I'll tell you what I think, Mr. Blunt. The place you want to be at eleven o'clock to-night is here in this office."

"What?" cried Tuppence, astonished.

"Here in this office. Never mind how I know-departments overlap sometimes-but you got one of those famous "Blue" letters to-day. Old what's his name is after that. He lures you up to Hampstead, makes quite sure of your being out of the way, and steps in here at night when all the building is empty and quiet to have a good search round at his leisure."

"But why should he think the letter would be here? He'd know I should have it on me or else have passed it on."

"Begging your pardon, sir, that's just what he wouldn't know. He may have tumbled to the fact that you're not the original Mr. Blunt, but he probably thinks that you're a bona fide gentleman who's bought the business. In that case, the letter would be all in the way of regular business and would be filed as such."

"I see," said Tuppence.

"And that’s just what we've got to let him think. We'll catch him red handed here to-night."

"So that's the plan, is it?"

“Yes. It's the chance of a lifetime. Now, let me see, what's the time? Six o'clock. What time do you usually leave here, sir?"

"About six."

"You must seem to leave the place as usual. Actually we'll sneak back to it as soon as possible. I don't believe they'll come here till about eleven, but of course they might. If you'll excuse me, I'll just go and take a look round outside and see if I can make out anyone watching the place."

Dymchurch departed, and Tommy began an argument with Tuppence.

It lasted some time and was heated and acrimonious. In the end Tuppence suddenly capitulated.

"All right," she said. "I give in. I'll go home, and sit there like a good little girl whilst you tackle crooks and hob nob with detectives-but you wait, young man. I'll be even with you yet for keeping me out of the fun."

Dymchurch returned at that moment.

"Coast seems clear enough," he said. "But you can't tell. Better seem to leave in the usual manner. They won't go on watching the place once you've gone."

Tommy called Albert, and gave him instructions to lock up.

Then the four of them made their way to the garage near by where the car was usually left. Tuppence drove and Albert sat beside her. Tommy and the detective sat behind.

Presently they were held up by a block in the traffic. Tuppence looked over her shoulder and nodded. Tommy and the detective opened the right hand door, and stepped out into the middle of Oxford Street. In a minute or two Tuppence drove on.

6. THE ADVENTURE OF THE SINISTER STRANGER (continued)

"Better not go in just yet," said Dymchurch as he and Tommy hurried into Haleham Street. "You've got the key all right?"

Tommy nodded.

"Then what about a bite of dinner? It's early, but there's a little place here right opposite. We'll get a table by the window, so that we can watch the place all the time."

They had a very welcome little meal, in the manner the detective had suggested. Tommy found Inspector Dymchurch quite an entertaining companion. Most of his official work had lain amongst international spies, and he had tales to tell which astonished his simple listener.

They remained in the little Restaurant until eight o'clock when Dymchurch suggested a move.

"It's quite dark now, sir," he explained. "We shall be able to slip in without anyone being the wiser."

It was, as he said, quite dark. They crossed the road looked quickly up and down the deserted street, and slipped inside the entrance. Then they mounted the stairs, and Tommy inserted his key in the lock of the outer office.

Just as he did so, he heard, as he thought, Dymchurch whistle beside him.

"What are you whistling for?" he asked sharply.

"I didn't whistle," said Dymchurch, very much astonished, "I thought you did."

"Well, someone-" began Tommy.

He got no further. Strong arms seized him from behind, and before he could cry out, a pad of something sweet and sickly was pressed over his mouth and nose.

He struggled valiantly, but in vain. The chloroform did its work. His head began to whirl and the floor heaved up and down in front of him. Choking, he lost consciousness....

He came to himself painfully but in full possession of his faculties. The chloroform had been only a whiff. They had kept him under long enough to force a gag into his mouth and ensure that he did not cry out.

When he came to himself, he was half lying, half sitting, propped against the wall in a corner of his own inner office. Two men were busily turning out the contents of the desk, and ransacking the cupboards, and as they worked they cursed freely.

"Swelp me, guvnor," said the taller of the two hoarsely, "we've turned the whole bloody place upside down and inside out. It's not there."

"It must be here," snarled the other. "It isn't on him. And there's no other place it can be."

As he spoke he turned, and to Tommy's utter amazement he saw that the last speaker was none other than Inspector Dymchurch. The latter grinned when he saw Tommy's astonished face.

"So our young friend is awake again," he said. "And a little surprised-yes, a little surprised. But it was so simple. We suspect that all is not as it should be with the International Detective Agency. I volunteer to find out if that is so, or not. If the new Mr. Blunt is indeed a spy, he will be suspicious, so I send first my dear old friend Carl Bauer. Carl is told to act suspiciously and pitch an improbable tale. He does so, and then I

appear on the scene. I use the name of Inspector Marriot to gain confidence. The rest is easy."

He laughed.

Tommy was dying to say several things, but the gag in his mouth prevented him. Also, he was dying to do several things -mostly with his hands and feet-but alas, that too had been attended to. He was securely bound.

The thing that amazed him most was the astounding change in the man standing over him. As Inspector Dymchurch, the fellow had been a typical Englishman. Now, no one could have mistaken him for a moment for anything but a well educated foreigner who talked English perfectly without trace of accent.

"Coggins, my good friend," said the erstwhile Inspector, addressing his ruffianly looking associate. "Take your life preserver and stand by the prisoner. I am going to remove the gag. You understand, my dear Mr. Blunt, do you not, that is would be criminally foolish on your part to cry out? But I am sure you do. For your age, you are quite an intelligent lad."

Very deftly he removed the gag, and stepped back.

Tommy eased his stiff jaws, rolled his tongue round his mouth, swallowed twice-and said nothing at all.

"I congratulate you on your restraint," said the other. "You appreciate the position, I see. Have you nothing at all to say?"

"What I have to say will keep," said Tommy. "And it won't spoil by waiting."

"Ah! What I have to say will not keep. In plain English, Mr. Blunt, where is that letter?"

"My dear fellow, I don't know," said Tommy cheerfully. "I haven't got it. But you know that as well as I do. I should go on looking about if I were you. I like to see you and friend Coggins playing Hide and Seek together."

The other's face darkened.

"You are pleased to be flippant, Mr. Blunt. You see that square box over there. That is Coggins' little outfit. In it there is vitriol . . . yes, vitriol . . . and irons that can be heated in the fire, so that they are red hot and burn . . ."

Tommy shook his head sadly.

"An error in diagnosis," he murmured. "Tuppence and I labelled this adventure wrong. It's not a Clubfoot story. It's a Bull Dog Drummond, and you are the inimitable Carl Peterson."

"What is this nonsense you are talking?" snarled the other.

"Ah!" said Tommy. "I see you are unacquainted with the Classics. A pity."

"Ignorant fool? Will you do what we want or will you not? Shall I tell Coggins to get out his tools and begin?"

"Don't be so impatient," said Tommy. "Of course I'll do what you want, as soon as you tell me what it is. You don't suppose I want to be carved up like a filleted sole and fried on a gridiron? I loathe being hurt."

Dymchurch looked at him in contempt.

"Gott! What cowards are these English."

"Common sense, my dear fellow, merely common sense. Leave the vitriol alone, and let us come down to brass tacks."

"I want the letter."

"I've already told you I haven't got it."

"We know that-we also know who must have it. The girl."

"Very possibly you're right," said Tommy. "She may have slipped it into her handbag when your pal Carl startled us."

"Oh, you do not deny. That is wise. Very good, you will write to this Tuppence, as you call her, bidding her bring the letter here immediately."

"I can't do that," began Tommy.

The other cut in before he had finished the sentence.

"Ah! You can't? Well, we shall soon see. Coggins!"

"Don't be in such a hurry," said Tommy. "And do wait for the end of the sentence. I was going to say that I can't do that unless you untie my arms. Hang it all, I'm not one of those freaks who can write with their noses or their elbows."

"You are willing to write, then?"

"Of course. Haven't I been telling you so all along? I'm all out to be pleasant and obliging. You won't do anything unkind to Tuppence, of course. I'm sure you won't. She's such a nice girl."

"We only want the letter," said Dymchurch, but there was a singularly unpleasant smile on his face.

At a nod from him, the brutal Coggins knealt down and unfastened Tommy's arms. The latter swung them to and fro.

"That's better," he said cheerfully. "Will kind Coggins hand me my fountain pen? It's on the table, I think, with my other miscellaneous property."

Scowling, the man brought it to hire, and provided a sheet of paper.

"Be careful what you say," Dymchurch said menacingly.

"We leave it to you, but failure means-death-and slow death at that."

“In that case," said Tommy, "I will certainly do my best."

He reflected a minute or two, then began to scribble rapidly.

"How will this do?" he asked, handing over the completed epistle.

Dear Tuppence,

Can you come along at once and bring that blue letter

with you? We want to decode it here and now.

In haste

Francis

"Francis?" queried the bogus Inspector, with lifted eyebrows. "Was that the name she called you?"

"As you weren't at my christening," said Tommy, "I don't suppose you can know whether it's my name or not. But I think the cigarette case you took from my pocket is a pretty good proof that I'm speaking the truth."

The other stepped over to the table and took up the case, read "Francis from Tuppence," with a faint grin and laid it down again.

"I am glad to find you are behaving so sensibly," he said. "Coggins, give that note to Vassily. He is on guard outside. Tell him to take it at once."

The next twenty minutes passed slowly, the ten minutes after that more slowly still. Dymchurch was striding up and down with a face that grew darker and darker. Once he turned menacingly on Tommy.

"If you have dared to double cross us . . ." he growled.

"If we'd had a pack of cards here, we might have had a game of picquet to pass the time," drawled Tommy. "Women always keep one waiting. I hope you're not going to be unkind to little Tuppence when she comes?"

"Oh! no," said Dymchurch. "We shall arrange for you to go to the same place-together."

"Will you, you swine," said Tommy under his breath.

Suddenly there was a stir in the outer office. A man whom Tommy had not yet seen poked his head in and growled something in Russian.

"Good," said Dymchurch. "She is coming-and coming alone."

For a moment a faint anxiety caught at Tommy's heart.

The next minute he heard Tuppence's voice.

"Oh! there you are, Inspector Dymchurch. I've brought the letter. Where is Francis?"

With the last words she came through the door, and Vassily sprang on her from behind, clapping his hand over her mouth. Dymchurch tore the handbag from her grasp, and turned over its contents in a frenzied search.

Suddenly he uttered an ejaculation of delight and held up a blue envelope with a Russian stamp on it. Coggins gave a hoarse shout.

And just in that minute of triumph, the other door, the door into Tuppence's own office, opened noiselessly and Inspector Marriott and two men armed with revolvers stepped into the room, with the sharp command: "Hands Up!"

There was no fight. The others were taken at a hopeless disadvantage. Dymchurch's automatic lay on the table, and the two others were not armed.

"A very nice little haul," said Inspector Marriott with approval, as he snapped on the last pair of handcuffs. "And we'll have more as time goes on, I hope."

White with rage, Dymchurch glared at Tuppence.

"You little devil," he snarled, "It was you put them on to us."

"It wasn't all my doing. I ought to have guessed, I admit, when you brought in the number sixteen this afternoon. But it was Tommy's note

clinched matters. I rang up Inspector Marriot, got Albert to meet him with the duplicate key of the office, and came along myself with the empty blue envelope in my bag. The letter I forwarded according to my instructions as soon as I had parted from you two this afternoon."

But one word had caught the other's attention.

"Tommy?" he queried.

Tommy who had just been released from his bonds came towards them.

"Well done, brother Francis," he said to Tuppence, taking both her hands in his. And to Dymchurch: "As I told you, my dear fellow, you really ought to read the Classics."

7. FINESSING THE KING

It was a wet Wednesday in the offices of the International Detective Agency. Tuppence let the Daily Leader fall idly from her hand.

"Do you know what I've been thinking, Tommy?"

"It's impossible to say," replied her husband. "You think of so many things, and you think of them all at once."

"I think it's time we went dancing again."

Tommy picked up the Daily Leader hastily.

"Our advertisement looks well," he remarked, his head on one side. "Blunt's Brilliant Detectives. Do you realise, Tuppence, that you and you alone are Blunt's Brilliant Detectives? There's glory for you, as Humpty Dumpty would say."

"I was talking about dancing."

"There's a curious point that I have observed about newspapers. I wonder if you have ever noticed it. Take these three copies of the Daily Leader. Can you tell me how they differ one from the other?"

Tuppence took them with some curiosity.

"It seems fairly easy," she remarked witheringly. "One is to-day's, one is yesterday's, and one is the day before's."

"Positively scintillating, my dear Watson. But that was not my meaning. Observe the headline, 'The Daily Leader.' Compare the three-do you see any difference between them?"

"No, I don't," said Tuppence, "and what's more, I don't believe there is any."

Tommy sighed, and brought the tips of his fingers together in the most approved Sherlock Holmes fashion.

"Exactly. Yet you read the papers as much-in fact, more than I do. But I have observed and you have not. If you will look at today's Daily Leader, you will see that in the middle of the downstroke of the D is a small white dot, and there is another in the L of the same word. But in yesterday's paper the white dot is not in DAILY at all. There are two white dots in the L of LEADER. That of the day before again has two dots in the D of DAILY. In fact, the dot, or dots, are in a different position every day."

"Why?" asked Tuppence.

"That's a journalistic secret."

"Meaning you don't know, and can't guess."

"I will merely say this-the practice is common to all newspapers."

"Aren't you clever?" said Tuppence. "Especially at drawing red herrings across the track. Let's go back to what we were talking about before."

"What were we talking about?"

"The Three Arts Ball."

Tommy groaned.

"No, no, Tuppence. Not the Three Arts Ball. I'm not young enough. I assure you I'm not young enough."

"When I was a nice young girl," said Tuppence, "I was brought up to believe that men-especially husbands-were dissipated beings, fond of drinking and dancing and staying up late at night. It took an exceptionally beautiful and clever wife to keep them at home. Another illusion gone! All the wives I know are hankering to go out and dance, and weeping because their husbands will wear bedroom slippers and go to bed at half past nine. And you do dance so nicely, Tommy dear."

"Gently with the butter, Tuppence."

"As a matter of fact," said Tuppence, "it's not purely for pleasure that I want to go. I'm intrigued by this advertisement."

She picked up the Daily Leader again, and read it out.

"I should go three hearts. 12 tricks. Ace of Spades. Necessary to finesse the King."

"Rather an expensive way of learning Bridge," was Tommy's comment.

"Don't be an ass. That's nothing to do with Bridge. You see, I was lunching with a girl yesterday at the Ace of Spades. It's a queer little underground den in Chelsea, and she told me that it's quite the fashion at these big shows to trundle round there in the course of the evening for bacon and eggs and Welsh Rabbits-Bohemian sort of stuff. It's got screened off booths all round it. Pretty hot place, I should say."

"And your idea is-?"

"Three hearts stands for the Three Arts Ball to-morrow night, 12 tricks is twelve o'clock, and the Ace of Spades is the Ace of Spades."

"And what about its being necessary to finesse the King?"

"Well, that's what I thought we'd find out."

"I shouldn't wonder if you weren't right, Tuppence," said Tommy magnanimously. "But I don't quite see why you want to butt in upon other people's love affairs."

"I shan't butt in. What I'm proposing is an interesting experiment in detective work. We need practice."

"Business is certainly not too brisk," agreed Tommy. "All the same, Tuppence, what you want is to go to the Three Arts Ball and dance! Talk of red herrings."

Tuppence laughed shamelessly.

"Be a sport, Tommy. Try and forget you're thirty-two and have got one grey hair in your left eyebrow."

"I was always weak where women were concerned," murmured her husband. "Have I got to make an ass of myself in fancy dress?"

"Of course, but you can leave that to me. I've got a splendid idea."

Tommy looked at her with some misgiving. He was always profoundly mistrustful of Tuppence's brilliant ideas.

When he returned to the flat on the following evening, Tuppence came flying out of her bedroom to meet him.

"It's come," she announced.

"What's come?"

“The costume. Come and look at it."

Tommy followed her. Spread out on the bed was a complete fireman's kit with shining helmet.

"Good God!" groaned Tommy. "Have I joined the Wembley fire brigade?"

"Guess again," said Tuppence. "You haven't caught the idea yet. Use your little grey cells, mon ami. Scintillate, Watson. Be a bull that has been more than ten minutes in the arena."

"Wait a minute," said Tommy. "I begin to see. There is a dark purpose in this. What are you going to wear, Tuppence?"

"An old suit of your clothes, an American hat and some horn spectacles."

"Crude," said Tommy. "But I catch the idea. McCarty incog. And I am Riordan."

"That's it. I thought we ought to practice American detective methods as well as English ones. Just for once I am going to be the star, and you will be the humble assistant."

"Don't forget," said Tommy warningly, "that it's always an innocent remark by the simple Denny that puts McCarty on the right track."

But Tuppence only laughed. She was in high spirits.

It was a most successful evening. The crowds, the music the fantastic dresses-everything conspired to make the young couple enjoy themselves. Tommy forgot his role of the bored husband dragged out against his will.

At ten minutes to twelve, they drove off in the car to the famous-or infamous-Ace of Spades. As Tuppence had said, it was an underground den, mean and tawdry in appearance, but it was nevertheless crowded with couples in fancy dress. There were closed in booths round the walls, and Tommy and Tuppence secured one of these. They left the doors purposely a little ajar so that they could see what was going on outside.

"I wonder which they are-our people, I mean," said Tuppence. "What about that Columbine over there with the red Mephistopheles?"

"I fancy the wicked Mandarin and the lady who calls herself a Battleship-more of a fast Cruiser, I should say."

"Isn't he witty?" said Tuppence. "All done on a little drop of drink! Who's this coming in dressed as the Queen of Hearts-rather a good get up, that."

The girl in question passed into the booth next to them accompanied by her escort who was "the gentleman dressed in newspaper" from Alice in Wonderland. They were both wearing masks-it seemed to be rather a common custom at the Ace of Spades.

“I'm sure we're in a real den of iniquity," said Tuppence with a pleased face. "Scandals all round us. What a row everyone makes."

A cry, as of protest, rang out from the booth next door and was covered by a man's loud laugh. Everybody was laughing and singing. The shrill voices of the girls rose above the booming of their male escorts.

"What about that shepherdess?" demanded Tommy. "The one with the comic Frenchman. They might be our little lot."

"Anyone might be," confessed Tuppence. "I'm not going to bother. The great thing is that we are enjoying ourselves."

"I could have enjoyed myself better in another costume," grumbled Tommy. "You've no idea of the heat of this one."

"Cheer up," said Tuppence. "You look lovely."

"I'm glad of that," said Tommy. "It's more than you do. You're the funniest little guy I've ever seen."

"Will you keep a civil tongue in your head, Denny, my boy. Hullo, the gentleman in newspaper is leaving his lady alone. Where's he going, do you think?"

"Going to hurry up the drinks, I expect," said Tommy. "I wouldn't mind doing the same thing."

"He's a long time doing it," said Tuppence, when four or five minutes had passed. "Tommy, would you think me an awful ass-" She paused.

Suddenly she jumped up.

"Call me an ass if you like. I'm going in next door."

"Look here, Tuppence-you can't-"

"I've a feeling there's something wrong. "I know there is. Don't try and stop me."

She passed quickly out of their own booth, and Tommy followed her. The doors of the one next door were closed. Tuppence pushed them apart and went in, Tommy on her heels.

The girl dressed as the Queen of Hearts sat in the corner leaning up against the wall in a queer huddled position. Her eyes regarded them steadily through her mask, but she did not move. Her dress was carried out in a bold design of red and white, but on the left side of the pattern seemed to have got mixed. There was more red than should have been. . . .

With a cry Tuppence hurried forward. At the same time, Tommy saw what she had seen, the hilt of a jewelled dagger just below the heart. Tuppence dropped on her knees by the girl's side.

"Quick, Tommy, she's still alive. Get hold of the Manager and make him get a doctor at once."

"Right. Mind you don't touch the handle of that dagger,

"I'll be careful. Go quickly."

Tommy hurried out, pulling the doors to behind him Tuppence passed her arm around the girl. The latter made a faint gesture, and Tuppence realised that she wanted to get rid of the mask. Tuppence unfastened it gently. She saw a fresh flower-like face, and wide starry eyes that were full of horror, suffering, and a kind of dazed bewilderment.

"My dear," said Tuppence, very gently. "Can you speak at all? Will you tell me, if you can, who did this?"

She felt the eyes fix themselves on her face. The girl was sighing, the deep palpitating sighs of a failing heart. And still she looked steadily at Tuppence. Then her lips parted.

"Bingo did it-" she said in a strained whisper

Then her hands relaxed, and she seemed to nestle down on Tuppence's shoulder.

Tommy came in, two men with him. The bigger of the two came forward with an air of authority, the word, doctor, written all over him.

Tuppence relinquished her burden.

"She's dead, I'm afraid," she said with a catch in her voice.

The doctor made a swift examination.

"Yes," he said. "Nothing to be done. We had better leave things as they are till the police come. How did the thing happen?"

Tuppence explained rather haltingly, slurring over her reasons for entering the booth.

"It's a curious business," said the doctor. "You heard nothing?"

"I heard her give a kind of cry, but then the man laughed. Naturally I didn't think-"

"Naturally not," agreed the doctor. "And the man wore a mask, you say. You wouldn't recognise him?" "I'm afraid not. Would you, Tommy?" "No. Still there is his costume." "The first thing will be to identify this poor lady," said the doctor. "After that, well, I suppose the police will get down to things pretty quickly. It ought not to be a difficult case. Ah, here they come."

8. THE GENTLEMAN DRESSED IN NEWSPAPER

It was after three o'clock when, weary and sick at heart, the husband and wife reached home. Several hours passed before Tuppence could sleep. She lay tossing from side to side, seeing always that flower like face with the horror stricken eyes.

The dawn was coming in through the shutters when Tuppence finally dropped off to sleep. After the excitement, she slept heavily and dreamlessly. It was broad daylight when she awoke to find Tommy, up and dressed, standing by the bedside, shaking her gently by the arm.

"Wake up, old thing. Inspector Marriot and another man are here and want to see you."

“What time is it?"

"Just on eleven. I'll get Alice to bring you your tea right away."

“Yes, do. Tell Inspector Marriot I'll be there in ten minutes."

A quarter of an hour later, Tuppence came hurrying into the sitting room. Inspector Marriot who was sitting looking very straight and solemn, rose to greet her.

"Good morning, Mrs. Beresford. This is Sir Arthur Merivale."

Tuppence shook hands with a tall thin man with haggard eyes and preying hair.

"It's about this sad business last night," said Inspector Marriot. "I want Sir Arthur to hear from your own lips what you told me-the words the poor lady said before she died. Sir Arthur has been very hard to convince."

"I can't believe," said the other, "and I won't believe, that Bingo Hale ever hurt a hair on Vere's head."

Inspector Marriot went on.

"We've made some progress since last night, Mrs. Beresford," he said. "First of all we managed to identify the lady as Lady Merivale. We communicated with Sir Arthur here. He recognised the body at once, and was horrified beyond words, of course. Then I asked him if he knew anyone called Bingo."

"You must understand Mrs. Beresford," said Sir Arthur, "that Captain Hale, who is known to all his friends as Bingo, is the dearest pal I have. He practically lives with us. He was staying at my house when they arrested him this morning. I cannot but believe that you have made a mistake-it was not his name that my wife uttered."

"There is no possibility of mistake," said Tuppence gently. "She said 'Bingo did it-' "

"You see, Sir Arthur," said Marriot.

The unhappy man sank into a chair and covered his face with his hands.

"It's incredible. What earthly motive could there be? Oh! I know your idea, Inspector Marriot. You think Hale was my wife's lover, but even if that were so-which I don't admit for a moment-what motive was there for killing her?"

Inspector Marriot coughed.

"It's not a very pleasant thing to say, sir. But Captain Hale has been paying a lot of attention to a certain young American lady of late-a young lady with inconsiderable amount of money. If Lady Merivale liked to turn nasty, she could probably stop his marriage."

"This is outrageous, Inspector."

Sir Arthur sprang angrily to his feet. The other calmed him with a soothing gesture.

"I beg your pardon, I'm sure, Sir Arthur. You say that you and Captain Hale both decided to attend this show. Your wife was away on a visit at the time, and you had no idea that she was to be there?"

"Not the least idea."

"Just show him that advertisement you told me about, Mrs. Beresford."

Tuppence complied.

"That seems to me clear enough. It was inserted by Captain Hale to catch your wife's eye. They had already arranged to meet there. But

you only made up your mind to go the day before, hence it was necessary to warn her. That is the explanation of the phrase "Necessary to finesse the King." You ordered your costume from a theatrical firm at the last minute, but Captain Hale's was a home made affair. He went as the Gentleman Dressed in Newspaper. Do you know, Sir Arthur, what we found clasped in the dead lady's hand? A fragment torn from a newspaper. My men have orders to take Captain Hale's costume away with them from your house. I shall find it at the Yard when I get back. If there's a tear in it corresponding to the missing piece-well, it'll be the end of the case."

"You won't find it," said Sir Arthur. "I know Bingo Hale."

Apologising to Tuppence for disturbing her, they took their leave.

Late that evening, there was a ring at the bell, and somewhat to the astonishment of the young pair, Inspector Marriot once more walked in.

"I thought Blunt's Brilliant Detectives would like to hear the latest developments," he said, with a hint of a smile.

"They would," said Tommy. "Have a drink?"

He placed materials hospitably at Inspector Marriot's elbow.

"It's a clear case," said the latter, after a minute or two. "Dagger was the lady's own-the idea was to have made it look like suicide, evidently, but thanks to you two being on the spot, that didn't come off. We've found plenty of letters -they'd been carrying on together for some time,

that's clear-without Sir Arthur tumbling to it. Then we found the last link-"

"The last what?" said Tuppence sharply.

"The last link in the chain-that fragment of the Daily Leader. It was torn from the dress he wore-fits exactly. Oh! yes, it's a perfectly clear case. By the way, I brought round a photograph of those two exhibits-I thought they might interest you. It's very seldom that you get such a perfectly clear case."

"Tommy," said Tuppence, when her husband returned from showing the Scotland Yard man out. "Why do you think Inspector Marriot keeps repeating that it's a perfectly clear case?"

"I don't know. Smug satisfaction, I suppose."

"Not a bit of it. He's trying to get us irritated. You know, Tommy, butchers, for instance, know something about meat, don't they?"

"I should say so, but what on earth-"

"And in the same way, greengrocers know all about vegetables, and fishermen about fish. Detectives, professional detectives, must know all about criminals. They know the real thing when they see it-and they know when it isn't the real thing. Marriot's expert knowledge tells him that Captain Hale isn't a criminal-but all the facts are dead against him. As a last resource Marriot is egging us on, hoping against hope that some little detail or other will come back to us- something that

happened last night-which will throw a different light on things. Tommy, why shouldn't it be suicide, after all?"

"Remember what she said to you."

"I know-but take that a different way. It was Bingo's doing-his conduct that drove her to kill herself. It's just possible."

"Just. But it doesn't explain that fragment of newspaper."

"Let's have a look at Marriot's photographs. I forgot to ask him what Hale's account of the matter was."

"I asked him that in the hall just now. Hale declared he had never spoken to Lady Merivale at the show. Says somebody shoved a note into his hand which said: "Don't try and speak to me to-night. Arthur suspects." He couldn't produce the piece of paper, though, and it doesn't sound a very likely story. Anyway, you and I know he was with her at the Ace of Spades because we saw him."

Tuppence nodded and pored over the two photographs. One was a tiny fragment with the legend DAILY LE-and the rest torn off. The other was the front sheet of the Daily Leader with the small round tear at the top of it. There was no doubt about it. The two fitted together perfectly.

"What are all those marks down the side?" asked Tommy.

"Stitches," said Tuppence. "Where is was sewn to the others, you know."

“I thought it might be a new scheme of dots," said Tommy. Then he gave a slight shiver. "My word, Tuppence, how creepy it makes one feel. To think that you and I were discussing dots and puzzling over that advertisement all as lighthearted as anything."

Tuppence did not answer. Tommy looked at her, and was startled to observe that she was staring ahead of her, her mouth slightly open, and a bewildered expression on her face.

"Tuppence," said Tommy gently, shaking her by the arm. "What's the matter with you? Are you just going to have a stroke or something?"

But Tuppence remained motionless. Presently she said in a far away voice.

"Denis Riordan."

"Eh?" said Tommy staring.

"It's just as you said. One simple innocent remark! Find me all this week's Daily Leaders."

"What are you up to?"

"I'm being McCarty. I've been worrying round, and thanks to you, I've got a notion at last. This is the front sheet of Tuesday's paper. I seem to remember that Tuesday's paper was the one with two dots in the L of LEADER. This has a dot in the D of DAILY-and one in the L too. Get me the papers and let's make sure."

They compared them anxiously. Tuppence had been quite right in her remembrance.

"You see? This fragment wasn't torn from Tuesday's paper."

"But Tuppence, we can't be sure. It may merely be different editions."

"It may-but at any rate it's given me an idea. It can't be coincidence-that's certain. There's only one thing it can be if I'm right in my idea. Ring up Sir Arthur, Tommy. Ask him to come round here at once. Say I've got important news for him. Then get hold of Marriot. Scotland Yard will know his address if he's gone home."

Sir Arthur Merivale, very much intrigued by the summons, arrived at the flat in about half an hour's time. Tuppence came forward to greet hire.

“I must apologise for sending for you in such a peremptory fashion," she said. "But my husband and I have discovered something that we think you ought to know at once. Do sit down."

Sir Arthur sat down, and Tuppence went on.

"You are, I know, very anxious to clear your friend."

Sir Arthur shook his head sadly.

"I was, but even I have had to give in to the overwhelming evidence."

"What would you say if I told you that chance has placed in my hands a piece of evidence that will certainly clear him of all complicity?"

"I should be overjoyed to hear it, Mrs. Beresford."

"Supposing," continued Tuppence, "that I had come across a girl who was actually dancing with Captain Hale last night at twelve o'clock-the hour when he was supposed to be at the Ace of Spades."

"Marvellous," cried Sir Arthur. "I knew there was some mistake. Poor Vere must have killed herself after all."

"Hardly that," said Tuppence. "You forget the other man."

"What other man?"

"The one my husband and I saw leave the booth. You see, Sir Arthur, there must have been a second man dressed in newspaper at the Ball. By the way, what was your own costume?"

"Mine? I went as a seventeenth century executioner."

"How very appropriate," said Tuppence softly.

"Appropriate, Mrs. Beresford? What do you mean by appropriate?"

"For the part you played. Shall I tell you my ideas on the subject, Sir Arthur? The newspaper dress is easily put on over that of an executioner. Previously a little note has been slipped into Captain Hale's hand, asking him not to speak to a certain lady. But the lady

herself knows nothing of that note. She goes to the Ace of Spades at the appointed time, and sees the figure she expects to see. They go into the booth. He takes her in his arms, I think, and kisses her-the kiss of a Judas, and as he kisses he strikes with the dagger. She only utters one faint cry and he covers that with a laugh. Presently he goes away-and to the last, horrified and bewildered, she believes her lover is the man who killed her.

"But she has torn a small fragment from the costume. The murderer notices that-he is a man who pays great attention to detail. To make the case absolutely clear against his victim the fragment must seem to have been torn from Captain Hale's costume. That would present great difficulties unless tale two men happened to be living in the same house. Then, of course, the thing would be simplicity itself. He makes an exact duplicate of the tear in Captain Hale's costume-then he burns his own and prepares to play the part of the loyal friend."

Tuppence paused.

"Well, Sir Arthur?"

Sir Arthur rose and made her a bow.

“The rather vivid imagination of a charming lady who reads too much fiction."

"You think so?" said Tommy.

"And a husband who is guided by his wife," said Sir Arthur. "I do not fancy you will find anybody to take the matter seriously."

He laughed out loud, and Tuppence stiffened in her chair.

"I would swear to that laugh anywhere," she said. "I heard it last in the Ace of Spades. And you are under a little misapprehension about us both. Beresford is our real name, but we have another."

She picked up a card from the table and handed it to him. Sir Arthur read it aloud.

"International Detective Agency . . ." He drew his breath sharply. "So that is what you really are! That was why Marriot brought me here this morning. It was a trap-"

He strolled to the window.

"A fine view you have from here," he said. "Right over London."

"Inspector Marriot," cried Tommy sharply.

In a flash the Inspector appeared from the communicating door in the opposite wall.

A little smile of amusement came to Sir Arthur's lips.

"I thought as much," he said. "But you won't get me this time, I'm afraid, Inspector. I prefer to take my own way out."

And, putting his hands on the sill, he vaulted clean through the window.

Tuppence shrieked and clapped her hands to her ears to shut out the sound she had already imagined-the sickening thud far beneath. Inspector Marriot uttered an oath.

“We should have thought of the window," he said. "Though, mind you, it would have been a difficult thing to prove, I'll go down and-and-see to things."

"Poor devil," said Tommy slowly. "If he was fond of his wife-"

But the Inspector interrupted him with a snort.

"Fond of her? That's as may be. He was at his wits' end where to turn for money. Lady Merivale had a large fortune of her own, and it all went to him. If she'd bolted with young Hale, he'd never have seen a penny of it."

"That was it, was it?"

"Of course, from the very start, I sensed that Sir Arthur was a bad lot, and that Captain Hale was all right. We know pretty well what's what at the Yard-but it's awkward when you're up against facts. I'll be going down now-I should give your wife a glass of brandy if I were you, Mr. Beresford-it's been upsetting like for her."

"Greengrowers," said Tuppence in a low voice as the door closed behind the imperturbable Inspector. "Butchers. Fishermen. Detectives. I was right, wasn't I? He knew."

Tommy, who had been busy at the sideboard, approached her with a large glass.

"Drink this."

"What is it? Brandy?"

"No, it's a large cocktail-suitable for a triumphant McCarty. Yes, Marriot's right all round-that was the way of it. A bold finesse for game and rubber."

Tuppence nodded.

"But he finessed the wrong way round."

"And so," said Tommy. "Exit the King."

9. THE CASE OF THE MISSING LADY

The buzzer on Mr. Blunt's desk (International Detective Agency, Manager, Theodore Blunt) uttered its warning call. Tommy and Tuppence both flew to their respective peepholes which commanded a view of the outer office. There it was Albert's business to delay the prospective clients with various artistic devices.

"I will see, sir," he was saying. "But I'm afraid Mr. Blunt is very busy just at present. He is engaged with Scotland Yard on the phone just now."

"I'll wait," said the visitor. "I haven't got a card with me, but my name is Gabriel Stavansson."

The client was a magnificent specimen of manhood, standing over six feet high. His face was bronzed and weather beaten, and the extraordinary blue of his eyes made an almost startling contrast to the brown skin.

Tommy swiftly made up his mind. He put on his hat, picked up some gloves, and opened the door. He paused on the threshold.

"This gentleman is waiting to see you, Mr. Blunt," said Albert.

A quick frown passed over Tommy's face. He took out his watch.

"I am due at the Duke's at a quarter to eleven," he said. Then he looked keenly at the visitor. "I can give you a few minutes if you will come this way."

The latter followed him obediently into the inner office where Tuppence was sitting demurely with pad and pencil.

"My confidential secretary, Miss Robinson," said Tommy. "Now, sir, perhaps you will state your business? Beyond the fact that it is urgent, that you came here in a taxi, and that you have lately been in the Arctic-or possibly the Antarctic, I know nothing."

The visitor stared at him in amazement.

"But this is marvellous," he cried. "I thought detectives only did such things in books! Your office boy did not even give you my name!"

Tommy sighed deprecatingly.

"Tut tut, all that was very easy," he said. "The rays of the midnight sun within the Arctic circle have a peculiar action upon the skin-the actinic rays have certain properties. I am writing a little monograph on the subject shortly. But all this is wide of the point. What is it that has brought you to me in such distress of mind?"

"To begin with, Mr. Blunt, my name is Gabriel Stavansson-',

"Ah! of course " said Tommy. "The well known explorer. You have recently returned from the region of the North Pole, I believe?"

"I landed in England three days ago. A friend who was cruising in Northern waters brought me back on his yacht. Otherwise I should not have got back for another fortnight. Now I must tell you, Mr. Blunt, that before I started on this last expedition two years ago, I had the great good fortune to become engaged to Mrs. Maurice Leigh Gordon-"

Tommy interrupted.

"Mrs. Leigh Gordon was, before her marriage-"

"The Honorable Hermione Crane, second daughter of Lord Lanchester," reeled off Tuppence glibly.

Tommy threw her a glance of admiration.

"Her first husband was killed in the War," added Tuppence.

Gabriel Stavansson nodded.

"That is quite correct. As I was saying, Hermione and I became engaged. I offered, of course, to give up this expedition, but she wouldn't hear of such a thing-bless her! She's the right kind of woman for an explorer's wife. Well, my first thought on landing was to see Hermione. I sent a telegram from Southampton, and rushed up to town by the first train. I knew that she was living for the time being with an aunt of hers, Lady Susan Clonray, in Pont Street, and I went straight there. To my great disappointment, I found that Hermy was away visiting some friends in Northumberland. Lady Susan was quite nice about it, after getting over her first surprise at seeing me. As I told you, I wasn't expected for another fortnight. She said Hermy would be returning in a few days' time. Then I asked for her address, but the old woman hummed and hawed-said Hermy was staying at one of two different places, and that she wasn't quite sure what order she was taking them in. I may as well tell you, Mr. Blunt, that Lady Susan and I have never got on very well. She's one of those fat women with double chins. I loathe fat women-always have-fat women and fat dogs are an abomination unto the Lord-and unfortunately they so often go together! It's an idiosyncracy of mine, I know-but there it is-I never can get on with a fat woman."

"Fashion agrees with you, Mr. Stavansson," said Tommy drily. "And everyone has their own pet aversion-that of the late Lord Roberts was cats."

"Mind you, I'm not saying that Lady Susan isn't a perfectly charming woman-she may be, but I've never taken to her. I've always felt, deep down, that she disapproved of our engagement, and I feel sure that she would influence Hermy against me if that were possible. I'm telling you this for what it's worth. Count it out as prejudice, if you like. Well, to go on with my story, I'm the kind of obstinate brute who likes his own way. I didn't leave Pont Street until I'd got out of her the names and addresses of the people Hermy was likely to be staying with. Then I took the mail train North."

"You are, I perceive, a man of action, Mr. Stavansson," said Tommy, smiling.

"The thing came upon me like a bombshell. Mr. Blunt, none of these people had seen a sign of Hermy. Of the three houses, only one had been expecting her-Lady Susan must have made a bloomer over the other two-and she had put off her visit there at the last moment by telegram. I returned post haste to London, of course, and went straight to Lady Susan. I will do her the justice to say that she seemed upset. She admitted that she had no idea where Hermy could be. All the same, she strongly negatived any idea of going to the police. She pointed out that Hermy was not a silly young girl, but an independent woman who had always been in the habit of making her own plans. She was probably carrying out some idea of her own.

"I thought it quite likely that Hermy didn't want to report all her movements to Lady Susan. But I was still worried. I had that queer feeling one gets when something is wrong. I was just leaving when a telegram was brought to Lady Susan. She read it with an expression of relief and handed it to me. It ran as follows: "Changed my plans Just off to Monte Carlo for a week Hermy."

Tommy held out his hand.

"You have got the telegram with you?"

"No, I haven't. But it was handed in at Maldon, Surrey. I noticed that at the time, because it struck me as odd. What should Hermy be doing at Maldon? She'd no friends there that I had ever heard of."

"You didn't think of rushing off to Monte Carlo in the same way that you had rushed North?"

"I thought of it, of course. But I decided against it. You see, Mr. Blunt, whilst Lady Susan seemed quite satisfied by that telegram, I wasn't. It struck me as odd that she should always telegraph, not write. A line or two in her own handwriting would have set all my fears at rest. But anyone can sign a telegram 'Hermy.' The more I thought it over, the more uneasy I got. In the end I went down to Maldon. That was yesterday afternoon. It's a fair sized place-good links there and all that-two hotels. I inquired everywhere I could think of, but there wasn't a sign that Hermy had ever been there. Coming back in the train I read your advertisement, and I thought I'd put it up to you. If Hermy has really gone off to Monte Carlo, I don't want to set the police on her track and make a scandal, but I'm not going to be sent off on a wild

goose chase myself. I stay here in London, in case- in case there's been foul play of any kind."

Tommy nodded thoughtfully.

"What do you suspect exactly?"

"I don't know. But I feel there's something wrong."

With a quick movement, Stavansson took a case from his pocket and laid it open before them.

“That is Hermione," he said. "I will leave it with you."

The photograph represented a tan willowy woman, no longer in her first youth, but with a charming frank smile and lovely eyes.

"Now, Mr. Stavansson," said Tommy. “There is nothing you have omitted to tell me?"

"Nothing whatever."

"No detail, however small?"

"I don't think so."

Tommy sighed.

"That makes the task harder," he observed. "You must often have noticed, Mr. Stavansson, in reading of crime, how one small detail is all

the great detective needs to set him on the track. I may say that this case presents some unusual features. I have, I think, practically solved it already, but time will show."

He picked up a violin which lay on the table, and drew the bow once or twice across the strings. Tuppence ground her teeth and even the explorer blenched. The performer laid the instrument down again.

"A few chords from Mosgovskensky," he murmured. "Leave me your address, Mr. Stavansson, and I will report progress to you."

As the visitor left the office, Tuppence grabbed the violin and putting it in the cupboard turned the key in the lock.

"If you must be Sherlock Holmes," she observed, "I'll get you a nice little syringe and a bottle labelled Cocaine, but for God's sake leave that violin alone. If that nice explorer man hadn't been as simple as a child, he'd have seen through you. Are you going on with the Sherlock Holmes touch?"

"I flatter myself that I have carried it through very well so far," said Tommy with some complacence. "The deductions were good, weren't they? I had to risk the taxi. After all, it's the only sensible way of getting to this place."

"It's lucky I had just read the bit about his engagement in this morning's Daily Mirror," remarked Tuppence.

"Yes, that looked well for the efficiency of Blunt's Brilliant Detectives. This is decidedly a Sherlock Holmes case. Even you cannot have failed

to notice the similarity between it and the disappearance of Lady Frances Carfax."

"Do you expect to find Mrs. Leigh Gordon's body in a coffin?"

"Logically, history should repeat itself. Actually-well, what do you think?"

"Well," said Tuppence. "The most obvious explanation seems to be that for some reason or other Hermy, as he calls her, is afraid to meet her fiancé, and that Lady Susan is backing her up. In fact, to put it bluntly, she's come a cropper of some kind, and has got the wind up about it."

"That occurred to me also," said Tommy. "But I thought we'd better make pretty certain before suggesting that explanation to a man like Stavansson. What about a run down to Maldon, old thing? And it would do no harm to take some golf clubs with us."

Tuppence agreeing, the International Detective Agency was left in the charge of Albert.

Maldon, though a well known residential place, did not cover a large area. Tommy and Tuppence, making every possible inquiry that ingenuity could suggest, nevertheless drew a complete blank. It was as they were returning to London that a brilliant idea occurred to Tuppence.

"Tommy, why did they put Maldon Surrey on the telegram?"

"Because Maldon is in Surrey, idiot."

"Idiot yourself-I don't mean that. If you get a telegram from-Hastings, say, or Torquay, they don't put the county after it. But from Richmond, they do put Richmond Surrey. That's because there are two Richmonds."

Tommy, who was driving, slowed up.

"Tuppence," he said affectionately. "Your idea is not so dusty. Let us make inquiries at yonder post office."

They drew up before a small building in the middle of a village street. A very few minutes sufficed to elicit the information that there were two Maldons. Maldon, Surrey, and Maldon, Sussex, the latter a tiny hamlet but possessed of a telegraph office.

"That's it," said Tuppence excitedly. "Stavansson knew Maldon was in Surrey, so he hardly looked at the word beginning with S. after Maldon."

"Tomorrow," said Tommy. "We'll have a look at Maldon, Sussex."

Maldon, Sussex, was a very different proposition to its Surrey namesake. It was four miles from a railway station, possessed two public houses, two small shops, a post and telegraph office combined with a sweet and picture postcard business, and about seven small cottages. Tuppence took on the shops whilst Tommy betook himself to the Cock and Sparrow. They met half an hour later.

"Well?" said Tuppence.

"Quite good beer," said Tommy, "but no information."

"You'd better try the King's Head," said Tuppence. "I'm going back to the post office. There's a sour old woman there, but I heard them yell to her that dinner was ready."

She returned to the place, and began examining postcards. A fresh-faced girl, still munching, came out of the back room.

"I'd like these, please," said Tuppence. "And do you mind waiting whilst I just look over these comic ones?"

She sorted through a packet, talking as she did so.

"I'm ever so disappointed you couldn't tell me my sister's address. She's staying near here and I've lost her letter. Leigh Wood, her name if."

The girl shook her head.

"I don't remember it. And we don't get many letters through here either-so I probably should if I'd seen it on a letter. Apart from the Grange, there isn't many big houses round about."

"What is the Grange?" asked Tuppence. "Who does it belong to?"

"Doctor Horriston has it. It's turned into a Nursing Home now. Nerve cases mostly, I believe. Ladies that come down for rest cures, and all

that sort of thing. Well, it's quiet enough down here, Heaven knows." She giggled.

Tuppence hastily selected a few cards and paid for them.

"That's Doctor Horriston's car coming along now," exclaimed the girl.

Tuppence hurried to the shop door. A small two seater was passing. At the wheel was a tall dark man with a neat black beard and a powerful, unpleasant face. The car went straight on down the street. Tuppence saw Tommy crossing the road towards her.

"Tommy, I believe I've got it. Doctor Horriston's Nursing Home."

"I heard about it at the King's Head, and I thought there might be something in it. But if she's had a nervous breakdown or anything of that sort, her aunt and her friends would know about it surely."

"Ye-es. I didn't mean that. Tommy, did you see that man in the two seater?"

"Unpleasant looking brute, yes."

"That was Doctor Horriston."

Tommy whistled.

"Shifty looking beggar. What do you say about it, Tuppence? Shall we go and have a look at the Grange?"

They found the place at last, a big rambling house, surrounded by deserted grounds, with a swift mill stream running behind the house.

"Dismal sort of abode," said Tommy. "It gives me the creeps, Tuppence. You know, I've a feeling this is going to turn out a far more serious matter than we thought at first."

"Oh! don't. If only we are in time. That woman's in some awful danger, I feel it in my bones."

"Don't let your imagination run away with you."

"I can't help it. I mistrust that man. What shall we do? I think it would be a good plan if I went and rang the bell alone first, and asked boldly for Mrs. Leigh Gordon just to see what answer I get. Because, after all, it may be perfectly fair and above board."

Tuppence carried out her plan. The door was opened almost immediately by a man servant with an impassive face.

"I want to see Mrs. Leigh Gordon if she is well enough to see me."

She fancied that there was a momentary flicker of the man's eyelashes, but he answered readily enough.

"There is no one of that name here, Madam."

"Oh! surely. This is Doctor Horriston's place, The Grange, is it not?"

"Yes, Madam, but there is nobody of the name of Mrs. Leigh Gordon here."

Baffled, Tuppence was forced to withdraw and hold a further consultation with Tommy outside the gate.

"Perhaps he was speaking the truth. After all, we don't know."

"He wasn't. He was lying. I'm sure of it."

"Wait until the doctor comes back," said Tommy. "Then I'll pass myself off as a journalist anxious to discuss his new system of rest cure with him. That will give me a chance of getting inside and studying the geography of the place."

The doctor returned about half an hour later. Tommy gave him about five minutes then he in turn marched up to the front door. But he too returned baffled.

"The doctor was engaged and couldn't be disturbed. And he never sees journalists. Tuppence, you're right. There's something fishy about this place. It's ideally situated-miles from anywhere. Any mortal thing could go on here, and no one would ever know."

"Come on," said Tuppence with determination.

"What are you going to do?"

"I'm going to climb over the wall and see if I can't get up to the house quietly without being seen."

"Right. I'm with you."

The garden was somewhat overgrown, and afforded a multitude of cover. Tommy and Tuppence managed to reach the back of the house unobserved.

Here there was a wide terrace, with some crumbling steps leading down from it. In the middle some French windows opened onto the terrace, but they dared not step out into the open, and the windows where they were crouching were too high for them to be able to look in. It did not seem as though their reconnaissance would be much use when suddenly Tuppence tightened her grasp of Tommy's arm.

Someone was speaking in the room close to them. The window was open and the fragment of conversation came clearly to their ears.

"Come in, come in, and shut the door," said a man's voice irritably "A lady came about an hour ago, you said, and asked for Mrs. Leigh Gordon?"

Tuppence recognised the answering voice as that of the impassive man servant.

"Yes, sir."

"You said she wasn't here, of course?"

"Of course, sir."

"And now this journalist fellow," fumed the other.

He came suddenly to the window, throwing up the sash, and the two outside, peering through a screen of bushes, recognised Dr. Horriston.

"It's the woman I mind most about," continued the doctor. "What did she look like?"

"Young, good-looking, and very smartly dressed, sir."

Tommy nudged Tuppence in the ribs.

"Exactly," said the doctor between his teeth. "As I feared. Some friend of the Leigh Gordon woman's. It's getting very difficult. I shall have to take steps-"

He left the sentence unfinished. Tommy and Tuppence heard the door close. There was silence.

Gingerly, Tommy led the retreat. When they had reached a little clearing not far away, but out of earshot from the house, he spoke.

"Tuppence, old thing, this is getting serious. They mean mischief. I think we ought to get back to town at once and see Stavansson."

To his surprise Tuppence shook her head.

"We must stay down here. Didn't you hear him say he was going to take steps? That might mean anything."

"The worst of it is we've hardly got a case to go to the police on."

"Listen, Tommy. Why not ring up Stavansson from the village? I'll stay around here."

"Perhaps that is the best plan," agreed her husband. "But, I say-Tuppence-"

"Well?"

"Take care of yourself-won't you?"

"Of course I shall, you silly old thing. Cut along."

It was some two hours later that Tommy returned. He found Tuppence awaiting him near the gate.

"Well?"

"I couldn't get on to Stavansson. Then I tried Lady Susan.

She was out too. Then I thought of ringing up old Brady. I asked him to look up Horriston in the Medical Directory or whatever the thing calls itself."

"Well, what did Dr. Brady say?"

"Oh! he knew the name at once. Horriston was once a bona fide doctor, but he came a cropper of some kind. Brady called him a most

unscrupulous quack, and said he, personally, wouldn't be surprised at anything. The question is, what are we to do now?"

"We must stay here," said Tuppence instantly. "I've a feeling they mean something to happen tonight. By the way, a gardener has been clipping ivy round the house. Tommy, I saw where he put the ladder."

"Good for you, Tuppence," said her husband appreciatively. "Then tonight-"

"As soon as it's dark-"

"We shall see-"

"What we shall see."

Tommy took his turn at watching the house whilst Tuppence went to the village and had some food.

Then she returned and they took up the vigil together. At nine o'clock, they decided that it was dark enough to commence operations. They were now able to circle round the house in perfect freedom. Suddenly Tuppence clutched Tommy by the arm.

"Listen."

The sound she had heard came again, borne faintly on the night air. It was the moan of a woman in pain. Tuppence pointed upward to a window on the first floor.

"It came from that room," she whispered.

Again that low moan rent the stillness of the night.

The two listeners decided to put their original plan into action. Tuppence led the way to where she had seen the gardener put the ladder. Between them they carried it to the side of the house from which they had heard the moaning. All the blinds of the ground floor rooms were drawn, but this particular window upstairs was unshuttered.

Tommy put the ladder as noiselessly as possible against the side of the house.

"I'll go up," whispered Tuppence. "You stay below. I don't mind climbing ladders and you can steady it better than I could. And in case the doctor should come round the corner you'd be able to deal with him and I shouldn't."

Nimbly Tuppence swarmed up the ladder, and raised her head cautiously to look in at the window. Then she ducked it swiftly, but after a minute or two brought it very slowly up again. She stayed there for about five minutes. Then she descended again.

"It's her," she said breathlessly and ungrammatically, "But oh! Tommy, it's horrible. She's lying there in bed, moaning and turning to and fro- and just as I got there a woman dressed as a nurse came in. She bent over her and injected something in her arm and then went away again. What shall we do?"

"Is she conscious?"

"I think so. I'm almost sure she is. I fancy she may be strapped to the bed. I'm going up again, and if I can, I'm going to get into that room."

"I say, Tuppence-"

"If I'm in any sort of danger I'll yell for you. So long."

Avoiding further argument Tuppence hurried up the ladder again. Tommy saw her try the window, then noiselessly push up the sash. Another second, and she had disappeared inside.

And now an agonising time came for Tommy. He could hear nothing at first. Tuppence and Mrs. Leigh Gordon must be talking in whispers if they were talking at all. Presently he did hear a low murmur of voices and drew a breath of relief. But suddenly the voices stopped. Dead silence.

Tommy strained his ears. Nothing. What could they be doing?

Suddenly a hand fell on his shoulder.

"Come on," said Tuppence's voice out of the darkness.

“Tuppence! How did you get here?"

“Through the front door. Let's get out of this."

"Get out of this?"

"That's what I said."

"But-Mrs. Leigh Gordon?"

In a tone of indescribable bitterness Tuppence replied.

"Getting thin!"

Tommy looked at her, suspecting irony.

“What do you mean?"

“What I say. Getting thin. Slinkiness. Reduction of weight. Didn't you hear Stavansson say he hated fat women? In the two years he's been away, his Hermy has put on weight. Got a panic when she knew he was coming back, and rushed off to do this new treatment of Dr. Horriston's. It's injections of some sort, and he makes a deadly secret of it, and charges through the nose. I daresay he is a quack-but he's a damned successful one! Stavansson comes home a fortnight too soon when she's only beginning the treatment. Lady Susan has been sworn to secrecy, and plays up. And we come down here and make blithering idiots of ourselves!"

Tommy drew a deep breath.

"I believe, Watson," he said with dignity, "that there is a very good Concert at the Queen's Hall tomorrow. We shall be in plenty of time for it. And you will oblige me by not placing this case upon your records. It has absolutely no distinctive features."

10. BLINDMAN'S BUFF

"Right," said Tommy, and replaced the receiver on its hoof`.

Then he turned to Tuppence.

"That was the Chief. Seems to have got the wind up about us. It appears that the parties we're after have got wise to the fact that I'm not the genuine Mr. Theodore Blunt. We're to expect excitements at any minute. The Chief begs you as a favor to go home and stay at home, and not mix yourself up in it any more. Apparently the hornet's nest we've stirred up is bigger than anyone imagined."

"All that about my going home is nonsense," said Tuppence decidedly. "Who is going to look after you if I go home? Besides, I like excitement. Business hasn't been very brisk just lately."

"Well, one can't have murders and robberies every day," said Tommy. "Be reasonable. Now my idea is this. When business is slack, we ought to do a certain amount of home exercises every day."

"Lie on our backs and wave our feet in the air? That sort of thing?"

"Don't be so literal in your interpretation. When I say exercises, I mean exercises in the detective art. Reproductions of the Great Masters. For instance-"

From the drawer beside him, Tommy took out a formidable dark green eyeshade covering both eyes. This he adjusted with some care. Then he drew a watch from his pocket.

"I broke the glass this morning," he remarked. "That paved the way for its being the crystalless watch which my sensitive fingers touch so lightly."

"Be careful," said Tuppence. "You nearly had the short hand off then."

"Give me your hand," said Tommy. He held it, one finger feeling for the pulse. "Ah! the keyboard of silence. This woman has not got heart disease."

“I suppose," said Tuppence, "that you are Thornley Colton?"

"Just so," said Tommy. "The blind Problemist. And you're thingumrnybob, the black-haired apple-cheeked secretary-"

"The bundle of baby clothes picked up on the banks of the English river," finished Tuppence.

"And Albert is the Fee, alias Shrimp."

"We must teach him to say 'Gee,' " said Tuppence. "And his voice isn't shrill. It's dreadfully hoarse."

"Against the wall by the door,' said Tommy, "you perceive the slim hollow cane which held in my sensitive hand tells me so much."

He rose and cannoned into a chair.

"Damn!" said Tommy. "I forgot that chair was there."

"It must be beastly to be blind," said Tuppence with feeling.

"Rather," agreed Tommy heartily. "I'm sorrier for all those poor devils who lost their eyesight in the War than for anyone else. But they say that when you live in the dark you really do develop special senses. That's what I want to try and see if one couldn't do. It would be jolly handy to train oneself to be some good in the dark. Now, Tuppence, be a good Sydney Thames. How many steps to that cane?"

Tuppence made a desperate guess.

"Three straight, five left," she hazarded.

Tommy paced it uncertainly, Tuppence interrupting with a cry of warning as she realised that the fourth step left would take him slap against the wall.

"There's a lot in this," said Tuppence. "You've no idea how difficult it is to judge how many steps are needed."

"It's jolly interesting," said Tommy. "Call Albert in. I'm going to shake hands with you both, and see if I know which is which."

"All right," said Tuppence, "but Albert must wash his hands first. They're sure to be sticky from those beastly acid drops he's always eating."

Albert, introduced to the game, was full of interest.

Tommy, the hand shakes completed, smiled complacently.

“The keyboard of silence cannot lie," he murmured. 'The first was Albert, the second, you, Tuppence."

"Wrong!" shrieked Tuppence. "Keyboard of silence indeed! You went by my wedding ring. And I put that on Albert's finger."

Various other experiments were carried out, with indifferent success.

"But it's coming," declared Tommy. "One can't expect to be infallible straight away. I tell you what. It's just lunch time. You and I will go to the Blitz, Tuppence. Blind man and his keeper. Some jolly useful tips to be picked up there."

"I say, Tommy, we shall get into trouble."

"No, we shan't. I shall behave quite like the little gentleman. But I bet you that by the end of luncheon I shall be startling you."

All protests being thus overborne, a quarter of an hour later saw Tommy and Tuppence comfortably ensconced at a corner table in the Gold Room of the Blitz.

Tommy ran his fingers lightly over the Menu.

"Pilaff de Homard and Grilled Chicken for me," he murmured.

Tuppence also made her selection, and the waiter moved away.

"So far, so good," said Tommy. "Now for a more ambitious venture. What beautiful legs that girl in the short skirt has-the one who has just come in."

"How was that done, Thorn?"

"Beautiful legs impart a particular vibration to the floor which is received by my hollow cane. Or, to be honest, in a big Restaurant there is nearly always a girl with beautiful legs standing in the doorway looking for her friends, and with short skirts going about, she'd be sure to take advantage of them."

The meal proceeded.

"The man two tables from us is a very wealthy profiteer, I fancy," said Tommy carelessly.

"Pretty good," said Tuppence appreciatively. "I don't follow that one."

"I shan't tell you how it's done every time. It spoils my show. The head waiter is serving champagne three tables off to thee right. A stout woman in black is about to pass our table."

“Tommy, how can you-"

"Aha! You're beginning to see what I can do. That's a nice girl in brown just getting up at the table behind you."

"Snoo!" said Tuppence. "It's a young man in grey."

"Oh!" said Tommy, momentarily disconcerted.

And at that moment two men who had been sitting at a table not far away, and who had been watching the young pair with keen interest, got up and came across to the corner table.

"Excuse me," said the elder of the two, a tall well dressed man with an eyeglass and a small grey moustache. "But you have been pointed out to me as Mr. Theodore Blunt. May I ask if that is so?"

Tommy hesitated a minute, feeling somewhat at a disadvantage. Then he bowed his head.

“That is so. I am Mr. Blunt."

"What an unexpected piece of good fortune! Mr. Blunt, I was going to call at your offices after lunch. I am in trouble-very grave trouble. But-excuse me-you have had some accident to your eyes?"

"My dear sir," said Tommy in a melancholy voice. "I am blind-completely blind."

"What?"

"You are astonished. But surely you have heard of blind detectives?"

"In fiction. Never in real life. And I have certainly never heard that you were blind."

"Many people are not aware of the fact," murmured Tommy. "I am wearing an eyeshade today to save my eyeballs from glare. But without it, quite a host of people have never suspected my infirmity-if you call it that. You see, my eyes cannot mislead me. But enough of all this. Shall we go at once to my office, or will you give me the facts of the case here? The latter would be best, I think."

A waiter brought up two extra chairs, and the two men sat down. The second man, who had not yet spoken, was shorter, sturdy in build and very dark.

"It is a matter of great delicacy," said the older man dropping his voice confidentially. He looked uncertainly at Tuppence. Mr. Blunt seemed to feel the glance.

"Let me introduce my confidential secretary," he said. "Miss Ganges. Found on the banks of the Indian river-a mere bundle of baby clothes. Very sad history. Miss Ganges is my eyes. She accompanies me everywhere."

The stranger acknowledged the introduction with a bow.

"Then I can speak out. Mr. Blunt, my daughter, a girl of sixteen, has been abducted under somewhat peculiar circumstances. I discovered this half an hour ago. The circumstances of the case were such that I dared not call in the police. Instead I rang up your office. They told me

you were out to lunch, but would be back by half past two. I came in here with my friend Captain Harker-"

The short man jerked his head and muttered something.

"By the greatest good fortune you happened to be lunching here also. We must lose no time. You must return with me to my house immediately."

Tommy demurred cautiously.

"I can be with you in half an hour. I must return to my office first."

Captain Harker, turning to glance at Tuppence, may have been surprised to see a half smile lurking for a moment at the corners of her mouth.

"No, no, that will not do. You must return with me." The grey haired man took a card from his pocket and handed it across the table. "That is my name."

Tommy fingered it.

"My fingers are hardly sensitive enough for that," he said with a smile, and handed it to Tuppence, who read out in a low voice: "The Duke of Blairgowrie."

She looked with great interest at their client. The Duke of Blairgowrie was well known to be a most haughty and inaccessible nobleman who had married as a wife the daughter of a Chicago pork butcher, many

years younger than himself, and of a lively temperament that augured ill for their future together. There had been rumors of disaccord lately.

"You will come at once, Mr. Blunt?" said the Duke, with a tinge of acerbity in his manner.

Tommy yielded to the inevitable.

"Miss Ganges and I will come with you," he said quietly. "You will excuse my just stopping to drink a large cup of black coffee? They will serve it immediately. I am subject to very distressing headaches, the result of my eye trouble, and the coffee steadies my nerves."

He called a waiter and gave the order. Then he spoke to Tuppence.

"Miss Ganges-I am lunching here tomorrow with the French Prefect of Police. Just note down the luncheon, and give it to the head waiter with instructions to reserve me my usual table. I am assisting the French Police in an important case. The fee-" he paused-"is considerable. Are you ready, Miss Ganges?"

"Quite ready," said Tuppence, her stylo poised.

"We win start with that special salad of Shrimps that they have here. Then to follow-let me see, to follow-Yes. Omelette Blitz, and perhaps a couple of Toundedos á l'Etranger."

He looked up, catching the Duke's eye.

"You will forgive me, I hope," he murmured. "Ah! yes, Soufflé en surprise. That will conclude the repast. A most interesting man, the French prefect. You know him, perhaps?"

The other replied in the negative, as Tuppence rose and went to speak to the head waiter. Presently she returned, just as the coffee was brought.

Tommy drank a large cup of it, sipping it slowly, then rose.

"My cane, Miss Ganges? Thank you. Directions, please?"

It was a moment of agony for Tuppence.

"One right, eighteen straight. About the fifth step, there is a waiter serving the table on your left."

Swinging his cane jauntily, Tommy set out. Tuppence kept close beside him, and endeavored unobtrusively to steer him. All went well until they were just passing out through the doorway. A man entered rather hurriedly, and before Tuppence could warn the blind Mr. Blunt, he had barged right into the newcomer. Explanations and apologies ensued.

At the door of the Blitz a smart landaulette was waiting. The Duke himself aided Mr. Blunt to get in.

"Your car here, Harker?" he asked over his shoulder.

"Yes. Just round the corner."

“Take Miss Ganges in it, will you."

Before another word could be said, he had jumped in beside Tommy, and the car rolled smoothly away.

"A very delicate matter," murmured the Duke. "I can soon acquaint you with all the details."

Tommy raised his hand to his head.

"I can remove my eyeshade now," he observed pleasantly. "It was only the glare of artificial light in the Restaurant necessitated its use.

But his arm was jerked down sharply. At the same time he felt something hard and round being poked between his ribs. "No, my dear Mr. Blunt," said the Duke's voice-but a voice that seemed suddenly different. "You will not remove that eyeshade. You will sit perfectly still and not move in any way. You understand? I don't want this pistol of mine to go off. You see, I happen not to be the Duke of Blairgowrie at all. I borrowed his name for the occasion, knowing that you would not refuse to accompany such a celebrated client. I am something much more prosaic-a ham merchant who has lost his wife."

He felt the start the other gave.

“That tells you something," he laughed. "My dear young man, you have been incredibly foolish. I'm afraid-I'm very much afraid that your activities will be curtailed in future."

He spoke the last words with a sinister relish.

Tommy sat motionless. He did not reply to the other's taunts.

Presently the car slackened its pace and drew up.

"Just a minute," said the pseudo Duke. He twisted a handkerchief deftly into Tommy's mouth, and drew up his scarf over it.

"In case you should be foolish enough to think of calling for help," he explained suavely.

The door of the car opened and the chauffeur stood ready. He and his master took Tommy between them and propelled him rapidly up some steps and in at the door of a house.

The door closed behind them. There was a rich oriental smell in the air. Tommy's feet sank deep into velvet pile. He was propelled in the same fashion up a flight of stairs and into a room which he judged to be at the back of the house. Here the two men bound his hands together. The chauffeur went out again, and the other removed the gag.

"You may speak freely now," he announced pleasantly. "What have you to say for yourself, young man?"

Tommy cleared his throat and eased the aching corners of his mouth.

"I hope you haven't lost my hollow cane," he said mildly. "It cost me a lot to have that made."

"You have nerve," said the other, after a minute's pause. "Or else you are just a fool. Don't you understand that I have got you-got you in the hollow of my hand? That you're absolutely in my power? That no one who knows you is ever likely to see you again?"

"Can't we cut out the melodrama?" asked Tommy plaintively. "Have I got to say 'You villain, I'll foil you yet?' That' sort of thing is so very much out of date."

"What about the girl?" said the other, watching him, "Doesn't that move you?"

"Putting two and two together during my enforced silence just now," said Tommy, "I have come to the inevitable conclusion that that chatty lad Harker is another of the doers of desperate deeds, and that therefore my unfortunate secretary will shortly join this little tea party."

"Right as to one point, but wrong on the other. Mrs. Beresford-you see I know all about you-Mrs. Beresford will not be brought here. That is a little precaution I took. It occurred to me that just probably your friends in high places might be keeping you shadowed. In that case, by dividing the pursuit, you could not both be trailed. I should still keep one in my hands. I am waiting now-"

He broke off, as the door opened. The chauffeur spoke.

"We've not been followed, sir. It's all clear."

"Good. You can go, Gregory."

The door closed again.

"So far, so good," said the 'Duke.' "And now what are we to do with you, Mr. Beresford Blunt?"

"I wish you'd take this confounded eyeshade off me," said Tommy.

"I think not. With it on, you are truly blind-without it you would see as well as I do-and that would not suit my little plan. For I have a plan. You are fond of sensational fiction, Mr. Blunt. This little game that you and your wife were playing today proves that. Now I too have arranged a little game something rather ingenious, as I am sure you will admit when I explain it to you.

"You see, this floor on which you are standing is made of metal, and here and there on its surface are little projections. I touch a switch-so." A sharp click sounded. "Now the electric current is switched on. To tread on one of those little knobs now means-death! You understand? If you could see . . . but you cannot see. You are in the dark. That is the game-Blindman's Buff with death. If you can reach the door in safety-freedom! But I think that long before you reach it you will have trodden on one of the danger spots. And that will be very amusing-for me!"

He came forward and unbound Tommy's hands. Then he handed him his cane with a little ironical bow.

"The blind Problemist. Let us see if he will solve this problem. I shall stand here with my pistol ready. If you raise your hands to your head to remove that eyeshade, I shoot. Is that clear?"

"Perfectly clear," said Tommy. He was rather pale, but determined. "I haven't got a dog's chance, I suppose?"

"Oh! that-" the other shrugged his shoulders.

"Damned ingenious devil, aren't you?" said Tommy. "But you've forgotten one thing. May I light a cigarette, by the way? My poor little heart's going pit a pat."

"You may light a cigarette-but no tricks. I am watching you, remember, with the pistol ready."

"I'm not a performing dog," said Tommy. "I don't do tricks." He extracted a cigarette from his case, then felt for a match box. "It's all right. I'm not feeling for a revolver. But you know well enough that I'm not armed. All the same, as I said before, you've forgotten one thing."

"What is that?"

Tommy took a match from the box, and held it ready to strike.

"I'm blind and you can see. That's admitted. The advantage is with you. But supposing we were both in the dark- eh? Where's your advantage then?"

He struck the match.

The 'Duke' laughed contemptuously.

"Thinking of shooting at the switch of the lights? Plunging the room into darkness? It can't be done."

"Just so," said Tommy. "I can't give you darkness. But extremes meet, you know. What about light?"

As he spoke, he touched the match to something he held in his hand, and threw it down upon the table.

A blinding glare filled the room.

Just for a minute, blinded by the intense white light, the 'Duke' blinked and fell back, his pistol hand lowered.

He opened his eyes again to feel something sharp pricking his breast.

"Drop that pistol," ordered Tommy. "Drop it quick. I agree with you that a hollow cane is a pretty rotten affair. So I didn't get one. A good sword stick is a very useful weapon, though. Don't you think so? Almost as useful as magnesium wire. Drop that pistol."

Obedient to the necessity of that sharp point, the man dropped it. Then, with a laugh, he sprang back.

"But I still have the advantage," he mocked. "For I can see, and you cannot."

"That's where you're wrong," said Tommy. "I can see perfectly. This eyeshade's a fake. I was going to put one over on Tuppence. Make one or two bloomers to begin with, and then put in some perfectly marvellous stuff towards the end of the lunch. Why, bless you, I could have walked to the door and avoided all the knobs with perfect ease. But I didn't trust you to play a sporting game. You'd never have let me get out of this alive. Careful now-"

For, with his face distorted with rage, the 'Duke' sprang forward, forgetting in his fury to look where he put his feet.

There was a sudden blue crackle of flame, and he swayed for a minute, then fell like a log. A faint odor of singed flesh filled the room, mingling with a stronger smell of ozone.

“Whew," said Tommy.

He wiped his face.

Then, moving gingerly, and with every precaution, he reached the walk and touched the switch he had seen the other manipulate.

He crossed the room to the door, opened it carefully, and looked out. There was no one about. He went down the stairs and out through the front door.

Safe in the street, he looked up at the house with a shudder, noting the number. Then he hurried to the nearest telephone box.

There was a moment of agonising anxiety, and then a well known voice spoke.

"Tuppence, thank goodness!"

"Yes, I'm all right. I got all your points. The Fee, Shrimp Come to the Blitz and follow the two strangers. Albert got there in time, and when we went off in separate cars, followed me in a taxi, saw where they took me, and rang up the police."

"Albert's a good lad," said Tommy. "Chivalrous. I was pretty sure he'd choose to follow you. But I've been worried, all the same. I've got lots to tell you. I'm coming straight back now. And the first thing I shall do when I get back is to write a thumping big cheque for St. Dunstan's. Lord, it must be awful not to be able to see."

11. THE MAN IN THE MIST

Tommy was not pleased with life. Blunt's Brilliant Detectives had met with a reverse, distressing to their pride if not to their pockets. Called in professionally to elucidate the mystery of a stolen pearl necklace at Adlington Hall, Adlington, Blunt's Brilliant Detectives had failed to make good. Whilst Tommy, hard on the track of a gambling Countess, was tracking her in the disguise of a Roman Catholic Priest, and Tuppence was 'getting off' with a nephew of the house on the golf links, the local Inspector of Police had unemotionally arrested the

second footman who proved to be a thief well known at headquarters and who admitted his guilt without making any bones about it.

Tommy and Tuppence, therefore, had withdrawn with what dignity they could muster, and were at the present moment solacing themselves with cocktails at the Grand Adlington Hotel. Tommy still wore his clerical disguise.

"Hardly a Father Brown touch, that," he remarked gloomily. "And yet I've got just the right kind of umbrella."

"It wasn't a Father Brown problem," said Tuppence. "One needs a certain atmosphere from the start. One must be doing something quite ordinary, and then bizarre things begin to happen. That's the idea."

"Unfortunately," said Tommy, "we have to return to town. Perhaps something bizarre will happen on the way to the station."

He raised the glass he was holding to his lips, but the liquid in it was suddenly spilled, as a heavy hand smacked him on the shoulder, and a voice to match the hand boomed out words of greeting.

"Upon my soul, it is! Old Tommy! And Mrs. Tommy too. Where did you blow in from? Haven't seen or heard anything of you for years."

"Why, it's Bulger!" said Tommy, setting down what was left of the cocktail, and turning to look at the intruder, a big square-shouldered man of thirty years of age, with a round red beaming face, and dressed in golfing kit. "Good old Bulger!"

"But I say, old chap," said Bulger (whose real name by the way, was Mervyn Estcourt), "I never knew you'd taken orders. Fancy you a blinking parson."

Tuppence burst out laughing, and Tommy looked embarrassed. And then they suddenly became conscious of a fourth person.

A tall slender creature, with very golden hair and very round blue eyes, almost impossibly beautiful, with an effect of really expensive black topped by wonderful ermines, and very large pearl earrings. She was smiling. And her smile said many things. It asserted, for instance, that she knew perfectly well that she herself was the thing best worth looking at certainly in England, and possibly in the whole world. She was not vain about it in any way, but she just knew, with certainty and confidence, that it was so.

Both Tommy and Tuppence recognised her immediately. They had seen her three times in "The Secret of the Heart," and an equal number of times in that other great success, "Pillars of Fire," and in innumerable other plays. There was, perhaps, no other actress in England who had so firm a hold on the British public, as Miss Gilda Glen. She was reported to be the most beautiful woman in England. It was also rumored that she was the stupidest.

"Old friends of mine, Miss Glen," said Estcourt, with a tinge of apology in his voice for having presumed, even for a moment, to forget such a radiant creature. "Tommy, and Mrs. Tommy, let me introduce you to Miss Gilda Glen."

The ring of pride in his voice was unmistakable. By merely being seen in his company, Miss Glen had conferred great glory upon him.

The actress was staring with frank interest at Tommy.

"Are you really a Priest?" she asked. "A Roman Catholic Priest, I mean? Because I thought they didn't have wives."

Estcourt went off in a boom of laughter again.

"That's good," he exploded. "You sly dog, Tommy. Glad he hasn't renounced you, Mrs. Tommy, with all the rest of the pomps and vanities."

Gilda Glen took not the faintest notice of him. She continued to stare at Tommy with puzzled eyes.

"Are you a Priest?" she demanded.

"Very few of us are what we seem to be," said Tommy gently. "My profession is not unlike that of a Priest. I don't give Absolution-but I listen to Confessions-I-"

"Don't you listen to him," interrupted Estcourt. "He's pulling your leg."

"If you're not a clergyman, I don't see why you're dressed up like one," she puzzled. "That is, unless-"

"Not a criminal flying from justice," said Tommy. "The other thing."

"Oh!" she frowned, and looked at him with beautiful bewildered eyes.

"I wonder if she'll ever get that," thought Tommy to himself. "Not unless I put it in words of one syllable for her, I should say."

Aloud he said:

"Know anything about the trains back to town, Bulger? We've got to be pushing for home. How far is it to the station?"

"Ten minutes' walk. But no hurry. Next train up is the 6.35 and it's only about twenty to six now. You've just missed one."

"Which way is it to the station from here?"

"Sharp to the left when you turn out of the Hotel. Then- let me see- down Morgan's Avenue would be the best way, wouldn't it?"

"Morgan's Avenue?" Miss Glen started violently, and stared at him with startled eyes.

"I know what you're thinking of," said Estcourt, laughing "The Ghost. Morgan's Avenue is bounded by the cemetery on one side, and tradition has it that a policeman who met his death by violence gets up and walks on his old beat up and down Morgan's Avenue. A spook policeman! Can you beat it? But lots of people swear to having seen him."

"A policeman?" said Miss Glen. She shivered a little. "But there aren't really any ghosts, are there? I mean-there aren't such things?"

She got up, folding her wrap tighter round her.

"Good bye," she said vaguely.

She had ignored Tuppence completely throughout, and now she did not even glance in her direction. But over her shoulder she threw one puzzled questioning glance at Tommy.

Just as she got to the door, she encountered a tall man with grey hair and a puffy red face who uttered an exclamation of surprise. His hand on her arm, he led her through the doorway, talking in an animated fashion.

"Beautiful creature, isn't she?" said Estcourt. "Brains of a rabbit. Rumor has it that she's going to marry Lord Leconbury. That was Leconbury in the doorway."

"He doesn't look a very nice sort of man to marry," remarked Tuppence.

Estcourt shrugged his shoulders.

"A title has a kind of glamor still, I suppose," he said. "And Leconbury is not an impoverished peer by any means. She'll be in clover. Nobody knows where she sprang from. Pretty near the gutter, I daresay. There's something deuced mysterious about her being down here anyway. She's not staying at the Hotel. And when I tried to find out where she was staying, she snubbed me-snubbed me quite crudely, in the only way she knows. Blessed if I know what it's all about."

He glanced at his watch and uttered an exclamation.

"I must be off. Jolly glad to have seen you two again. We must have a bust in town together some night. So long."

He hurried away, and as he did so, a page approached with a note on a salver. The note was unaddressed.

"But it's for you, sir," he said to Tommy. "From Miss Gilda Glen."

Tommy tore it open and read it with some curiosity. Inside were a few lines written in a straggling untidy hand.

I'm not sure, but I think you might be able to help

me. And you'll be going that way to the station. Could

you be at The White House, Morgan's Avenue, at ten

minutes past six?

Yours sincerely,

Gilda Glen.

Tommy nodded to the page who departed, and then handed the note to Tuppence.

"Extraordinary," said Tuppence. "Is it because she still thinks you're a Priest?"

"No," said Tommy thoughtfully. "I should say it's because she's at last taken in that I'm not one. Hullo! what's this?"

"This" was a young man with flaming red hair, a pugnacious jaw and appallingly shabby clothes. He had walked into the room and was now striding up and down muttering to himself.

"Hell!" said the red haired man, loudly and forcibly. "That's what I say- Hell!"

He dropped into a chair near the young couple and stared at them moodily.

"Damn all women, that's what I say," said the young man, eyeing Tuppence ferociously. "Oh! all right, kick up a row if you like. Have me turned out of the Hotel! It won't be for the first time. Why shouldn't we say what we think? Why should we go about bottling up our feelings, and smirking, and saying things exactly like everyone else? I don't feel pleasant and polite. I feel like getting hold of someone round the throat and gradually choking them to death."

He paused.

"Any particular person?" asked Tuppence. "Or just anybody?"

"One particular person," said the young man grimly.

"This is very interesting," said Tuppence. "Won't you tell us some more?"

"My name's Reilly," said the red haired man. "James Reilly. You may have heard it. I wrote a little volume of Pacifist poems-good stuff, although I say so."

"Pacifist Poems?" said Tuppence.

"Yes-why not?" demanded Mr. Reilly belligerently.

"Oh! nothing," said Tuppence hastily.

"I'm for peace all the time," said Mr. Reilly fiercely. “To Hell with war. And women! Women! Did you see that creature who was trailing around here just now? Gilda Glen, she calls herself. Gilda Glen! God! how I've worshipped that woman. And I'll tell you this-if she's got a heart at all, it's on my side. She cared once for me, and I could make her care again. And if she sells herself to that muck heap Leconbury-well, God help her. I'd as soon kill her with my own hands."

And on this, suddenly, he rose and rushed from the room.

Tommy raised his eyebrows.

"A somewhat excitable gentleman," he murmured. "Well, Tuppence, shall we start?"

A fine mist was coming up as they emerged from the Hotel into the cool outer air. Obeying Estcourt's directions, they turned sharp to the left, and in a few minutes they came to a turning labelled Morgan's Avenue.

The mist had increased. It was soft and white, and hurried past them in little eddying drifts. To their left was the high wall of the Cemetery, on their right a row of small houses. Presently these ceased, and a high hedge took their place.

"Tommy," said Tuppence. "I'm beginning to feel jumpy. The mist-and the silence. As though we were miles from anywhere."

"One does feel like that," agreed Tommy. "All alone in the world. It's the effect of the mist, and not being able to see ahead of one."

Tuppence nodded. "Just our footsteps echoing on the pavement. What's that?"

"What's what?"

"I thought I heard other footsteps behind us."

"You'll be seeing the ghost in a minute if you work yourself up like this," said Tommy kindly. "Don't be so nervy. Are you afraid the spook policeman will lay his hand on your shoulder?"

Tuppence emitted a shrill squeal.

"Don't, Tommy. Now you've put it into my head."

She craned her head back over her shoulder, trying to peer into the white veil that was wrapped all round them.

“There they are again," she whispered. "No, they're in front now. Oh! Tommy, don't say you can't hear them?"

"I do hear something. Yes, it's footsteps behind us. Somebody else walking this way to catch the train. I wonder-"

He stopped suddenly, and stood still, and Tuppence gave a gasp.

For the curtain of mist in front of them suddenly parted in the most artificial manner, and there, not twenty feet away a gigantic policeman suddenly appeared, as though materialized out of the fog. One minute he was not there, the next minute he was-so at least it seemed to the rather superheated imaginations of the two watchers. Then as the mist rolled back still more, a little scene appeared, as though set on a stage.

The big blue policeman, a scarlet pillar box, and on the right of the road the outlines of a white house.

"Red, white, and blue," said Tommy. "It's damned pictorial. Come on, Tuppence, there's nothing to be afraid of."

For, as he had already seen, the policeman was a real policeman. And moreover, he was not nearly so gigantic as he had at first seemed looming up out of the mist.

But as they started forward, footsteps came from behind them. A man passed them, hurrying along. He turned in at the gate of the white house, ascended the steps, and beat a deafening tattoo upon the knocker. He was admitted just as they reached the spot where the policeman was standing staring after him.

"There's a gentleman seems to be in a hurry," commented the policeman.

He spoke in a slow reflective voice, as of one whose thoughts took some time to mature.

"He's the sort of gentleman always would be in a hurry," remarked Tommy.

The policeman's stare, slow and rather suspicious, came round to rest on his face.

"Friend of yours?" he demanded, and there was distinct suspicion now in his voice.

"No," said Tommy. "He's not a friend of mine, but I happen to know who he is. Name of Reilly."

"Ah!" said the policeman. 'Well, I'd better be getting along."

"Can you tell me where the White House is?" asked Tommy.

The constable jerked his head sideways.

"This is it. Mrs. Honeycott's." He paused, and added evidently with the idea of giving them valuable information: "Nervous party. Always suspecting burglars is around. Always asking me to have a look around the place. Middle-aged women get like that."

"Middle aged, eh?" said Tommy. "Do you happen to know if there's a young lady staying there?"

"A young lady," said the policeman, ruminating. "A young lady. No, I can't say I know anything about that."

"She mayn't be staying here, Tommy," said Tuppence. "And anyway, she mayn't be here yet. She could only have started just before we did."

"Ah!" said the policeman suddenly. "Now that I call it to mind, a young lady did go in at this gate. I saw her as I was coming up the road. About three or four minutes ago it might be."

"With ermine furs on?" asked Tuppence eagerly.

"She had some kind of white rabbit round her throat," admitted the policeman.

Tuppence smiled. The policeman went on in the direction from which they had just come, and they prepared to enter the gate of the White House.

Suddenly a faint muffled cry sounded from inside the house, and almost immediately afterwards the front door opened and James Reilly

came rushing down the steps. His face was white and twisted, and his eyes glared in front of him unseeingly. He staggered like a drunken man.

He passed Tommy and Tuppence as though he did not see them, muttering to himself with a kind of dreadful repetition.

"My God! My God! Oh, my God!"

He clutched at the gate post, as though to steady himself, and then, as though animated by sudden panic, he raced off down the road as hard as he could go in the opposite direction to that taken by the policeman.

Tommy and Tuppence stared at each other in bewilderment. "Well," said Tommy, "something's happened in that house to scare our friend Reilly pretty badly."

Tuppence drew her finger absently across the gate post.

"He must have put his hand on some wet red paint somewhere," she said idly.

"H'm," said Tommy. "I think we'd better go inside rather quickly. I don't understand this business."

In the doorway of the house a white capped maid servant was standing, almost speechless with indignation.

"Did you ever see the likes of that now, Father," she burst out, as Tommy ascended the steps. "That fellow comes here, asks for the young lady, rushes upstairs without how or by your leave. She lets out a screech like a wild cat-and what wonder, poor pretty dear, and straightway he comes rushing down again, with the white face on him, like one who's seen a ghost. What will be the meaning of it all?"

"Who are you talking with at the front door, Ellen?" demanded a sharp voice from the interior of the hall.

"Here's Missus," said Ellen, somewhat unnecessarily.

She drew back and Tommy found himself confronting a grey haired, middle aged woman, with frosty blue eyes imperfectly concealed by pince nez, and a spare figure clad in black with bugle trimming.

"Mrs. Honeycott?" said Tommy. "I came here to see Miss Glen."

Mrs. Honeycott gave him a sharp glance, then went on to Tuppence and took in every detail of her appearance.

"Oh! you did, did you?" she said. "Well, you'd better come inside."

She led the way into the hall and along it into a room at the back of the house facing on the garden. It was a fair sized room, but looked smaller than it was, owing to the large amount of chairs and tables crowded into it. A big fire burned in the grate, and a chintz covered

sofa stood at one side of it. The wall paper was a small grey stripe with a festoon of roses round the top. Quantities of engravings and oil paintings covered the walls.

It was a room almost impossible to associate with the expensive personality of Miss Gilda Glen.

"Sit down," said Mrs. Honeycott. "To begin with, you'll excuse me if I say I don't hold with the Roman Catholic religion. Never did I think to see a Roman Catholic priest in my house. But if Gilda's gone over to the Scarlet Woman it's only what's to be expected in a life like hers-and I daresay it might be worse. She mightn't have any religion at all. I should think more of Roman Catholics if their priests were married-I always speak my mind. And to think of those convents-quantities of beautiful young girls shut up there, and no one knowing what becomes of them-well, it won't bear thinking about."

Mrs. Honeycott came to a full stop, and drew a deep breath.

Without entering upon a defence of the celibacy of the priesthood or the other controversial points touched upon, Tommy went straight to the point.

"I understand, Mrs. Honeycott, that Miss Glen is in this house."

"She is. Mind you, I don't approve. Marriage is marriage and your husband's your husband. As you make your bed, so you must lie on it."

"I don't quite understand-" began Tommy, bewildered.

"I thought as much. That's the reason I brought you in here. You can go up to Gilda after I've spoken my mind. She came to me-after all these years, think of it!-and asked me to help her. Wanted me to see this man and persuade him to agree to a divorce. I told her straight out I'd have nothing whatever to do with it. Divorce is sinful. But I couldn't refuse my own sister shelter in my house, could I now?"

"Your sister?" exclaimed Tommy.

"Yes, Gilda's my sister. Didn't she tell you?"

Tommy stared at her open mouthed. The thing seemed fantastically impossible. Then he remembered that the angelic beauty of Gilda Glen had been in evidence for many years. He had been taken to see her act as quite a small boy. Yes, it was possible after all. But what a piquant contrast. So it was from this lower middle class respectability that Gilda Glen had sprung. How well she had guarded her secret!

"I am not yet quite clear," he said. "Your sister is married?"

"Ran away to be married as a girl of seventeen," said Miss Honeycott succinctly. "Some common fellow far below her in station. And our father a reverend. It was a disgrace. Then she left her husband and went on the stage. Play acting! I've never been inside a theatre in my life. I hold no truck with wickedness. Now, after all these years, she wants to divorce the man. Means to marry some big wig, I suppose. But her husband's standing firm-not to be bullied and not to be bribed-I admire him for it."

"What is his name?" asked Tommy suddenly.

"That's an extraordinary thing now, but I can't remember! It's nearly twenty years ago, remember, since I heard it. My father forbade it to be mentioned. And I've refused to discuss the matter with Gilda. She knows what I think, and that's enough for her."

"It wasn't Reilly, was it?"

"Might have been. I really can't say. It's gone clean out of my head."

"The man I mean was here just now."

"That man! I thought he was an escaped lunatic. I'd been in the kitchen giving orders to Ellen. I'd just got back into this room, and was wondering whether Gilda had come in yet (she has a latch key) when I heard her. She hesitated a minute or two in the hall and then went straight upstairs. About three minutes later, all this tremendous rat tatting began. I went out into the hall, and just saw a man rushing upstairs. Then there was a sort of cry upstairs and presently down he came again and rushed out like a madman. Pretty goings on."

Tommy rose.

"Mrs. Honeycott, let us go upstairs at once. I am afraid-"

"What of?"

"Afraid that you have no red wet paint in the house."

Mrs. Honeycott stared at him.

"Of course I haven't."

“That is what I feared," said Tommy gravely. "Please let us go to your sister's room at once."

Momentarily silenced, Mrs. Honeycott led the way. They caught a glimpse of Ellen in the hall, backing hastily into one of the rooms.

Mrs. Honeycott opened the first door at the top of the stairs. Tommy and Tuppence entered close behind her.

Suddenly she gave a gasp and fell back.

A motionless figure in black and ermine lay stretched on the sofa. The face was untouched, a beautiful soulless face like a mature child asleep. The wound was on the side of the head, a heavy blow with some blunt instrument had crushed in the skull. Blood was dripping slowly onto the floor, but the wound itself had long since ceased to bleed. . .

Tommy examined the prostrate figure his face very white

"So," he said at last, "he didn't strangle her after all."

"What do you mean? Who?" cried Mrs. Honeycott. "Is she dead?"

"Oh! yes, Mrs. Honeycott, she's dead. Murdered. The question is-by whom? Not that it is much of a question. Funny-for all his ranting words, I didn't think the fellow had got it in him."

He paused a minute, then turned to Tuppence with decision.

"Will you go out and get a policeman, or ring up the police station from somewhere?"

Tuppence nodded. She, too, was very white. Tommy led Mrs. Honeycott downstairs again.

"I don't want there to be any mistake about this," he said. "Do you know exactly what time it was when your sister came in?"

"Yes, I do," said Mrs. Honeycott. "Because I was just setting the clock on five minutes as I have to do every evening. It gains just five minutes a day. It was exactly eight minutes past six by my watch, and that never loses or gains a second."

Tommy nodded. That agreed perfectly with the policeman's story. He had seen the woman with the white furs go in at the gate, probably three minutes had elapsed before he and Tuppence had reached the same spot. He had glanced at his own watch then and had noted that it was just one minute after the time of their appointment.

There was just the faint chance that someone might have been waiting for Gilda Glen in the room upstairs. But if so, he must still be hiding in the house. No one but James Reilly had left it.

He ran upstairs and made a quick but efficient search of the premises. But there was no one concealed anywhere.

Then he spoke to Ellen. After breaking the news to her, and waiting for her first lamentations and invocations to the Saints to have exhausted themselves, he asked a few questions.

"Had anyone come to the house that afternoon asking for Miss Glen? No one whatsoever. Had she herself been upstairs at all that evening? Yes, she'd gone up at six o'clock as usual to draw the curtains-or it might have been a few minutes after six. Anyway it was just before that wild fellow come breaking the knocker down. She'd run downstairs to answer the door. And him a black hearted murderer at the time."

Tommy let it go at that. But he still felt a curious pity for Reilly, an unwillingness to believe the worst of him. And yet there was no one else who could have murdered Gilda Glen. Mrs. Honeycott and Ellen had been the only two people in the house.

He heard voices in the hall, and went out to find Tuppence and the policeman from the beat outside. The latter had produced a notebook, and a rather blunt pencil which he licked surreptitiously. He went upstairs and surveyed the victim stolidly, merely remarking that if he was to touch anything the Inspector would give him beans. He listened to all Mrs. Honeycott's hysterical outbursts and confused explanations, and occasionally he wrote something down. His presence was calming and soothing.

Tommy finally got him alone for a minute or two on the steps outside, ere he departed to telephone headquarters.

"Look here," said Tommy. "You saw the deceased turning in at the gate, you say. Are you sure she was alone?"

"Oh, she was alone all right. Nobody with her."

"And between that time and when you met us, nobody came out of the gate?"

"Not a soul."

"You'd have seen them if they had?"

"In course I should. Nobody come out till that wild chap did."

The majesty of the law moved portentously down the steps and paused by the white gate post which bore the imprint of a hand in red.

"Kind of amateur he must have been," he said pityingly. "To leave a thing like that."

Then he swung out into the road.

It was the day after the crime. Tommy and Tuppence were still at the Grand Hotel, but Tommy had thought it prudent to discard his clerical disguise.

James Reilly had been apprehended, and was in custody. His solicitor, Mr. Marvell, had just finished a lengthy conversation with Tommy on the subject of the crime.

"I never would have believed it of James Reilly," he said simply. "He's always been a man of violent speech, but that's all."

Tommy nodded.

"If you disperse energy in speech, it doesn't leave you too much over for action. What I realise is that I shall be one of the principal witnesses against him. That conversation he had with me just before the crime was particularly damning. And in spite of everything, I like the man, and if there was anyone else to suspect, I should believe him to be innocent. What's his own story?"

The solicitor pursed up his lips.

"He declares that he found her lying there dead. But that's impossible, of course. He's using the first lie that comes into his head."

"Because, if he happened to be speaking the truth, it would mean that our garrulous Mrs. Honeycott committed the crime-and that is fantastic. Yes, he must have done it."

"The maid heard her cry out, remember."

"The maid-yes-"

Tommy was silent a moment. Then he said thoughtfully:

"What credulous creatures we are, really. We believe evidence as though it were gospel truth. And what is it ready? Only the impressions

conveyed to the mind by the senses- and suppose they're the wrong impressions?"

The lawyer shrugged his shoulders.

"Oh! we all know that there are unreliable witnesses, witnesses who remember more and more as time goes on, with no real intention to deceive."

"I don't mean only that. I mean all of us-we say things that aren't really so, and never know that we've done so. For instance, both you and I, without doubt, have said some time or other 'There's the post,' when what we really meant was that we'd heard a double knock and the rattle of the letter box. Nine times out of ten we'd be right, and it would be the post, but just possibly the tenth time it might be only a little urchin playing a joke on us. See what I mean?"

"Ye-es," said Mr. Marvell slowly. "But I don't see what you're driving at?"

"Don't you? I'm not sure that I do myself. But I'm beginning to see. It's like the stick, Tuppence. You remember? One end of it pointed one way-but the other end always points the opposite way. It depends whether you get hold of it by the right end. Doors open-but they also shut. People go upstairs, but they also go downstairs. Boxes shut, but they also open."

"What do you mean?" demanded Tuppence.

"It's so ridiculously easy, really," said Tommy. "And yet it's only just come to me. How do you know when a person's come into the house? You hear the door open and bang to, and if you re expecting anyone to come in, you will be quite sure it is them. But it might just as easily be someone going out."

"But Miss Glen didn't go out?"

"No, I know she didn't. But someone else did-the murderer."

"But how did she get in, then?"

"She came in whilst Mrs. Honeycott was in the kitchen talking to Ellen. They didn't hear her. Mrs. Honeycott went back to the drawing-room, wondered if her sister had come in and began to put the clock right, and then, as she thought, she heard her come in and go upstairs."

"Well, what about that? The footsteps going upstairs?"

"That was Ellen, going up to draw the curtains. You remember, Mrs. Honeycott said her sister paused before going up. That pause was just the time needed for Ellen to come out from the kitchen into the hall. She just missed seeing the murderer."

"But Tommy," cried Tuppence. "The cry she gave?"

"That was James Reilly. Didn't you notice what a high pitched voice he has? In moments of great emotion, men often squeal just like a woman."

"But the murderer? We'd have seen him?"

"We did see him. We even stood talking to him. Do you remember the sudden way that policeman appeared? That was because he stepped out of the gate, just after the mist cleared from the road. It made us jump, don't you remember? After all, though we never think of them as that, policemen are men just like any other men. They love and they hate. They marry. . . .

"I think Gilda Glen met her husband suddenly just outside that gate, and took him in with her to thrash the matter out. He hadn't Reilly's relief of violent words, remember. He just saw red-and he had his truncheon handy. . . ."

13. THE CRACKLER

"Tuppence," said Tommy, "we shall have to move into a much larger office."

"Nonsense," said Tuppence, "You mustn't get swollen headed and think you are a millionaire just because you solved two or three twopenny halfpenny cases with the aid of the most amazing luck."

"What some call luck, others call skill."

"Of course if you really think you are Sherlock Holmes, Thorndyke, McCarty and the Brothers Okewood all rolled into one there is no more

to be said. Personally I would much rather have luck on my side than all the skill in the world."

"Perhaps there is something in that," conceded Tommy. "All the same, Tuppence, we do need a larger office."

"Why?"

"The Classics," said Tommy. "We need several hundreds of yards of extra book shelf if Edgar Wallace is to be properly represented."

"We haven't had an Edgar Wallace case yet."

"I am afraid we never shall," said Tommy. "If you notice he never does give the amateur sleuth much of a chance. It is all stern Scotland Yard kind of stuff-the real thing and no base counterfeit."

Albert, the office boy, appeared at the door.

"Inspector Marriot to see you," he announced.

"The mystery man of Scotland Yard" murmured Tommy.

"The busiest of the Busies," said Tuppence. "Or is it 'Noses?' I always get mixed between Busies and Noses."

The Inspector advanced upon them with a beaming smile of welcome.

"Well and how are things?" he asked breezily. "None the worse for our little adventure the other day?"

"Oh! rather not," said Tuppence. "Too, too marvellous, wasn't it?"

"Well, I don't know that I would describe it exactly that way myself," said Marriot cautiously.

"What has brought you here today, Marriott?" asked Tommy. "Not just solicitude for our nervous systems, is it?"

"No," said the Inspector. "It is work for the brilliant Mr. Blunt."

"Ha!" said Tommy. "Let me put my brilliant expression on."

"I have come to make you a proposition, Mr. Beresford. What would you say to rounding up a really big gang?"

"Is there such a thing?" asked Tommy.

"What do you mean, is there such a thing?"

"I always thought that gangs were confined to fiction-like master crooks, and super criminals."

“The master crook isn't very common," agreed the Inspector. "But Lord bless you, sir, there's any amount of gangs knocking about."

"I don't know that I should be at my best dealing with a gang," said Tommy. "The amateur crime, the crime of quiet family life-that is where I flatter myself that I shine. Drama of strong domestic interest. That's the thing-with Tuppence at hand to supply all those little feminine

details which are so important, and so apt to be ignored by the denser male."

His eloquence was arrested abruptly, as Tuppence threw a cushion at him and requested him not to talk nonsense.

"Will have your little bit of fun, won't you, sir?" said Inspector Marriot, smiling paternally at them both. "If you'll not take offense at my saying so, it's a pleasure to see two your" people enjoying life as much as you two do."

"Do we enjoy life?" said Tuppence, opening her eyes very wide. "I suppose we do. I've never thought about it before."

"To return to that gang you were talking about," said Tommy. "In spite of my extensive private practice, Duchesses, millionaires, and all the best charwomen-I might perhaps condescend to look into the matter for you. I don't like to see Scotland Yard at fault. You'll have the Daily Mail after you before you know where you are."

"As I said before, you must have your bit of fun. Well, it's like this." Again he hitched his chair forward. "There's any amount of forged notes going about just now-hundreds of 'em! The amount of counterfeit Treasury notes in circulation would surprise you. Most artistic bit of work it is. Here's one of 'em."

He took a one pound note from his pocket and handed it to Tommy.

"Looks all right, doesn't it?"

Tommy examined the note with great interest.

"By Jove, I'd never spot there was anything wrong with that."

"No more would most people. Now here's a genuine one. I'll show you the differences-very slight they are, but you'll soon learn to tell them apart. Take this magnifying glass."

At the end of five minutes' coaching, both Tommy and Tuppence were fairly expert.

"What do you want us to do, Inspector Marriot?" asked Tuppence. "Just keep our eyes open for these things?"

"A great deal more than that, Mrs. Beresford. I'm pinning my faith on you to get to the bottom of the matter. You see we've discovered that the notes are being circulated from the West End. Somebody pretty high up in the social scale is doing the distributing. They're passing them the other side of the Channel as well. Now there's a certain person who is interesting us very much. A Major Laidlaw-perhaps you've heard the name?"

"I think I have," said Tommy. "Connected with racing, isn't that it?"

"Yes. Major Laidlaw is pretty well known in connection with the Turf. There's nothing actually against him, but there's a general impression that he's been a bit too smart over one or two rather shady transactions. Men in the know look queer when he's mentioned. Nobody knows much of his past or where he came from. He's got a very attractive French wife who's seen about everywhere with a train

of admirers. They must spend a lot of money, the Laidlaws, and I'd like to know where it comes from."

"Possibly from the train of admirers," suggested Tommy.

"That's the general idea. But I'm not so sure. It may be coincidence, but a lot of notes have been forthcoming from a certain very smart little gambling club which is much frequented by the Laidlaws and their set. This racing, gambling set get rid of a lot of loose money in notes. There couldn't be a better way of getting it into circulation."

"And where do we come in?"

"This way. Young St. Vincent and his wife are friends of yours, I understand? They're in pretty thick with the Laidlaw set-though not as thick as they were. Through them it will be easy for you to get a footing in the same set in a way that none of our people could attempt. There's no likelihood of their spotting you. You'll have an ideal opportunity."

"What have we got to find out exactly?"

"Where they get the stuff from, if they are passing it."

"Quite so," said Tommy. "Major Laidlaw goes out with an empty suitcase. When he returns it is crammed to the bursting point with Treasury notes. How is it done? I sleuth him and find out. Is that the idea?"

"More or less. But don't neglect the lady, and her father, M. Heroulade. Remember the notes are being passed on both sides of the Channel."

"My dear Marriot," exclaimed Tommy reproachfully. "Blunt's Brilliant Detectives do not know the meaning of the word neglect."

The Inspector rose.

"Well, good luck to you," he said, and departed.

"Slush," said Tuppence enthusiastically.

"Eh?" said Tommy perplexed.

"Counterfeit money," explained Tuppence. "It is always called Slush. I know I'm right. Oh, Tommy, we have got an Edgar Wallace case. At last we are Busies."

"We are," said Tommy, "and we are out to get The Crackler and we will get him good."

"Did you say The Cackler or The Crackler?"

"The Crackler."

"Oh, what is a Crackler?"

"A new word that I have coined," said Tommy. "Descriptive of one who passes false notes into circulation. Bank notes crackle; therefore he is called a Crackler. Nothing could be more simple."

"That is rather a good idea," said Tuppence, "it makes it seem more real. I like the Rustler myself. Much more descriptive and sinister."

"No," said Tommy, "I said the Crackler first and I stick to it."

"I shall enjoy this case," said Tuppence. "Lots of Night Clubs and cocktails in it. I shall buy some eyelash black to-morrow."

"Your eyelashes are black already," objected her husband.

"I could make them blacker," said Tuppence, "and cherry lip stick would be useful too. That ultra bright kind."

"Tuppence," said Tommy, "you're a real rake at heart. What a good thing it is that you are married to a sober steady middle aged man like myself."

"You wait," said Tuppence. "When you have been to the Python Club a bit you mayn't be so sober yourself."

Tommy produced from a cupboard various bottles, two glasses, and a cocktail shaker.

"Let's start now," he said. "We are after you, Crackler, and we mean to get you."

Making the acquaintance of the Laidlaws proved an easy affair. Tommy and Tuppence, young, well dressed, eager for life and with apparently money to burn, were soon made free of that particular coterie in which the Laidlaws had their being.

Major Laidlaw was a tall fair man, typically English in appearance, with a hearty sportsmanlike manner, slightly belied by the hard lines round his eyes and the occasional quick sideways glance that assorted oddly with his supposed character.

He was a very dexterous card player, and Tommy noticed that when the stakes were high he seldom rose from the table a loser.

Marguerite Laidlaw was quite a different proposition. She was a charming creature, with the slenderness of a wood nymph and the face of a Greuze picture. Her dainty broken English was fascinating, and Tommy felt that it was no wonder most men were her slaves. She seemed to take a great fancy to Tommy from the first, and playing his part, he allowed himself to be swept into her train.

"My Tommee," she would say. "But positively I cannot go without my Tommee. His 'air, eet ees the color of the sunset, ees eet not?"

Her father was a more sinister figure. Very correct, very upright, with his little black beard and his watchful eyes.

Tuppence was the first to report progress. She came to Tommy with ten one pound notes.

"Have a look at these. They're wrong 'uns, aren't they?"

Tommy examined them and confirmed.Tuppence's diagnosis.

"Where did you get them from?"

"That boy, Jimmy Faulkener. Marguerite Laidlaw gave them to him to put on a horse for her. I said I wanted small notes, and gave him a tenner in exchange."

"All new and crisp," said Tommy thoughtfully. "They can't have passed through many hands. I suppose young Faulkener is all right?"

"Jimmy? Oh! he's a dear. He and I are becoming great Friends."

"So I have noticed," said Tommy coldly. "Do you really think it is necessary?"

"Oh! it isn't business," said Tuppence cheerily. "It's pleasure. He's such a nice boy. I'm glad to get him out of that woman's clutches. You've no idea of the amount of money she's cost him."

"It looks to me as though he were getting rather a pash for you, Tuppence."

"I've thought the same myself sometimes. It's nice to know one's still young and attractive, isn't it?"

"Your moral tone, Tuppence, is deplorably low. You look at these things from the wrong point of view."

"I haven't enjoyed myself so much for years," declared Tuppence shamelessly. "And anyway, what about you? Do I ever see you nowadays? Aren't you always living in Marguerite Laidlaw's pocket?"

"Business," said Tommy crisply.

"But she is attractive, isn't she?"

"Not my type," said Tommy. "I don't admire her."

"Liar," laughed Tuppence. "But I always did think I'd rather marry a liar than a fool."

"I suppose," said Tommy, "that there's no absolute necessity for a husband to be either?"

But Tuppence merely threw him a pitying glance and withdrew.

Amongst Mrs. Laidlaw's train of admirers was a simple but extremely wealthy gentleman of the name of Hank Ryder.

Mr. Ryder came from Alabama, and from the first he was disposed to make a friend and confidant of Tommy.

"That's a wonderful woman, sir," said Mr. Ryder, following the lovely Marguerite with reverential eyes. "Plumb full of civilization. Can’t beat la gaie France, can you? When I'm near her, I feel as though I was one

of the Almighty's earliest experiments. I guess He'd got to get His hand in before He attempted anything so lovely as that perfectly lovely woman."

Tommy agreeing politely with these sentiments, Mr. Ryder unburdened himself still further.

"Seems kind of a shame a lovely creature like that should have money worries."

"Has she?" asked Tommy.

"You betcha life she has. Queer fish, Laidlaw. She's skeered of him. Told me so. Daren't tell him about her little bills."

"Are they little billls?" asked Tommy.

"Well-when I say little! After all, a woman's got to wear clothes, and the less there are of them the more they cost, the way I figure it out. And a pretty woman like that doesn't want to go about in last season's goods. Cards too, the poor little thing's been mighty unlucky at cards. Why, she lost fifty to me last night."

"She won two hundred from Jimmy Faulkener the night before," said Tommy drily.

"Did she indeed? That relieves my mind some. By the way, there seems to be a lot of dud notes floating around in your country just now. I paid in a bunch at my bank this morning, and twenty-five of them were

down and outers, so the polite gentleman behind the counter informed me."

"That's rather a large proportion. Were they new looking?"

"New and crisp as they make 'em. Why, they were the ones Mrs. Laidlaw paid over to me, I reckon. Wonder where she got 'em from. One of these toughs on the race course as likely as not."

"Yes," said Tommy. "Very likely."

"You know, Mr. Beresford, I'm new to this sort of high life. All these swell dames, and the rest of the outfit. Only made my pile a short while back. Came right over to Yurrop to see life."

Tommy nodded. He made a mental note to the effect that with the aid of Marguerite Laidlaw Mr. Ryder would probably see a good deal of life and that the price charged would be heavy.

Meantime, for the second time, he had evidenced that the forged notes were being distributed pretty near at hand, and that in all probability Marguerite Laidlaw had a hand in their distribution.

On the following night he himself was given a proof.

It was at that small select meeting place mentioned by Inspector Marriot. There was dancing there, but the real attraction of the place lay behind a pair of imposing folding doors. There were two rooms there with green baize covered tables, where vast sums changed hands nightly.

Marguerite Laidlaw, rising at last to go, thrust a quantity of small notes into Tommy's hands.

"They are so bulkee, Tommee-you will change them, yes? A beeg note. See my so sweet leetle bag, it bulges him to distraction."

Tommy brought her the hundred pound note she asked for. Then in a quiet corner, he examined the notes she had given him. At least a quarter of them were counterfeit.

But where did she get her supplies from? To that he had as yet no answer. By means of Albert's cooperation, he was almost sure that Laidlaw was not the man. His movements had been watched closely and had yielded no result.

Tommy suspected her father, the saturnine M. Heroulade. He went to and fro to France fairly often. What could be simpler than to bring the notes across with him? A false bottom to a trunk-something of that kind.

Tommy strolled slowly out of the Club, absorbed in these thoughts, but was suddenly recalled to immediate necessities. Outside in the street was Mr. Hank P. Ryder, and it was clear at once that Mr. Ryder was not strictly sober. At the moment he was trying to hang his hat on the radiator of a car, and missing it by some inches every time.

"This goddarned hatshtand, this goddarned hatshtand," said Mr. Ryder tearfully. "Not like that in the Shtates. Man can hang up hishhat

every night-every night, sir. You're wearing two hatshs. Never sheen a man wearing two hatsh before. Mushtbe effectclimate."

"Perhaps I've got two heads," said Tommy gravely.

"Sho you have," said Mr. Ryder. "Thatsh odd. Thatsh remarkable fac. Letsh have a cocktail. Prohibition-probishun-thatsh whatsh done me in. I guess I'm drunk-constootionally drunk. Cocktailsh-mixed 'em-Angel's Kiss- that's Marguerite-lovely creature, fon' o' me too. Horshes Neck, two Martinis-three Road to Ruinsh-no, roadshto roon-mixed 'em all-in a beer tankard. Bet me I wouldn't-I shaid-to hell, I shayed-"

Tommy interrupted.

"That's all right," he said soothingly. "Now what about getting home?"

"No home to go to," said Mr. Ryder sadly, and wept.

"What Hotel are you staying at?" asked Tommy.

"Can't go home," said Mr. Ryder. "Treasurehunt. Swell thing to do. She did it. Whitechapel-White heartsh, white headsh shorrow to the grave-"

"Never mind that," said Tommy. "Where are you-"

But Mr. Ryder became suddenly dignified. He drew himself erect and attained a sudden miraculous command over his speech.

"Young man, I'm telling you. Margee took me. In her car Treasure Hunting. Englisharishtocrashy all do it. Under the cobblestones. Five

hundred poundsh. Solemn thought, 'tis solemn thought. I'm telling you, young man. You've been kind to me. I've got your welfare at heart, sir, at heart. We Americans-"

Tommy interrupted him this time with even less ceremony.

"What's that you say? Mrs. Laidlaw took you in a car?"

The American nodded with a kind of owlish solemnity.

"To Whitechapel?" Again that owlish nod. "And you found five hundred pounds there?"

Mr. Ryder struggled for words.

"S-she did," he corrected his questioner. "Left me outside. Outside the door. Always left outside. It's kinder sad. Outside-always outside."

"Would you know your way there?"

"I guess so. Hank Ryder doesn't lose his bearings-"

Tommy hauled him along unceremoniously. He found his own car where it was waiting, and presently they were bowling eastward. The cool air revived Mr. Ryder. After slumping against Tommy's shoulder in a kind of stupor, he awoke clear headed and refreshed.

"Say, boy, where are we?" he demanded.

"Whitechapel," said Tommy crisply. "Is this where you came with Mrs. Laidlaw tonight?"'

"It looks kinder familiar," admitted Mr. Ryder looking round. "Seems to me we turned off to the left somewhere down here. That's it-that street there."

Tommy turned off obediently. Mr. Ryder issued directions.

"That's it. Sure. And round to the right. Say, aren't the smells awful? Yes, past the pub at the corner-sharp round, and stop at the mouth of that little alley. But what's the big idea? Hand it to me. Some of the oof left behind? Are we going to put one over on them?"

"That's exactly it," said Tommy. "We're going to put one over on them. Rather a joke, isn't it?"

"I'll tell the world," assented Mr. Ryder. "Though I'm just a mite hazed about it all," he ended wistfully.

Tommy got out and assisted Mr. Ryder to alight also. They advanced into the alley way. On the left were the backs of a row of dilapidated houses, most of which had doors opening into the alley. Mr. Ryder came to a stop before one of these doors.

"In here she went," he declared. "It was this door-I'm plumb certain of it."

"They all look very alike," said Tommy. "Reminds me of the story of the soldier and the Princess. You remember, they made a cross on the door to show which one it was. Shall we do the same?"

Laughing, he drew a piece of white chalk from his pocket and made a rough cross low down on the door. Then he looked up at various dim shapes that prowled high on the walls of the alley, one of which was uttering a blood curdling yawl.

"Lots of cats about," he remarked cheerfully.

"What is the procedure?" asked Mr. Ryder. "Do we step inside?"

"Adopting due precautions we do," said Tommy.

He glanced up and down the alley way, then softly tried the door. It yielded. He pushed it open, and peered into a dim yard.

Noiselessly he passed through, Mr. Ryder on his heels.

"Gee!" said the latter. "There's someone coming down the alley."

He slipped outside again. Tommy stood still for a minute, then hearing nothing went on. He took a torch from his pocket and switched on the light for a brief second. That momentary flash enabled him to see his way ahead. He pushed forward and tried the closed door ahead of him. That too gave, and very softly he pushed it open and went in.

After standing still a second and listening, he again switched on the torch, and at that flash, as though at a given signal, the place seemed

to rise round him. Two men were in front of him, two men were behind him. They closed in on him, and bore him down.

"Lights," growled a voice.

An incandescent gas burner was lit. By its light Tommy saw a circle of unpleasing faces. His eyes wandered gently round the room and noted some of the objects in it.

"Ah!" he said pleasantly. "The headquarters of the counterfeiting industry, if I am not mistaken."

"Shut your jaw," growled one of the men.

The door opened and shut behind Tommy, and a genial and well known voice spoke.

"Got him, boys. That's right. Now, Mr. Busy, let me tell you you're up against it."

"That dear old word," said Tommy. "How it thrills me. Yes. I am the Mystery Man of Scotland Yard. Why it's Mr. Hank Ryder. This is a surprise."

"I guess you mean that too. I've been laughing fit to bust all this evening-leading you here like a little child. And you so pleased with your cleverness. Why, sonny, I was on to you from the start. You weren't in with that crowd for your health. I let you play about for a while, and when you got real suspicious of the lovely Marguerite, I said

to myself 'Now's the time to lead him to it.' I guess your friends won't be hearing of you for some time."

"Going to do me in? That's the correct expression, I believe. You have got it in for me."

"You've got a nerve all right. Not we shan't attempt violence. Just keep you under restraint, so to speak."

"I'm afraid you're backing the wrong horse," said Tommy. "I've no intention of being 'kept under restraint' as you call it."

Mr. Ryder smiled genially. From outside a cat uttered a melancholy cry to the moon.

"Banking on that cross you put on the door, eh Sonny?" said Mr. Ryder. "I shouldn't if I were you. Because I know that story you mentioned. Heard it when I was a little boy. I stepped back into the alleyway to enact the part of the dog with eyes as big as cart wheels. If you were in that alley now, you would observe that every door in the alley is marked with an identical cross."

Tommy drooped his head despondently.

"Thought you were mighty clever, didn't you?" said Ryder.

As the words left his lips a sharp rapping sounded on the door.

"What's that?" he cried, starting.

At the same time, an assault began on the front of the house. The door at the back was a flimsy affair. The lock gave almost immediately and Inspector Marriot showed in the doorway.

"Well done, Marriot," said Tommy. "You were quite right as to the district. I'd like you to make the acquaintance of Mr. Hank Ryder who knows all the best fairy tales."

"You see, Mr. Ryder," he added gently, "I've had my suspicions of you. Albert (that important looking boy with the big ears is Albert) had orders to follow on his motor cycle if you and I went off joy riding at any time. And whilst I was ostentatiously marking a chalk cross on the door to engage your attention, I also emptied a little bottle of valerian on the ground. Nasty smell, but cats love it. All the cats in the neighborhood were assembled outside to mark the right house when Albert and the police arrived."

He looked at the dumbfounded Mr. Ryder with a smile. Then rose to his feet.

"I said I would get you, Crackler, and I have got you," he observed.

"What the Hell are you talking about?" asked Mr. Ryder. "What do you mean-Crackler?"

"You will find it in the glossary of the next criminal dictionary," said Tommy. "Etymology doubtful."

He looked round him with a happy smile.

"And all done without a Nose," he murmured brightly. "Good night, Marriot. I must go now to where the happy ending of the story awaits me. No reward like the love of a good woman-and the love of a good woman awaits me at home-that is I hope it does, but one never knows nowadays. This has been a very dangerous job, Marriot. Do you know Captain Jimmy Faulkener? His dancing is simply too marvellous and as for his taste in cocktails-! Yes, Marriot, it has been a very dangerous job."

15.THE SUNNINGDALE MYSTERY

“Do you know where we are going to lunch today, Tuppence?"

Mrs. Beresford considered the question.

"The Ritz?" she suggested hopefully.

"Think again."

"That nice little place in Soho?"

"No." Tommy's tone was full of importance. "An A.B.C. shop. This one in fact."

He drew her deftly inside an establishment of the kind indicated, and steered her to a corner marble-topped table.

"Excellent," said Tommy with satisfaction, as he seated himself. "Couldn't be better."

"Why has this craze for the simple life come upon you?" demanded Tuppence.

"You see, Watson, but you do not observe. I wonder now whether one of these haughty damsels would condescend to notice us? Splendid, she drifts this way. It is true that she appears to be thinking of something else, but doubtless her subconscious mind is functioning busily with such matters as ham and eggs and pots of tea. Chop and fried potatoes, please, Miss, and a large coffee, a roll and butter, and a plate of tongue for the lady."

The waitress repeated the order in a scornful tone, but Tuppence leant forward suddenly and interrupted her.

"No, not a chop and fried potatoes. This gentleman will have a cheese cake and a glass of milk."

"A cheese cake and a milk," said the waitress with even deeper scorn if that were possible. Still thinking of something else, she drifted away again.

"That was uncalled for," said Tommy coldly.

"But I'm right, aren't I? You are the Old Man in the Corner? Where's your piece of string?"

Tommy drew a long twisted mesh of string from his pocket, and proceeded to tie a couple of knots in it.

"Complete to the smallest detail," he murmured.

"You made a small mistake in ordering your meal, though."

"Women are so literal minded," said Tommy. "If there's one thing I hate it's milk to drink, and cheese cakes are always so yellow and bilious looking."

"Be an artist," said Tuppence. "Watch me attack my cold tongue. Jolly good stuff, cold tongue. Now then, I'm all ready to be Miss Polly Burton. Tie a large knot and begin."

"First of all," said Tommy, "speaking in a strictly unofficial capacity, let me point out this. Business is not too brisk lately. If business does not come to us, we must go to business. Apply our minds to one of the great public mysteries of the moment. Which brings me to the point-the Sunningdale Mystery."

"Ah!" said Tuppence, with deep interest. "The Sunningdale Mystery!"

Tommy drew a crumpled piece of newspaper from his pocket and laid it on the table.

"That is the latest portrait of Captain Sessle as it appeared in the Daily Leader."

"Just so," said Tuppence. "I wonder someone doesn't sue these newspapers sometimes. You can see it's a man and that's all."

"When I said the Sunningdale Mystery, I should have said the so-called Sunningdale Mystery," went on Tommy rapidly. "A mystery to the police perhaps, but not to an intelligent mind."

"Tie another knot," said Tuppence.

"I don't know how much of the case you remember," continued Tommy quietly.

"All of it," said Tuppence, "but don't let me cramp your style."

"It was just over three weeks ago," said Tommy, "that that gruesome discovery was made on the famous golf links. Two members of the Club who were enjoying an early round were horrified to find the body of a man lying face downwards on the seventh tee. Even before they turned him over they had guessed him to be Captain Sessle, a well known figure on the links, and who always wore a golf coat of a peculiarly bright blue color.

"Captain Sessle was often seen out on the links early in the morning, practicing, and it was thought at first that he had been suddenly overcome by some form of heart disease. But examination by a doctor revealed the sinister fact that he had been murdered, stabbed to the heart with a significant object, a woman's hat pin. He was also found to have been dead at least twelve hours.

"That put an entirely different complexion on the matter, and very soon some interesting facts came to light. Practically the last person to see Captain Sessle alive was his friend and partner Mr. Hollaby of the Porcupine Assurance Co., and he told his story as follows.

"Sessle and he played a round earlier in the day. After tea the other suggested that they should play a few more holes before it got too dark to see. Hollaby assented. Sessle seemed in good spirits, and was in excellent form. There is a public footpath that crosses the links, and just as they were playing up to the sixth green Hollaby noticed a woman coming along it. She was very tall and dressed in brown, but he did not observe her particularly and Sessle he thought did not notice her at all.

"The footpath in question crosses in front of the seventh tee," continued Tommy. "The woman had passed along this, and was standing at the farther side, as though waiting. Captain Sessle was the first to reach the tee, as Mr. Hollaby was replacing the pin in the hole. As the latter came towards the tee, he was astonished to see Sessle and the woman talking together. As he came nearer, they both turned abruptly, Sessle calling over his shoulder: 'Shan't be a minute.'

“The two of them walked off side by side, still deep in earnest conversation. The footpath there leaves the course, and passing between two narrow hedges of neighboring gardens comes out on the road to Windlesham.

"Captain Sessle was as good as his word. He reappeared within a minute or two, much to Hollaby's satisfaction, as two other players were coming up behind them, and the light was failing rapidly. They

drove off, and at once Hollaby noticed that something had occurred to upset his companion. Not only did he foozle his drive badly, but his face was worried, and his forehead creased in a big frown. He hardly answered his companion's remarks, and his golf was atrocious. Evidently something had occurred to put him completely off his game.

"They played that hole and the eighth, and then Captain Sessle declared abruptly that the light was too bad and that he was off home. Just at that point there is another of those narrow 'slips' leading to the Windlesham road, and Captain Sessle departed that way which was a short cut to his home, a small bungalow on the road in question. The other two players came up, a Major Barnard and Mr. Lecky, and to them Hollaby mentioned Captain Sessle's sudden change of manner. They also had seen him speaking to the woman in brown, but had not been near enough to see her face. All three men wondered what she could have said to upset their friend to that extent.

"They returned to the Club House together, and as far as was known at the time, were the last people to see Captain Sessle alive. The day was a Wednesday and on Wednesdays cheap tickets to London are issued. The man and wife who ran Captain Sessle's small bungalow were up in town according to custom, and did not return until the late train. They entered the Bungalow as usual, and supposed their master to be in his room asleep. Mrs. Sessle, his wife, was away on a visit.

"The murder of the Captain was a nine days' wonder. Nobody could suggest a motive for it. The identity of the tall woman in brown was eagerly discussed, but without result. The police were, as usual, blamed for their supineness-most unjustly as time was to show. For a

week later, a girl called Doris Evans was arrested and charged with the murder of Captain Anthony Sessle.

"The police had had little to work upon. A strand of fair hair caught in the dead man's fingers, and a few threads of flame colored wool caught on one of the buttons of his blue coat. Diligent inquiries at the Railway Station and elsewhere had elicited the following facts.

"A young girl dressed in a flame colored coat and skirt had arrived by Main that evening about seven o'clock, and had asked the way to Captain Sessle's house. The same girl had reappeared again at the station, two hours later. Her hat was awry and her hair tousled, and she seemed in a state of great agitation. She inquired about the trains back to town, and was continually looking over her shoulder as though afraid of something.

"Our police force is in many ways very wonderful. With this slender evidence to go upon, they managed to track down the girl, and identify her as one Doris Evans. She was charged with murder, and cautioned that anything she might say would be used against her, but she nevertheless persisted in making a statement, and this statement she repeated again in detail, without any substantial variation, at the subsequent proceedings.

"Her story was this. She was a typist by profession, and had made friends one evening, in a Cinema, with a well dressed man who declared he had taken a fancy to her. His name, he told her, was Anthony, and he suggested that she should come down to his bungalow at Sunningdale. She had no idea then, or at any other time, that he had a wife. It was arranged between them that she should

come down on the following Wednesday-the day, you will remember, when the servants would be absent and his wife away from home. In the end he told her his full name was Anthony Sessle, and gave her the name of his house.

"She duly arrived at the Bungalow on the evening in question, and was greeted by Sessle who had just come in from She links. Though he professed himself delighted to see her, the girl declared that from the first his manner was strange and different. A half acknowledged fear sprang up in her, and she wished fervently that she had not come.

"After a simple meal which was all ready and prepared, Sessle suggested going out for a stroll. The girl consenting, he took her out of the house, down the road, and along the 'slip' onto the golf course. And then suddenly, just as they were crossing the seventh tee, he seemed to go completely mad. Drawing a revolver from his pocket, he brandished it in the air, declaring that he had come to the end of his tether.

"'Everything must go! I'm ruined-done for. And you shall go with me. I shall shoot you first-then myself. They will find our bodies here in the morning side by side-together in death.'

"And so on-a lot more. He had hold of Doris Evans by the arm and she, realising she had to do with a madman, made frantic efforts to free herself, or failing that to get the revolver away from him. They struggled together, and in that struggle he must have torn out a piece of her hair and got the wool of her coat entangled on a button.

"Finally, with a desperate effort, she freed herself, and ran for her life across the golf links, expecting every minute to be shot down with a revolver bullet. She fell twice-tripping over the heather, but eventually regained the road to the station and realised that she was not being pursued.

"That is the story that Doris Evans tells-and from which she has never varied. She strenuously denies that she ever struck at him with a hat pin in self defence-a natural enough thing to do under the circumstances, though-and one which may well be the truth. In support of her story a revolver has been found in the furze bushes near where the body is lying. It had not been fired.

"Doris Evans has been sent for trial, but the mystery still remains a mystery. If her story is to be believed, who was it who stabbed Captain Sessle? The other woman, the tall woman in brown whose appearance so upset him? So far no one has explained her connection with the case. She appears out of space suddenly on the footpath across the links, she disappears along the slip, and no one ever hears of her again. Who was she? A local resident? A visitor from London? If so, did she come by car or train? There is nothing remarkable about her except her height, no one seems to be able to describe her appearance. She could not have been Doris Evans for Doris Evans is small and fair, and moreover was only just then arriving at the station."

"The wife?" suggested Tuppence. "What about the wife?"

"A very natural suggestion. But Mrs. Sessle is also a small woman, and besides Mr. Hollaby knows her well by sight, and there seems no doubt that she was really away from home. One further development has

come to light. The Porcupine Assurance Co. is in liquidation. The accounts reveal the most daring misappropriation of funds. The reasons for Captain Sessle's wild words to Doris Evans are now quite apparent. For some years past, he must have been systematically embezzling money. Neither Mr. Hollaby, nor his son, had any idea of what was going on. They are practically ruined.

"The case stands like this. Captain Sessle was on the verge of discovery and ruin. Suicide would be a natural solution, but the nature of the wound rules that theory out. Who killed him? Was it Doris Evans? Was it the mysterious woman in brown?"

Tommy paused, took a sip of milk, made a wry face, and bit cautiously at the cheese cake.

16. THE SUNNINGDALE MYSTERY (continued)

"Of course," murmured Tommy, "I saw at once where the hitch in this particular case lay, and just where the police were going astray."

"Yes?" said Tuppence eagerly.

Tommy shook his head sadly.

"I wish I did. Tuppence, it's dead easy being the Old Man in the Corner up to a certain point. But the solution beats me. Who did murder the beggar? I don't know."

He took some more newspaper cuttings out of his pocket.

"Further exhibits. Mr. Hollaby. His son. Mrs. Sessle. Doris Evans."

Tuppence pounced on the last, and looked at it for some time.

"She didn't murder him anyway," she remarked at last. "Not with a hat pin."

"Why this certainty?"

"A Lady Molly touch. She's got bobbed hair. Only one woman in twenty uses hat pins nowadays, anyway-long hair or short. Hats fit tight and pull on-there's no need for such a thing."

"Still, she might have had one by her."

"My dear boy, we don't keep them as heirlooms! What on earth should she have brought a hat pin down to Sunningdale for?"

"Then it must have been the other woman, the woman in brown."

"I wish she hadn't been tall. Then she could have been the wife. I always suspect wives who are away at the time and so couldn't have had anything to do with it. If she found her husband carrying on with that girl, it would be quite natural for her to go for him with a hat pin."

"I shall have to be careful, I see," remarked Tommy.

But Tuppence was deep in thought and refused to be drawn.

"What were the Sessles like?" she asked suddenly. "What sort of thing did people say about them?"

"As far as I can make out, they were very popular. He and his wife were supposed to be devoted to one another. That's what makes the business of the girl so odd. It's the last thing you'd have expected of a man like Sessle. He was an ex-soldier, you know. Came into a good bit of money, retired and went into this Insurance business. The last man in the world, apparently, whom you would have suspected of being a crook."

"Is it absolutely certain that he was the crook? Couldn't it have been the other two who took the money?"

"The Hollabys? They say they're ruined."

"Oh, they say! Perhaps they've got it all in a Bank under another name. I put it foolishly, I daresay, but you know what I mean. Suppose they'd been speculating with the money for some time, unbeknownst to Sessle, and lost it all. It might be jolly convenient for them that Sessle died just when he did."

Tommy tapped the photograph of Mr. Hollaby senior with his finger nail.

“So you're accusing this respectable gentleman of murdering his friend and partner? You forget that he parted from Sessle on the links in full view of Barnard and Lecky, and spent the evening in the Dormy House. Besides, there's the hat pin."

"Bother the hat pin," said Tuppence impatiently. "That hat pin, you think, points to the crime having been committed by a woman?"

"Naturally. Don't you agree?"

"No. Men are notoriously old fashioned. It takes them ages to rid themselves of preconceived ideas. They associate hat pins and hairpins with the female sex, and call them 'women's weapons.' They may have been in the past, but they're both rather out of date now. Why, I haven't had a hat pin or hairpin for the last four years."

"Then you think-?"

"That it was a man killed Sessle. The hat pin was used to make it seem a woman's crime."

"There's something in what you say, Tuppence," said Tommy slowly. "It's extraordinary how things seem to straighten themselves out when you talk a thing over."

Tuppence nodded.

"Everything must be logical-if you look at it the right way. And remember what Marriot once said about the Amateur point of view-that it had the intimacy. We know something about people like Captain Sessle and his wife. We know what they're likely to do-and what they're not likely to do. And we've each got our special knowledge."

Tommy smiled.

"You mean," he said, "that you are an authority on what people with bobbed and shingled heads are likely to have in their possession, and that you have an intimate acquaintance with what wives are likely to feel and do?"

"Something of the sort."

"And what about me? What is my special knowledge? Do husbands pick up girls etc.?"

"No," said Tuppence gravely. "You know the course you've been on it-not as a detective, searching for clues, but as a golfer. You know about golf, and what's likely to put a man off his game."

"It must have been something pretty serious to put Sessle off his game. His handicap's two, and from the seventh tee on he played like a child, so they say."

"Who say?"

"Barnard and Lecky. They were playing just behind him, you remember."

"That was after he met the woman-the tall woman in brown. They saw him speaking to her, didn't they?"

"Yes-at least-"

Tommy broke off. Tuppence looked up at him, and was puzzled. He was staring at the piece of string in his fingers, but staring with the eyes of one who sees something very different.

"Tommy-what is it?"

"Be quiet, Tuppence. I'm playing the sixth hole at Sunningdale. Sessle and old Hollaby are holding out on the sixth green ahead of me. It's getting dusk, but I can see that bright blue coat of Sessle's clearly enough. And on the footpath to the left of me there's a woman coming along. She hasn't crossed from the Ladies' Course-that's on the right-I should have seen her if she had done so. And it's odd I didn't see her on the footpath before-from the fifth tee, for instance."

He paused.

"You said just now I knew the course, Tuppence. Just behind the sixth tee, there's a little hut or shelter made of turf. Anyone could wait in there until-the right moment came. They could change their appearance there. I mean-tell me, Tuppence this is where your special knowledge comes in again-would it be very difficult for a man to look like a woman, and then change back to being a man again? Could he wear a skirt over plus fours, for instance?"

"Certainly he could. The woman would look a bit bulky, that would be all. A longish brown skirt, say, a brown sweater of the kind both men and women wear, and a woman's felt hat with a bunch of side curls attached each side. That would be all that was needed-I'm speaking, of course, of what would pass at a distance, which I take to be what you are driving at. Switch off the skirt, take off the hat and curls, and put

on a man's cap which you can carry rolled up in your hand, and there you'd be-back as a man again."

"And the time required for the transformation?"

"From woman to man, a minute and a half at the outside, probably a good deal less. The other way about would take longer, you'd have to arrange the hat and curls a bit, and the skirt would stick getting it on over the plus fours."

"That doesn't worry me. It's the time for the first that matters. As I tell you, I'm playing the sixth hole. The woman in brown has reached the seventh tee now. She crosses it and waits. Sessle in his blue coat goes towards her. They stand together a minute, and then they follow the path round the trees out of sight. Hollaby is on the tee alone. Two or three minutes pass. I'm on the green now. The man in the blue coat comes back and drives off, foozling badly. The light's getting worse. I and my partner go on. Ahead of us are those two, Sessle slicing and topping and doing everything he shouldn't do. At the eighth green, I see him stride off and vanish down the slip. What happened to him to make him play like a different man?"

"The woman in brown-or the man, if you think it was a man."

"Exactly, and where they were standing-out of sight, remember, of those coming after them-there's a deep tangle of furze bushes. You could thrust a body in there, and it would be pretty certain to lie hidden until the morning."

“Tommy! You think it was then-But someone would have heard-"

"Heard what? The doctors agreed death must have been instantaneous. I've seen men killed instantaneously in the War. They don't cry out as a rule-just a gurgle, or a moan -perhaps just a sigh, or a funny little cough. Sessle comes towards the seventh tee, and the woman comes forward and speaks to him. He recognizes her perhaps, as a man he knows masquerading. Curious to learn the why and wherefore, he allows himself to be drawn along the footpath out of sight. One stab with the deadly hat pin as they walk along. Sessle falls-dead. The other man drags his body into the furze bushes, strips off the blue coat, then sheds his own skirt and the hat and curls. He puts on Sessle's well known blue coat and cap, and strides back to the tee. Three minutes would do it. The others behind can't see his face, only the peculiar blue coat they know so well. They never doubt that it's Sessle-but he doesn't play Sessle's brand of golf. They all say he played like a different man. Of course he did. He was a different man."

"But-"

"Point No. 2. His action in bringing the girl down there was the action of a different man. It wasn't Sessle who met Doris Evans at a Cinema, and induced her to come down to Sunningdale. It was a man calling himself Sessle. Remember, Doris Evans wasn't arrested until a fortnight after the crime. She never saw the body. If she had, she might have bewildered everyone by declaring that that wasn't the man who took her out on the golf links that night, and spoke so wildly of suicide. It was a carefully laid plot. The girl invited down for Wednesday when Sessle's house would be empty, then the hat pin which pointed to its being a woman's doing. The murderer meets the girl, takes her into the Bungalow and gives her supper, then takes her out on the links and

when he gets to the scene of the crime, brandishes his revolver and scares the life out of her. Once she has taken to her heels, all he has to do is to pull out the body and leave it lying on the tee. The revolver he chucks into the bushes. Then he makes a neat parcel of the skirt and hat and-now I admit I'm guessing-in all probability walks to Woking which is only about six or seven miles away, and goes back to town from there."

"Wait a minute," said Tuppence. "There's one thing you haven't explained. What about Hollaby?"

"Hollaby?"

"Yes. I admit that the people behind couldn't have seen whether it was really Sessle or not. But you can't tell me that the man who was playing with him was so hypnotised by the blue coat that he never looked at his face."

"My dear old thing," said Tommy. "That's just the point. Hollaby knew all right. You see, I'm adopting your theory-that Hollaby and his son were the real embezzlers. The murderer's got to be a man who knew Sessle pretty well-knew, for instance, about the servants being always out on a Wednesday, and that his wife was away. And also someone who was able to get an impression of Sessle's latch key. I think Hollaby Junior would fulfill all these requirements. He's about the same age and height as Sessle, and they were both clean shaven men. Doris Evans probably saw several photographs of the murdered man reproduced in the papers, but as you yourself observed-one can just see that it's a man and that's about all."

"Didn't she ever see Hollaby in Court?"

"The son never appeared in the case at all. Why should he? He had no evidence to give. It was old Hollaby, with his irreproachable alibi, who stood in the limelight throughout. Nobody has even bothered to inquire what son was doing that particular evening."

"It all fits in," admitted Tuppence. She paused a minute, and then asked: "Are you going to tell all this to the police?"

"I don't know if they'd listen."

"They'll listen all right," said an unexpected voice behind him.

Tommy swung round to confront Inspector Marriot. The Inspector was sitting at the next table. In front of him was a poached egg.

"Often drop in here to lunch," said Inspector Marriot. "As I was saying, we'll listen all right-in fact I've been listening. I don't mind telling you that we've not been quite satisfied all along over those Porcupine figures. You see, we've had our suspicions of those Hollabys. But nothing to go upon. Too sharp for us. Then this murder came, and that seemed to upset all our ideas. But thanks to you and the lady, sir, we'll confront young Hollaby and Doris Evans and see if she recognizes him. I rather fancy she will. That's a very ingenious idea of yours about the blue coat. I'll see that Blunt's Brilliant Detectives get the credit for it."

"You are a nice man, Inspector Marriot," said Tuppence gratefully.

"We think a lot of you two at the Yard," replied that stolid gentleman. "You'd be surprised. If I may ask you, sir, what's the meaning of that piece of string?"

"Nothing," said Tommy, stuffing it into his pocket. "A bad habit of mine. As to the cheese cake and the milk-I'm on a diet. Nervous dyspepsia. Busy men are always martyrs to it."

"Ah!" said the detective. "I thought perhaps you'd been reading-well, it's of no consequence."

But the Inspector's eyes twinkled.

17. THE HOUSE OF LURKING DEATH

"What-" began Tuppence, and then stopped.

She had just entered the private office of Mr. Blunt from the adjoining one marked "Clerks," and was surprised to behold her lord and master with his eye riveted to the private peep hole into the outer office.

"Ssh," said Tommy, warningly. "Didn't you hear the buzzer? It's a girl-rather a nice girl-in fact she looks to me a frightfully nice girl. Albert is telling her all that tosh about my being engaged with Scotland Yard."

"Let me see," demanded Tuppence.

Somewhat unwillingly, Tommy moved aside. Tuppence in her turn glued her eye to the peep hole.

"She's not bad," admitted Tuppence. "And her clothes are simply the latest shout."

"She's perfectly lovely," said Tommy. "She's like those girls Mason writes about-you know, frightfully sympathetic, and beautiful, and distinctly intelligent without being too saucy. I think, yes-I certainly think-I shall be the great Hanaud this morning."

"Hm," said Tuppence. "If there is one detective out of all the others whom you are most unlike-I should say it was Hanaud. Can you do the lightning changes of personality? Can you be the great comedian, the little gutter boy, the serious and sympathetic friend-all in five minutes?"

"I know this," said Tommy, rapping sharply on the desk, "I am the Captain of the Ship-and don't you forget it, Tuppence. I'm going to have her in."

He pressed the buzzer on his desk. Albert appeared ushering in the client.

The girl stopped in the doorway as though undecided. Tommy came forward.

"Come in, Mademoiselle," he said kindly, "and seat yourself here."

Tuppence choked audibly, and Tommy turned upon her with a swift change of manner. His tone was menacing.

"You spoke, Miss Robinson? Ah! no, I thought not."

He turned back to the girl.

"We will not be serious or formal," he said. "You will just tell me all about it, and then we will discuss the best way to help you."

"You are very kind," said the girl. "Excuse me, but are you a foreigner?"

A fresh choke from Tuppence. Tommy glared in her direction out of the corner of his eye.

"Not exactly," he said with difficulty. "But of late years I have worked a good deal abroad. My methods are the methods of the Sûreté."

"Oh!" The girl seemed impressed.

She was, as Tommy had indicated, a very charming girl. Young and slim, with a trace of golden hair peeping out from under her little brown felt hat, and big serious eyes.

That she was nervous could be plainly seen. Her little hands were twisting themselves together, and she kept clasping and unclasping the catch of her lacquer red handbag.

"First of all, Mr. Blunt, I must tell you that my name is Lois Hargreaves. I live in a great rambling old fashioned house called Thurnly Grange. It is in the heart of the country. There is the village of Thurnly near by, but it is very small and insignificant. There is plenty of hunting in winter, and we get tennis in summer, and I have never felt lonely there. Indeed I much prefer country to town life.

"I tell you this so that you may realise that in a country village like ours, everything that happens is of supreme importance. About a week ago, I got a box of chocolates sent through the post. There was nothing inside to indicate who they came from. Now I myself am not particularly fond of chocolates, but the others in the house are, and the box was passed around. As a result, everyone who had eaten any chocolates was taken ill. We sent for the doctor, and after various inquiries as to what other things had been eaten, he took the remains of the chocolates away with him, and had them analysed. Mr. Blunt, those chocolates contained arsenic! Not enough to kill anyone, but enough to make anyone quite ill."

"Extraordinary," commented Tommy.

"Dr. Burton was very excited over the matter. It seems that this was the third occurrence of the kind in the neighborhood. In each case a big house was selected, and the inmates were taken ill after eating the mysterious chocolates. It looked as though some local person of weak intellect was playing a particularly fiendish practical joke."

"Quite so, Miss Hargreaves."

"Dr. Burton put it down to Socialist agitation-rather absurdly, I thought. But there are one or two malcontents in Thurnly village, and it seemed possible that they might have had something to do with it. Dr. Burton was very keen that I should put the whole thing in the hands of the police."

"A very natural suggestion," said Tommy. "But you have not done so, I gather, Miss Hargreaves?"

"No," admitted the girl. "I hate the fuss and the publicity that would ensue-and you see, I know our local Inspector. I can never imagine him finding out anything! I have often seen your advertisements, and I told Dr. Burton that it would be much better to call in a private detective."

"I see."

"You say a great deal about discretion in your advertisement. I take that to mean-that-that-well, that you would not make anything public without my consent?"

Tommy looked at her curiously, but it was Tuppence who spoke.

"I think," she said quietly, "that it would be as well if Miss Hargreaves told us everything."

She laid especial stress upon the last word, and Lois Hargreaves flushed nervously.

"Yes " said Tommy quickly. "Miss Robinson is right. You must tell us everything."

"You will not-" she hesitated.

"Everything you say is understood to be strictly in confidence."

"Thank you. I know that I ought to have been quite frank with you. I have a reason for not going to the police. Mr. Blunt, that box of chocolates was sent by someone in our house!"

"How do you know that, Mademoiselle?"

"It's very simple. I've got a habit of drawing a little silly thing-three fish intertwined-whenever I have a pencil in my hand. A parcel of silk stockings arrived from a certain shop in London not long ago. We were at the breakfast table. I'd just been marking something in the newspaper, and without thinking, I began to draw my silly little fish on the label of the parcel before cutting the string and opening it. I thought no more about the matter, but when I was examining the piece of brown paper in which the chocolates had been sent, I caught sight of the corner of the original label-most of which had been torn off. My silly little drawing was on it."

Tommy drew his chair forward.

"That is very serious. It creates, as you say, a very strong presumption that the sender of the chocolates is a member of your household. But you will forgive me if I say that I still do not see why that fact should render you indisposed to call in the police?"

Lois Hargreaves looked him squarely in the face.

"I will tell you, Mr. Blunt. I may want the whole thing hushed up."

Tommy retired gracefully from the position.

"In that case," he murmured, "we know where we are. I see, Miss Hargreaves, that you are not disposed to tell me who it is you suspect?"

"I suspect no one-but there are possibilities."

"Quite so. Now will you describe the household to me in detail?"

"The servants, with the exception of the parlormaid, are all old ones who have been with us many years. I must explain to you, Mr. Blunt, that I was brought up by my Aunt, Lady Radclyffe, who was extremely wealthy. Her husband made a big fortune, and was knighted. It was he who bought Thurnly Grange, but he died two years after going there, and it was then that Lady Radclyffe sent for me to come and make my home with her. I was her only living relation. The other inmate of the house was Dennis Radclyffe, her husband's nephew. I have always called him cousin, but of course he is really nothing of the kind. Aunt Lucy always said openly that she intended to leave her money, with the exception of a small provision for me, to Dennis. It was Radclyffe money, she said, and ought to go to a Radclyffe. However, when Dennis was twenty-two, she quarrelled violently with him-over some debts that he had run up, I think. When she died, a year later, I was astonished to find that she had made a will leaving all her money to me. It was, I know, a great blow to Dennis, and I felt very badly about it. I would have given him the money if he would have taken it, but it seems

that that kind of thing can't be done. However, as soon as I was twenty-one, I made a will leaving it all to him. That's the least I can do. So if I'm run over by a motor, Dennis will come into his own."

"Exactly," said Tommy. "And when were you twenty-one, if I may ask the question?"

"Just three weeks ago."

"Ah!" said Tommy. "Now will you give me fuller particulars of the members of your household at this minute?"

"Servants-or-others?"

"Both."

"The servants, as I say, have been with us some time. There is old Mrs. Holloway, the cook, and her niece Rose, the kitchenmaid. Then there are two elderly housemaids, and Hannah who was my aunt's maid and who has always been devoted to me. The parlormaid is called Esther Quant, and seems a very nice quiet girl. As for ourselves, there is Miss Logan who was Aunt Lucy's companion and who runs the house for me, and Captain Radclyffe-Dennis, you know, whom I told you about, and there is a girl called Mary Chilcott, an old school friend of mine who is staying with us."

Tommy thought for a moment.

"That all seems fairly clear and straightforward, Miss Hargreaves," he said after a minute or two. "I take it that you have no special reason for

attaching suspicion more to one person than another? You are only afraid it might prove to be-well-not a servant, shall we say?"

"That's it exactly, Mr. Blunt. I have honestly no idea who used that piece of brown paper. The handwriting was printed."

"There seems only one thing to be done," said Tommy. "I must be on the spot."

The girl looked at him inquiringly.

Tommy went on after a moment's thought.

"I suggest that you prepare the way for the arrival of-say, Mr. and Miss Van Dusen-American friends of yours. Will you be able to do that quite naturally?"

"Oh! yes. There will be no difficulty at all. When will you come down-to-morrow-or the day after?"

"To-morrow, if you please. There is no time to waste."

"That is settled, then."

The girl rose, and held out her hand.

"One thing, Miss Hargreaves, not a word, mind, to anyone-anyone at all, that we are not what we seem."

"What do you think of it, Tuppence?" he asked, when he returned from showing the visitor out.

"I don't like it," said Tuppence decidedly. "Especially I don't like the chocolates having so little arsenic in them."

"What do you mean?"

"Don't you see? All those chocolates being sent round the neighborhood were a blind. To establish the idea of a local maniac. Then, when the girl was really poisoned, it would be thought to be the same thing. You see, but for a stroke of luck, no one would ever have guessed that the chocolates were actually sent by someone in the house itself."

"That was a stroke of luck. You're right. You think it's a deliberate plot against the girl herself?"

"I'm afraid so. I remember reading about old Lady Radclyffe's will. That girl has come into a terrific lot of money."

"Yes, and she came of age and made a will three weeks ago. It looks bad-for Dennis Radclyffe. He gains by her death."

Tuppence nodded.

"The worst of it is-that she thinks so too! That's why she won't have the police called in. Already she suspects him. And she must be more than half in love with him to act as she has done."

"In that case," said Tommy thoughtfully, "why the devil doesn't he marry her? Much simpler and safer."

Tuppence stared at him.

"You've said a mouthful," she observed. "Oh! boy. I'm getting ready to be Miss Van Dusen, you observe."

"Why rush to crime, where there is a lawful means near at hand?"

Tuppence reflected for a minute or two.

"I've got it," she announced. "Clearly he must have married a barmaid whilst at Oxford. Origin of the quarrel with his aunt. That explains everything."

"Then why not send poisoned sweets to the barmaid?" suggested Tommy. "Much more practical. I wish you wouldn't jump to these wild conclusions, Tuppence."

"They're deductions," said Tuppence, with a good deal of dignity. "This is your first corrida, my friend, but when you have been twenty minutes in the arena-"

Tommy flung the office cushion at her.

"Tuppence, I say, Tuppence, come here."

It was breakfast time the next morning. Tuppence hurried out of her bedroom and into the dining room. Tommy was striding up and down, the open newspaper in his hand.

"What's the matter?"

Tommy wheeled round, and shoved the paper into her hand, pointing to the headlines.

MYSTERIOUS POISONING CASE

DEATHS FROM FIG SANDWICHES

Tuppence read on. This mysterious outbreak of ptomaine poisoning had occurred at Thurnly Grange. The deaths so far reported were those of Miss Lois Hargreaves, the owner of the house, and the parlormaid, Esther Quant. A Captain Radclyffe and a Miss Logan were reported to be still seriously ill. The cause of the outbreak was supposed to be some fig paste used in sandwiches, since another lady, a Miss Chilcott, who had not partaken of these, was reported to be quite well.

"We must get down there at once," said Tommy. "That girl! That perfectly ripping girl! Why the devil didn't I go straight down there with her yesterday?"

"If you had," said Tuppence, "you'd probably have eaten fig sandwiches too for tea, and then you'd have been dead. Come on, let's start at once. I see it says that Dennis Radclyffe is seriously ill also."

"Probably shamming, the dirty blackguard."

They arrived at the small village of Thurnly about midday. An elderly woman with red eyes opened the door to them when they arrived at Thurnly Grange.

“Look here," said Tommy quickly before she could speak. "I'm not a reporter or anything like that. Miss Hargreaves came to see me yesterday, and asked me to come down here. Is there anyone I can see?"

"Dr. Burton is here now if you'd like to speak to him," said the woman doubtfully. "Or Miss Chilcott. She's making all the arrangements."

But Tommy had caught at the first suggestion.

"Dr. Burton," he said authoritatively. "I should like to see him at once if he is here."

The woman showed them into a small morning room. Five minutes later the door opened, and a tall elderly man with bent shoulders and a kind but worried face, came in.

"Dr. Burton?" said Tommy. He produced his professional card. "Miss Hargreaves called on me yesterday with reference to those poisoned chocolates. I came down to investigate the matter at her request-alas! too late."

The doctor looked at him keenly.

"You are Mr. Blunt himself?"

"Yes. This is my assistant, Miss Robinson."

The doctor bowed to Tuppence.

"Under the circumstances, there is no need for reticence. But for the episode of the chocolates, I might have believed these deaths to be the result of severe ptomaine poisoning-but ptomaine poisoning of an unusually virulent kind. There is gastro-intestinal inflammation and haemorrhage. As it is, I am taking the fig paste to be analysed."

"You suspect arsenic poisoning?"

"No. The poison, if a poison has been employed, is something far more potent and swift in its action. It looks more like some powerful vegetable toxin."

"I see. I should like to ask you, Dr. Burton, whether you are thoroughly convinced that Captain Radclyffe is suffering from the same form of poisoning?"

The doctor looked at him.

"Captain Radclyffe is not suffering from any sort of poisoning now."

"Aha," said Tommy. "I-"

"Captain Radclyffe died at five o'clock this morning."

Tommy was utterly taken aback. The doctor prepared to depart.

"And the other victim, Miss Logan?" asked Tuppence.

"I have every reason to hope that she will recover since she has survived so far. Being an older woman, the poison seems to have had less effect on her. I will let you know the result of the analysis, Mr. Blunt. In the meantime, Miss Chilcott will, I am sure, tell you anything you want to know."

As he spoke, the door opened, and a girl appeared. She was tall, with a tanned face, and steady blue eyes.

Dr. Burton performed the necessary introductions.

"I am glad you have come, Mr. Blunt," said Mary Chilcott. "This affair seems too terrible. Is there anything you want to know that I can tell you?"

"Where did the fig paste come from?"

"It is a special kind that comes from London. We often have it. No one suspected that this particular pot differed from any of the others. Personally I dislike the flavor of figs. That explains my immunity. I cannot understand how Dennis was affected, since he was out for tea. He must have picked up a sandwich when he came home, I suppose."

Tommy felt Tuppence's hand press his arm ever so slightly.

"What time did he come in?" he asked.

"I don't really know. I could find out."

“Thank you, Miss Chilcott. It doesn't matter. You have no objection, I hope, to my questioning the servants?"

"Please do anything you like, Mr. Blunt. I am nearly distraught. Tell me-you don't think there has been-foul play?"

Her eyes were very anxious as she put the question.

"I don't know what to think. We shall soon know."

"Yes, I suppose Dr. Burton will have the paste analysed."

Quickly excusing herself, she went out by the window to speak to one of the gardeners.

"You take the housemaids, Tuppence," said Tommy, "and I'll find my way to the kitchen. I say, Miss Chilcott may feel very distraught, but she doesn't look it."

Tuppence nodded assent without replying.

Husband and wife met half an hour later.

"Now to pool results," said Tommy. “The sandwiches came out from tea, and the parlormaid ate one-that's how she got it in the neck. Cook is positive Dennis Radclyffe hadn't returned when tea was cleared away. Query-how did he get poisoned?"

"He came in at a quarter to seven," said Tuppence.

Housemaid saw him from one of the windows. He had a cocktail before dinner-in the library. She was just clearing away the glass now, and luckily I got it from her before she washed it. It was after that that he complained of feeling ill."

"Good," said Tommy. "I'll take that glass along to Burton presently. Anything else?"

"I'd like you to see Hannah, the maid. She's-she's queer."

"How do you mean-queer?"

"She looks to me as though she were going off her head."

"Let me see her."

Tuppence led the way upstairs. Hannah had a small sittingroom of her own. The maid sat upright on a high chair. On her knees was an open

Bible. She did not look towards the two strangers as they entered. Instead she continued to read aloud to herself.

"Let hot burning coals fall upon them, let them be cast into the fire and into the pit, that they never rise up again."

"May I speak to you a minute?" asked Tommy.

Hannah made an impatient gesture with her hand.

"This is no time. The time is running short, I say. I will follow upon mine enemies and overtake them, neither will I turn again till I have destroyed them. So it is written. The word of the Lord has come to me. I am the scourge of the Lord."

"Mad as a hatter," murmured Tommy.

"She's been going on like that all the time," whispered Tuppence.

Tommy picked up a book that was lying open, face downwards on the table. He glanced at the title and slipped it into his pocket.

Suddenly the old woman rose and turned towards them menacingly.

"Go out from here. The time is at hand! I am the flail of the Lord. The wind bloweth where it listeth-so do I destroy. The ungodly shall perish. This is a house of evil-of evil, I tell you! Beware of the wrath of the Lord whose handmaiden I am."

She advanced upon them fiercely. Tommy thought it best to humor her and withdrew. As he closed the door, he saw her pick up the Bible again.

"I wonder if she's always been like that," he muttered.

He drew from his pocket the book he had picked up off the table.

"Look at that. Funny reading for an ignorant maid."

Tuppence took the book.

"Materia Medica," she murmured. She looked at the fly leaf. "Edward Logan. It's an old book. Tommy, I wonder if we could see Miss Logan? Dr. Burton said she was better."

"Shall we ask Miss Chilcott?"

"No. Let's get hold of a housemaid, and send her in to ask."

After a brief delay, they were informed that Miss Logan would see them. They were taken into a big bedroom facing over the lawn. In the bed was an old lady with white hair, her delicate old face drawn by suffering.

"I have been very ill," she said faintly. "And I can't talk much, but Ellen tells me you are detectives. Lois went to consult you then? She spoke of doing so."

"Yes, Miss Logan," said Tommy. "We don't want to tire you, but perhaps you can answer a few questions. The maid, Hannah, is she quite right in her head?"

Miss Logan looked at them with obvious surprise.

"Oh! yes. She is very religious-but there is nothing wrong with her."

Tommy held out the book he had taken from the table.

"Is this yours, Miss Logan?"

"Yes. It was one of my father's books. He was a great doctor, one of the pioneers of serum therapeutics."

The old lady's voice rang with pride.

"Quite so," said Tommy. "I thought I knew his name," he added mendaciously. "This book now, did you lend it to Hannah?"

"To Hannah?" Miss Logan raised herself in bed with indignation. "No, indeed. She wouldn't understand the first word of it. It is a highly technical book."

"Yes. I see that. Yet I found it in Hannah's room."

"Disgraceful," said Miss Logan. "I will not have the servants touching my things."

"Where ought it to be?"

"In the bookshelf in my sitting-room-or-stay, I lent it to Mary. The dear girl is very interested in herbs. She has made one or two experiments in my little kitchen. I have a little place of my own, you know, where I brew liqueurs and make preserves in the old fashioned way. Dear Lucy, Lady Radclyffe, you know, used to swear by my tansy tea-a wonderful thing for a cold in the head. Poor Lucy, she was subject to colds. So is Dennis. Dear boy, his father was my first cousin."

Tommy interrupted these reminiscences.

"This kitchen of yours? Does anyone else use it except you and Miss Chilcott?"

"Hannah clears up there. And she boils the kettle there for our early morning tea."

"Thank you, Miss Logan," said Tommy. "There is nothing more I want to ask you at present. I hope we haven't tired you too much."

He left the room and went down the stairs, frowning to himself.

"There is something here, my dear Mr. Ricardo, that I do not understand."

"I hate this house," said Tuppence with a shiver. "Let's go for a good long walk and try to think things out."

Tommy complied and they set out. First they left the cocktail glass at the doctor's house and then set off for a good tramp across country discussing the case as they did so.

"It makes it easier somehow if one plays the fool," said Tommy. "All this Hanaud business. I suppose some people would think I didn't care. But I do, most awfully. I feel that somehow or other we ought to have prevented this."

"I think that's foolish of you," said Tuppence. "It is not as though we had advised Lois Hargreaves not to go to Scotland Yard or anything like that. Nothing would have induced her to bring the police into the matter. If she hadn't come to us, she would have done nothing at all."

"And the result would have been the same. Yes, you are right, Tuppence. It's morbid to reproach oneself over something one couldn't help. What I would like to do is to make good now."

"And that's not going to be easy."

"No, it isn't. There are so many possibilities, and yet all of them seem wild and improbable. Supposing Dennis Radclyffe put the poison in the sandwiches. He knew he would be out to tea. That seems fairly plain sailing."

"Yes," said Tuppence, "that's all right so far. Then we can put against that the fact that he was poisoned himself-so that seems to rule him out. There is one person we mustn't forget-and that is Hannah."

"Hannah?"

"People do all sorts of queer things when they have religious mania."

"She is pretty far gone with it too," said Tommy. "You ought to drop a word to Dr. Burton about it."

"It must have come on very rapidly," said Tuppence. "That is if we go by what Miss Logan said."

"I believe religious mania does," said Tommy. "I mean, you go on singing hymns in your bedroom with the door open for years, and then you go suddenly right over the line and become violent."

“There is certainly more evidence against Hannah than against anybody else," said Tuppence thoughtfully, "and yet I have an idea-" She stopped.

"Yes?" said Tommy encouragingly.

"It is not really an idea. I suppose it is just a prejudice."

"A prejudice against someone?"

Tuppence nodded.

"Tommy-did you like Mary Chilcott?"

Tommy considered.

"Yes, I think I did. She struck me as extremely capable and businesslike-perhaps a shade too much so-but very reliable."

"You didn't think it was odd that she didn't seem more upset?"

"Well, in a way that is a point in her favor. I mean, if she had done anything, she would make a point of being upset-lay it on rather thick."

"I suppose so," said Tuppence. "And anyway there doesn't seem to be any motive in her case. One doesn't see what good this wholesale slaughter can do her."

"I suppose none of the servants are concerned?"

"It doesn't seem likely. They seem a quiet reliable lot. I wonder what Esther Quant, the parlormaid, was like."

"You mean, that if she was young and good-looking there was a chance that she was mixed up in it some way."

"That is what I mean." Tuppence sighed. "It is all very discouraging."

"Well, I suppose the police will get down to it all right," said Tommy.

"Probably. I should like it to be us. By the way, did you notice a lot of small red dots on Miss Logan's arm?"

"I don't think I did. What about them?"

“They looked as though they were made by a hypodermic syringe," said Tuppence.

"Probably Dr. Burton gave her a hypodermic injection of some kind."

"Oh, very likely. But he wouldn't give her about forty."

"The cocaine habit," suggested Tommy helpfully.

"I thought of that," said Tuppence, "but her eyes were all right. You would see at once if it was cocaine or morphia. Besides she doesn't look that sort of old lady."

"Most respectable and God fearing" agreed Tommy.

"It is all very difficult," said Tuppence. "We have talked and talked and we don't seem any nearer now than we were. Don't let's forget to call at the doctor's on our way home."

The doctor's door was opened by a lanky boy of about fifteen.

"Mr. Blunt?" he inquired. "Yes, the doctor is out but he left a note for you in case you should call."

He handed them the note in question and Tommy tore it open.

"Dear Mr. Blunt,

There is reason to believe that the poison employed

was Ricin, a vegetable toxalbumose of tremendous

potency. Please keep this to yourself for the present."

Tommy let the note drop, but picked it up quickly.

"Ricin," he murmured. "Know anything about it, Tuppence? You used to be rather well up in these things."

"Ricin," said Tuppence, thoughtfully. "You get it out of Castor Oil, I believe."

"I never did take kindly to Castor Oil," said Tommy. "I am more set against it than ever now."

“The oil's all right. You get Ricin from the seeds of the Castor Oil plant. I believe I saw some Castor Oil plants in the garden this morning-big things with glossy leaves."

"You mean that someone extracted the stuff on the premises. Could Hannah do such a thing?

Tuppence shook her head.

"Doesn't seem likely. She wouldn't know enough."

Suddenly Tommy gave an exclamation.

"That book. Have I got it in my pocket still? Yes." He took it out, and turned over the leaves vehemently. "I thought so. Here's the page it was open at this morning. Do you see, Tuppence? Ricin!"

Tuppence seized the book from him.

"Can you make head or tail of it? I can't."

"It's clear enough to me," said Tuppence. She walked along, reading busily, with one hand on Tommy's arm to steer herself. Presently she shut the book with a bang. They were just approaching the house again.

"Tommy, will you leave this to me? Just for once, you see, I am the bull that has been more than twenty minutes in the arena."

Tommy nodded.

"You shall be the Captain of the Ship, Tuppence," he said gravely. "We've got to get to the bottom of this."

"First of all," said Tuppence as they entered the house, "I must ask Miss Logan one more question."

She ran upstairs. Tommy followed her. She rapped sharply on the old lady's door, and went in.

"Is that you, my dear?" said Miss Logan. "You know you are much too young and pretty to be a detective. Have you found out anything?"

"Yes," said Tuppence. "I have."

Miss Logan looked at her questioningly.

"I don't know about being pretty," went on Tuppence, "but being young, I happened to work in a hospital during the War. I know something about serum therapeutics. I happen to know that when Ricin is injected in small doses hypodermically immunity is produced, antiricin is formed. That fact paced the way for the foundation of serum therapeutics. You knew that, Miss Logan. You injected Ricin for some time hypodermically into yourself. Then you let yourself be poisoned with the rest. You helped your father in his work, and you knew all about Ricin and how to obtain it and extract it from the seeds. You chose a day when Dennis Radclyffe was out for tea. It wouldn't do for him to be poisoned at the same time-he might die before Lois Hargreaves. So long as she died first, he inherited her money, and at his death it passes to you, his next of kin. You remember, you told us this morning that his father was your first cousin."

The old lady stared at Tuppence with baleful eyes.

Suddenly a wild figure burst in from the adjoining room. It was Hannah. In her hand she held a lighted torch which she waved frantically.

"Truth has been spoken. That is the wicked one. I saw her reading the book, and smiling to herself and I knew. I found the book and the page-but it said nothing to me. But the voice of the Lord spoke to me. She

hated my mistress, her ladyship. She was always jealous and envious. She hated my own sweet Miss Lois. But the wicked shall perish, the fire of the Lord shall consume them."

Waving her torch she sprang forward to the bed.

A cry arose from the old lady.

"Take her away-take her away. It's true-but take her away."

Tuppence flung herself upon Hannah, but the woman managed to set fire to the curtains of the bed before Tuppence could get the torch from her and stamp on it. Tommy, however, had rushed in from the landing outside. He tore down the bed hangings and managed to stifle the flames with a rug. Then he rushed to Tuppence's assistance and between them they subdued Hannah just as Dr. Burton came hurrying in.

A very few words sufficed to put him au courant of the situation.

He hurried to the bedside, lifted Miss Logan's hand, then uttered a sharp exclamation.

"The shock of fire has been too much for her. She's dead. Perhaps it is as well under the circumstances."

He paused and then added, "There was Ricin in the cocktail glass as well."

"It's the best thing that could have happened," said Tommy when they had relinquished Hannah to the doctor's care, and were alone together. "Tuppence, you were simply marvellous."

"There wasn't much Hanaud about it," said Tuppence.

"It was too serious for play acting. I still can't bear to think of that girl. I won't think of her. But, as I said before, you were marvellous. The honors are with you. To use a familiar quotation, 'It is a great advantage to be intelligent and not to look it.' "

"Tommy," said Tuppence. "You're a beast."

19. THE UNBREAKABLE ALIBI

Tommy and Tuppence were busy sorting correspondence. Tuppence gave an exclamation and handed a letter across to Tommy.

"A new client," she said importantly.

"Ha!" said Tommy. "What do we deduce from this letter, Watson? Nothing much, except the somewhat obvious fact that Mr.-er-Montgomery Jones is not one of the world's best spellers, thereby proving that he has been expensively educated."

"Montgomery Jones?" said Tuppence. "Now what do I know about a Montgomery Jones? Oh, yes, I have got it now. I think Janet St. Vincent mentioned him. His mother was Lady Aileen Montgomery, very crusty and high church, with gold crosses and things, and she married a man called Jones who is immensely rich."

"In fact the same old story," said Tommy. "Let me see, what time does this Mr. M. J. wish to see us? Ah, eleven thirty."

At eleven thirty precisely a very tall young man with an amiable and ingenuous countenance entered the outer office and addressed himself to Albert, the office boy.

"Look here-I say. Can I see Mr.-er-Blunt?"

"Have you an appointment, sir?" said Albert.

"I don't quite know. Yes, I suppose I have. What I mean is I wrote a letter-"

"What name, sir?"

"Mr. Montgomery Jones."

"I will take your name in to Mr. Blunt."

He returned after a brief interval.

"Will you wait a few minutes please, sir. Mr. Blunt is engaged on a very important conference at present."

"Oh-er-yes-certainly," said Mr. Montgomery Jones. Having, he hoped, impressed his client sufficiently Tommy rang the buzzer on his desk, and Mr. Montgomery Jones was ushered into the inner office by Albert.

Tommy rose to greet him, and shaking him warmly by the hand motioned towards the vacant chair.

"Now, Mr. Montgomery Jones," he said briskly, "what can we have the pleasure of doing for you?"

Mr. Montgomery Jones looked uncertainly at the third occupant of the office.

"My confidential secretary, Miss Robinson," said Tommy. “You can speak quite freely before her. I take it that this is some family matter of a delicate kind?"

"Well-not exactly," said Mr. Montgomery Jones.

"You surprise me," said Tommy. "You are not in trouble of any kind yourself, I hope?"

"Oh rather not," said Mr. Montgomery Jones.

"Well," said Tommy, "perhaps you will-er-state the facts plainly."

That, however, seemed to be the one thing that Mr. Montgomery Jones could not do.

"It's a dashed odd sort of thing I have got to ask you," he said hesitatingly. "I-er-I really don't know how to set about it."

"We never touch divorce cases," said Tommy.

"Oh Lord no," said Mr. Montgomery Jones. “I don't mean that. It is just, well-it's a deuced silly sort of a joke. That's all."

"Someone has played a practical joke on you of a mysterious nature?" suggested Tommy.

But Mr. Montgomery Jones once more shook his head.

"Well," said Tommy retiring gracefully from the position, "take your own time and let us have it in your own words."

There was a pause.

"You see," said Mr. Jones at last, "it was at dinner. I sat next to a girl."

"Yes?" said Tommy encouragingly.

"She was a-oh, well, I really can't describe her, but she was simply one of the most sporting girls I ever met. She's an Australian over here with another girl, sharing a flat with her in Clarges Street. She's simply game for anything. I absolutely can't tell you the effect that girl had on me."

"We can quite imagine it, Mr. Jones," said Tuppence.

She saw clearly that if Mr. Montgomery Jones' troubles were ever to be extracted a sympathetic feminine touch was needed, as distinct from the businesslike methods of Mr. Blunt.

"We can understand," said Tuppence encouragingly.

"Well, the whole thing came as an absolute shock to me," said Mr. Montgomery Jones, "that a girl could, well-knock you over like that. There had been another girl-in fact two other girls. One was awfully jolly and all that but I didn't much like her chin. She danced marvellously though and I have known her all my life which makes a fellow feel kind of safe, you know. And then there was one of the girls at the 'Frivolity.' Frightfully amusing, but of course there would be a lot of ructions with the mater over that, and anyway I really didn't want to marry either of them, but I was thinking about things you know and then-slap out of the blue-I sat next to this girl and-"

"The whole world was changed," said Tuppence in a feeling voice.

Tommy moved impatiently in his chair. He was by now somewhat bored by the recital of Mr. Montgomery Jones' love affairs.

"You put it awfully well," said Mr. Montgomery Jones. "That is absolutely what it was like. Only, you know, I fancy she didn't think much of me. You mayn't think it but I am not terribly clever."

"Oh, you mustn't be too modest," said Tuppence.

"Oh, I do realize that I am not much of a chap," said Mr. Jones with an engaging smile. "Not for a perfectly marvellous girl like that. That is

why I just feel I have got to put this thing through. It's my only chance. She's such a sporting girl that she would never go back on her word."

"Well I am sure we wish you luck and all that," said Tuppence kindly. "But I don't exactly see what you want us to do."

"Oh Lordl" said Mr. Montgomery Jones. "Haven't I explained?"

"No," said Tommy. "You haven't."

"Well, it was like this. We were talking about detective stories. Una-that's her name-is just as keen about them as I am. We got talking about one in particular. It all hinges on an alibi. Then we got talking about alibis and faking them. Then I said-no, she said-now which of us was it that said it?"

"Never mind which of you it was," said Tuppence.

"I said it would be a jolly difficult thing to do. She disagreed-said it only wanted a bit of brain work. We got all hot and excited about it and in the end she said 'I will make you a sporting offer. What do you bet that I can produce an alibi that nobody can shake?"

"Anything you like, I said, and we settled it then and there. She was frightfully cocksure about the whole thing. 'It's an odds on chance for me,' she said. 'Don't be so sure of that,' I said. 'Supposing you lose and I ask you for anything I like?' She laughed and said she came of a gambling family and I could."

"Well?" said Tuppence as Mr. Jones came to a pause and looked at her appealingly.

"Well, don't you see? It is up to me. It is the only chance I have got of getting a girl like that to look at me. You have no idea how sporting she is. Last summer she was out in a boat and someone bet her she wouldn't jump overboard and swim ashore in her clothes, and she did it."

"It is a very curious proposition," said Tommy. "I am not quite sure I yet understand it."

"It is perfectly simple," said Mr. Montgomery Jones. "You must be doing this sort of thing all the time. Investigating fake alibis and seeing where they fall down."

"Oh-er-yes, of course," said Tommy. "We do a lot of that sort of work."

"Someone has got to do it for me," said Montgomery Jones. "I shouldn't be any good at that sort of thing myself. You have only got to catch her out and everything is all right. I daresay it seems rather a futile business to you but it means a lot to me and I am prepared to pay-er-all necessary whatnots you know."

"That will be all right," said Tuppence. "I am sure Mr. Blunt will take the case on for you."

"Certainly, certainly," said Tommy. "A most refreshing case, most refreshing indeed."

Mr. Montgomery Jones heaved a sigh of relief and pulled a mass of papers from his pocket and selected one of them. "Here it is," he said. She says, 'I am sending you proof I was in two distinct places at one and the same time. According to one story I dined at the Bon Temps Restaurant in Soho by myself, went to the Duke's Theatre and had supper with a friend, Mr. le Marchant, at the Savoy-but I was also staying at the Castle Hotel, Torquay, and only returned to London on the following morning. You have got to find out which of the two stories is the true one and how I managed the other."

"There," said Mr. Montgomery Jones. "Now you see what it is that I want you to do."

"A most refreshing little problem," said Tommy. "Very naïve."

"Here is Una's photograph," said Mr. Montgomery Jones. "You will want that."

"What is the lady's full name?" inquired Tommy.

"Miss Una Drake. And her address is 180 Clarges Street."

"Thank you," said Tommy. "Well, we will look into the matter for you, Mr. Montgomery Jones. I hope we shall have good news for you very shortly."

"I say you know, I am no end grateful," said Mr. Jones rising to his feet and shaking Tommy by the hand. "It has taken an awful load off my mind."

Having seen his client out, Tommy returned to the inner office. Tuppence was at the cupboard that contained the Classic library.

"Inspector French," said Tuppence.

"Eh?" said Tommy.

"Inspector French of course," said Tuppence. "He always does alibis. I know the exact procedure. We have to go over everything and check it. At first it will seem all right and then when we examine it more closely we shall find the flaw."

"There ought not to be much difficulty about that," agreed Tommy. "I mean, knowing that one of them is a fake to start with makes the thing almost a certainty I should say. That is what worries me."

"I don't see anything to worry about in that."

"I am worrying about the girl," said Tommy. "She will probably be let in to marry that young man whether she wants to or not."

"Darling," said Tuppence, "don't be foolish. Women are never the wild gamblers they appear. Unless that girl was already perfectly prepared to marry that pleasant but rather empty-headed young man, she would never have let herself in for a wager of this kind. But, Tommy, believe me, she will marry him with more enthusiasm and respect if he wins the wager than if she has to make it easy for him some other way."

"You do think you know about everything," said her husband.

"I do," said Tuppence.

"And now to examine our data," said Tommy drawing the papers towards him. "First the photograph-hm-quite a nice looking girl-and quite a good photograph I should say. Clear and easily recognizable."

"We must get some other girls' photographs," said Tuppence.

"Why?"

"They always do," said Tuppence. "You show four or five to waiters and they pick out the right one."

"Do you think they do?" said Tommy-"pick out the right one I mean."

"Well, they do in books," said Tuppence.

"It is a pity that real life is so different from fiction," said Tommy. "Now then what have we here? Yes, this is the London lot. Dined at the Bon Temps seven thirty. Went to Duke's Theatre and saw Delphiniums Blue. Counterfoil of theatre ticket enclosed. Supper at the Savoy with Mr. le Marchant. We can, I suppose, interview Mr. le Marchant."

"That tells us nothing at all," said Tuppence, "because if he is helping her to do it he naturally won't give the show away. We can wash out anything he says now."

"Well, here is the Torquay end," went on Tommy. "Twelve o'clock train from Paddington, had lunch in the Restaurant Car, receipted bill enclosed. Stayed at Castle Hotel for one night. Again receipted bill."

"I think this is all rather weak," said Tuppence. "Anyone can buy a theatre ticket, you need never go near the theatre. The girl just went to Torquay and the London thing is a fake."

"If so, it is rather a sitter for us," said Tommy. "Well, I suppose we might as well go and interview Mr. le Marchant."

Mr. le Marchant proved to be a breezy youth who betrayed no great surprise on seeing them.

"Una has got some little game on, hasn't she?" he asked. "You never know what that kid is up to."

"I understand, Mr. le Marchant," said Tommy, "that Miss Drake had supper with you at the Savoy last Tuesday evening."

"That's right," said Mr. le Marchant. "I know it was Tuesday because Una impressed it on me at the time and what's more she made me write it down in a little book."

With some pride he showed an entry faintly pencilled: "Having supper with Una. Savoy. Tuesday 19th."

"Where had Miss Drake been earlier in the evening? Do you know?"

"She had been to some rotten show called Pink Peonies or something like that. Absolute slosh so she told me."

"You are quite sure Miss Drake was with you that evening?"

Mr. le Marchant stared at him.

"Why, of course. Haven't I been telling you?"

"Perhaps she asked you to tell us," said Tuppence.

"Well, for a matter of fact she did say something that was rather dashed odd. She said, what was it now? 'You think you are sitting here having supper with me, Jimmy, but really, I am having supper two hundred miles away in Devonshire.' Now that was a dashed odd thing to say, don't you think so? Sort of astral body stuff. The funny thing is that a pal of mine, Dicky Rice, thought he saw her there."

"Who is this Mr. Rice?"

"Oh, just a friend of mine. He had been down in Torquay staying with an aunt. Sort of old bean who is always going to die and never does. Dicky had been down doing the dutiful nephew. He said, 'I saw that Australian girl one day-Una something or other. Wanted to go and talk to her but my aunt carried me off to chat with an old Pussy in a bathchair.' I said, 'When was this?' and he said, 'Oh, Tuesday about tea time.' I told him of course that he had made a mistake, but it was odd, wasn't it? With Una saying that about Devonshire that evening."

"Very odd," said Tommy. "Tell me, Mr. le Marchant, did anyone you know have supper near you at the Savoy?"

"Some people called Oglander were at the next table."

"Do they know Miss Drake?"

"Oh yes, they know her. They are not frightful friends or anything of that kind."

"Well, if there's nothing more you can tell us, Mr. le Marchant, I think we will wish you good morning."

"Either that chap is an extraordinary good liar," said Tommy as they reached the street, "or else he is speaking the truth."

"Yes," said Tuppence. "I have changed my opinion. I have a sort of feeling now that Una Drake was at the Savoy for supper that night."

"We will now go to the Bon Temps," said Tommy. "A little food for starving sleuths is clearly indicated. Let's just get a few girls' photographs first."

This proved rather more difficult than was expected. Turning into a photographer's and demanding a few assorted photographs, they were met with a cold rebuff.

"Why are all the things that are so easy and simple in books so difficult in real life?" wailed Tuppence. "How horribly suspicious they looked. What do you think they thought we wanted to do with the photographs? We had better go and raid Jane's flat."

Tuppence's friend Jane proved of an accommodating disposition and permitted Tuppence to rummage in a drawer and select four

specimens of former friends of Jane's who had been shoved hastily in to be out of sight and mind.

Armed with this galaxy of feminine beauty they proceeded to the Bon Temps where fresh difficulties and much expense awaited them. Tommy had to get hold of each waiter in turn, tip him and then produce the assorted photographs. The result was unsatisfactory. At least three of the photographs were promising starters as having dined there last Tuesday. They then returned to the office where Tuppence immersed herself in an A.B.C.

"Paddington twelve o'clock. Torquay three thirty-five. That's the train and le Marchant's friend, Mr. Sago, or Tapioca or something, saw her there about tea time."

"We haven't checked his statement, remember," said Tommy. "If, as you said to begin with, le Marchant is a friend of Una Drake's, he may have invented this story."

"Oh, we'll hunt up Mr. Rice," said Tuppence. "I have a kind of hunch that Mr. le Marchant was speaking the truth No, what I am trying to get at now is this. Una Drake leaves London by the twelve o'clock train, possibly takes a room at a hotel and unpacks. Then she takes a train back to town arriving in time to get to the Savoy. There is one at four forty gets up to Paddington at nine ten."

"And then?" said Tommy.

“And then," said Tuppence, frowning, "it is rather more difficult. There is a midnight train from Paddington down again but she could hardly take that, that would be too early."

"A fast car," suggested Tommy.

"H'm," said Tuppence. "It is just on two hundred miles."

"Australians, I have always been told, drive very recklessly."

"Oh, I suppose it could be done," said Tuppence, "she would arrive there about seven."

"Are you supposing her to have nipped into her bed at the Castle Hotel without being seen? Or arriving there explaining that she had been out all night and could she have her bill, please?"

"Tommy," said Tuppence. "We are idiots. She needn't have gone back to Torquay at all. She has only got to get a friend to go to the Hotel there and collect her luggage and pay her bill. Then you get the receipted bill with the proper date on it."

"I think on the whole we have worked out a very sound hypothesis," said Tommy. "The next thing to do is to catch the twelve o'clock train to Torquay tomorrow and verify our brilliant conclusions."

Armed with a portfolio of photographs, Tommy and Tuppence duly established themselves in a first class carriage the following morning, and booked seats for the second lunch.

"It probably won't be the same dining car attendants," said Tommy. "That would be too much luck to expect. I expect we shall have to travel up and down to Torquay for days before we strike the right ones."

"This alibi business is very trying," said Tuppence. "In books it is all passed over in two or three paragraphs. Inspector Something then boarded the train to Torquay and questioned the dining car attendants and so ended the story."

For once, however, the young couple's luck was in. In answer to their question the attendant who brought their bill for lunch proved to be the same one who had been on duty the preceding Tuesday. What Tommy called the ten shilling note touch then came into action and Tuppence produced the portfolio.

"I want to know," said Tommy, "if any of these ladies had lunch on this train on Tuesday last?"

In a gratifying manner worthy of the best detective fiction the man at once indicated the photograph of Una Drake.

"Yes sir, I remember that lady, and I remember that it was Tuesday, because the lady herself drew attention to the fact saying it was always the luckiest day in the week for her."

"So far, so good," said Tuppence as they returned to their compartment. "And we will probably find that she booked at the Hotel all right. It is going to be more difficult to prove that she travelled back

to London, but perhaps one of the porters at the station may remember."

Here, however, they drew a blank and crossing to the up platform Tommy made inquiries of the ticket collector and of various porters. After the distribution of half crowns as a preliminary to inquiring, two of the porters picked out one of the other photographs with a vague remembrance that someone like that travelled to town by the four forty that afternoon, but there was no identification of Una Drake.

"But that doesn't prove anything," said Tuppence as they left the station. "She may have travelled by that train and no one noticed her."

"She may have gone from the other station, from Torre."

"That's quite likely," said Tuppence, "however, we can see to that after we have been to the hotel."

The Castle Hotel was a big one overlooking the sea. After booking a room for the night and signing the register, Tommy observed pleasantly:

"I believe you had a friend of ours staying here last Tuesday. Miss Una Drake."

The young lady in the bureau beamed at him.

"Oh yes, I remember quite well. An Australian young lady I believe."

At a sign from Tommy, Tuppence produced the photograph.

"That is rather a charming photograph of her, isn't it?" said Tuppence.

"Oh very nice, very nice indeed, quite stylish."

"Did she stay here long?" inquired Tommy.

"Only one night. She went away by the Express the next morning back to London. It seemed a long way to come for one night but of course I suppose Australian ladies don't think anything of travelling."

"She is a very sporting girl," said Tommy, "always having adventures. It wasn't here, was it, that she went out to dine with some friends, went for a drive in their car afterwards, ran the car into a ditch and wasn't able to get home till morning?"

"Oh, no," said the young lady. "Miss Drake had dinner here in the Hotel."

"Really," said Tommy, "are you sure of that? I mean-how do you know?"

"Oh, I saw her."

"I asked because I understood she was dining with some friends in Torquay," explained Tommy.

"Oh, no sir, she dined here." The young lady laughed and blushed a little. "I remember she had on a most sweetly pretty frock. One of those new flowered chiffons all over pansies."

"Tuppence, this tears it," said Tommy when they had been shown upstairs to their room.

"It does rather," said Tuppence. "Of course that woman may be mistaken. We will ask the waiter at dinner. There can't be very many people here just at this time of year."

This time it was Tuppence who opened the attack.

"Can you tell me if a friend of mine was here last Tuesday?" she asked the waiter with an engaging smile. "A Miss Drake, wearing a frock all over pansies I believe." She produced a photograph. "This lady."

The waiter broke into immediate smiles of recognition.

"Yes, yes, Miss Drake. I remember her very well. She told me she came from Australia."

"She dined here?"

"Yes. It was last Tuesday. She asked me if there was anything to do afterwards in the town."

"Yes?"

"I told her the theatre, the Pavilion, but in the end she decided not to go and she stayed here listening to our orchestra."

"Oh damn," said Tommy under his breath.

"You don't remember what time she had dinner, do you?" said Tuppence.

"She came down a little late. It must have been about eight o'clock."

"Damn, Blast, and Curse," said Tuppence as she and Tommy left the dining-room. "Tommy, this is all going wrong. It seemed so clear and lovely."

"Well, I suppose we ought to have known it wouldn't all be plain sailing."

"Is there any train she could have taken after that I wonder?"

"Not one that would have landed her in London in time to go to the Savoy."

"Well," said Tuppence, "as a last hope I am going to talk to the chambermaid. Una Drake had a room on the same floor as ours."

The chambermaid was a voluble and informative woman. Yes, she remembered the young lady quite well. That was her picture right enough. A very nice young lady, very merry and talkative. Had told her a lot about Australia and the kangaroos.

The young lady rang the bell about half past nine and asked for her bottle to be filled and put in her bed and also to be called the next morning at half past seven-with coffee instead of tea.

"You did call her and she was in bed?" asked Tuppence,

The chambermaid stared at her.

"Why, yes Ma'am, of course."

"Oh, I only wondered if she was doing exercises or anything," said Tuppence, wildly. "So many people do in the early morning."

"Well, that seems cast iron enough," said Tommy, when the chambermaid had departed. "There is only one conclusion to be drawn from it. It is the London side of the thing that must be faked."

"Mr. le Marchant must be a more accomplished liar than we thought," said Tuppence.

"We have a way of checking his statements," said Tommy. "He said there were people sitting at the next table whom Una knew slightly. What was their name-Oglander, that was it. We must hunt up these Oglanders and we ought also to make inquiries at Miss Drake's flat in Clarges Street."

The following morning they paid their bill and departed somewhat crestfallen.

Hunting out the Oglanders was fairly easy with the aid of the telephone book. Tuppence this time took the offensive and assumed the character of a representative of a new illustrated paper. She called on Mrs. Oglander asking for a few details of their "smart" supper party at the Savoy on Tuesday evening. These details Mrs. Oglander was only

too willing to supply. Just as she was leaving Tuppence added carelessly: "Let me see, wasn't Miss Una Drake sitting at the table next you? Is it really true that she is engaged to the Duke of Perth? You know her, of course."

"I know her slightly," said Mrs. Oglander. "A very charming girl I believe. Yes, she was sitting at the next table to ours with Mr. le Marchant. My girls know her better than I do."

Tuppence's next port of call was the flat in Clarges Street.

Here she was greeted by Miss Mariory Leicester, the friend with whom Miss Drake shared a flat.

"Do tell me what all this is about?" asked Miss Leicester plaintively. "Una has some deep game on and I don't know what it is. Of course she slept here on Tuesday night."

"Did you see her when she came in?"

"No, I had gone to bed. She has got her own latch key, of course. She came in about one o'clock, I believe."

"When did you see her?"

"Oh, the next morning about nine-or perhaps it was nearer ten."

As Tuppence left the flat she almost collided with a tall, gaunt female who was entering.

"Excuse me, Miss, I'm sure," said the gaunt female.

"Do you work here?" asked Tuppence.

"Yes, Miss, I come daily."

"What time do you get here in the morning?"

"Nine o'clock is my time, Miss."

Tuppence slipped a hurried half crown into the gaunt female's hand.

"Was Miss Drake here last Tuesday morning when you arrived?"

"Why yes, Miss, indeed she was. Fast asleep in her bed and hardly woke up when I brought her in her tea."

"Oh, thank you," said Tuppence and went disconsolately down the stairs.

She had arranged to meet Tommy for lunch in a small Restaurant in Soho and there they compared notes.

"I have seen that fellow, Rice. It is quite true he did see Una Drake in the distance at Torquay."

"Well," said Tuppence, "we have checked these alibis all right. Here, give me a bit of paper and a pencil, Tommy. Let us put it down neatly like all detectives do."

1.30 Una Drake seen in Luncheon Car of train.

4 o'clock Arrives at Castle Hotel.

5 o'clock Seen by Mr. Rice.

8 o'clock Seen dining at Hotel.

9.30 Asks for hot water bottle.

11:30 Seen at Savoy with Mr. le Marchant.

7.30a.m. Called by chambermaid at Castle Hotel.

9 o'clock Called by charwoman at flat at Clarges Street.

They looked at each other.

"Well, it looks to me as if Blunt's Brilliant Detectives are beat," said Tommy.

"Oh, we mustn't give up," said Tuppence. "Somebody must be lying!"

"The queer thing is that it strikes me nobody was lying. They all seemed perfectly truthful and straightforward."

"Yet there must be a flaw. We know there is. I think of all sorts of things like private aeroplanes but that doesn't really get us any forwarder."

"I am inclined to the theory of an astral body."

"Well," said Tuppence, "the only thing to do is to sleep on it. Your subconscious works in your sleep."

"H'm," said Tommy. "If your subconscious provides you with a perfectly good answer to this riddle by tomorrow morning, I take off my hat to it."

They were very silent all that evening. Again and again Tuppence reverted to the paper of times. She wrote things on bits of paper. She murmured to herself, she sought perplexedly through Rail Guides. But in the end they both rose to go to bed with no faint glimmer of light on the problem.

"This is very disheartening," said Tommy.

"One of the most miserable evenings I have ever spent," said Tuppence.

"We ought to have gone to a Music Hall," said Tommy. "A few good jokes about mothers-in-law and twins and bottles of beer would have done us no end of good."

"No, you will see this concentration will work in the end," said Tuppence. "How busy our subconscious will have to be in the next eight hours!" And on this hopeful note they went to bed.

"Well," said Tommy next morning, "has the subconscious worked?"

"I have got an idea," said Tuppence.

"You have. What sort of an idea?"

"Well, rather a funny idea. Not at all like anything I have ever read in detective stories. As a matter of fact it is an idea that you put into my head."

"Then it must be a good idea," said Tommy firmly. "Come on, Tuppence, out with it."

"I shall have to send a cable to verify it," said Tuppence. "No, I am not going to tell you. It's a perfectly wild idea but it's the only thing that fits the facts."

"Well," said Tommy, "I must away to the office. A roomful of disappointed clients must not wait in vain. I leave this case in the hands of my promising subordinate."

Tuppence nodded cheerfully.

She did not put in an appearance at the office all day. When Tommy returned that evening about half past five it was to find a wildly exultant Tuppence awaiting him.

"I have done it, Tommy. I have solved the mystery of the alibi. We can charge up all these half crowns and ten shilling notes and demand a

substantial fee of our own from Mr. Montgomery Jones and he can go right off and collect his girl."

"What is the solution?" cried Tommy.

"A perfectly simple one," said Tuppence. "Twins."

"What do you mean?-Twins?"

"Why just that. Of course it is the only solution. I will say you put it into my head last night talking about mothers-in-law, twins, and bottles of beer. I cabled to Australia and got back the information I wanted. Una has a twin sister, Vera, who arrived in England last Monday. That is why she was able to make this bet so spontaneously. She thought it would be a frightful rag on poor Montgomery Jones. The sister went to Torquay and she stayed in London."

"Do you think she'll be terribly despondent that she's lost?" asked Tommy.

"No," said Tuppence. "I don't. I gave you my views about that before. She will put all the kudos down to Montgomery Jones. I always think respect for your husband's abilities should be the foundation of married life."

"I am glad to have inspired these sentiments in you, Tuppence."

"It is not a really satisfactory solution," said Tuppence.

"Not the ingenious sort of flaw that Inspector French would have detected."

"Nonsense," said Tommy. "I think the way I showed these photographs to the waiter in the Restaurant was exactly like Inspector French."

"He didn't have to use nearly so many half crowns and ten shilling notes as we seem to have done," said Tuppence.

"Never mind," said Tommy. "We can charge them all up with additions to Mr. Montgomery Jones. He will be in such a state of idiotic bliss that he would probably pay the most enormous bill without jibbing at it."

"So he should," said Tuppence. "Haven't Blunt's Brilliant Detectives been brilliantly successful? Oh, Tommy, I do think we are extraordinarily clever. It quite frightens me sometimes."

"The next case we have shall be a Roger Sheringham case and you, Tuppence, shall be Roger Sheringham."

"I shall have to talk a lot," said Tuppence.

"You do that naturally," said Tommy. "And now I suggest that we carry out my programme of last night and seek out a Music Hall where they have plenty of jokes about mothers-in-law, bottles of beer, and Twins."

20. THE CLERGYMAN'S DAUGHTER

“I wish," said Tuppence, roaming moodily round the office, "that we could befriend a clergyman's daughter."

"Why?" asked Tommy.

"You may have forgotten the fact, but I was once a clergyman's daughter myself. I remember what it was like. Hence this altruistic urge-this spirit of thoughtful consideration for others-this-"

"You are getting ready to be Roger Sheringham, I see," said Tommy. "If you will allow me to make a criticism, you talk quite as much as he does, but not nearly so well."

"On the contrary," said Tuppence, "there is a feminine subtlety about my conversation, a je ne sais quoi, that no gross male could ever attain to. I have, moreover, powers unknown to my prototype-do I mean prototype? Words are such uncertain things, they so often sound well but mean the opposite of what one thinks they do."

"Go on," said Tommy kindly.

"I was. I was only pausing to take breath. Touching these powers, it is my wish to-day to assist a clergyman's daughter. You will see, Tommy, the first person to enlist the aid of Blunt's Brilliant Detectives will be a clergyman's daughter."

"I'll bet you it isn't," said Tommy.

"Done," said Tuppence. "Hist! To your typewriters, Oh! Israel. One comes."

Mr. Blunt's office was humming with industry as Albert opened the door and announced:

"Miss Monica Deane."

A slender brown haired girl, rather shabbily dressed, entered and stood hesitating. Tommy came forward.

"Good-morning, Miss Deane. Won't you sit down and tell us what we can do for you? By the way, let me introduce my confidential secretary, Miss Sheringham."

“I am delighted to make your acquaintance, Miss Deane," said Tuppence. "Your father was in the Church, I think."

“Yes, he was. But how did you know that?"

"Oh! we have our methods," said Tuppence. "You mustn't mind me rattling on. Mr. Blunt likes to hear me talk. He always says it gives him ideas."

The girl stared at her. She was a slender creature, not beautiful, but possessing a wistful prettiness. She had a quantity of soft mouse-colored hair, and her eyes were dark blue and very lovely, though the dark shadows round them spoke of trouble and anxiety.

"Will you tell me your story, Miss Deane?" said Tommy.

The girl turned to him gratefully.

"It's such a long, rambling story," said the girl. "My name is Monica Deane. My father was the rector of Little Hampsley in Suffolk. He died three years ago, and my mother and I were left very badly off. I went out as a governess, but my mother became a confirmed invalid and I had to come home to look after her. We were desperately poor, but one day we received a lawyer's letter telling us that an aunt of my father's had died and had left everything to me. I had often heard of this aunt who had quarreled with my father many years ago, and I knew that she was very well off, so it really seemed that our troubles were at an end. But matters did not turn out quite as well as we had hoped. I inherited the house she had lived in, but after paying one or two small legacies, there was no money left. I suppose she must have lost it during the war, or perhaps she had been living on her capital. Still, we had the house, and almost at once we had a chance of selling it at quite an advantageous price. But, foolishly perhaps, I refused the offer. We were in tiny, but expensive lodgings, and I thought it would be much nicer to live in the Red House where my mother could have comfortable rooms and take in paying guests to cover our expenses.

"I adhered to this plan, notwithstanding a further tempting offer from the gentlemen who wanted to buy. We moved in, and I advertised for paying guests. For a time, all went well, we had several answers to our advertisement, my aunt's old servant remained on with us and she and I between us did the work of the house. And then these unaccountable things began to happen."

"What things?"

“The queerest things. The whole place seemed bewitched. Pictures fell down, crockery flew across the room and broke, one morning we came down to find all the furniture moved round. At first we thought someone was playing a practical joke, but we had to give up that explanation. Sometimes when we were all sitting down to dinner, a terrific crash would be heard overhead. We would go up and find no one there, but a piece of furniture thrown violently to the ground."

"A poltergeist," cried Tuppence, much interested.

"Yes, that's what Dr. O'Neill said-though I don't know what it means."

"It's a sort of evil spirit that plays tricks," explained Tuppence who in reality knew very little of the subject, and was not even sure that she had got the word poltergeist right.

"Well, at any rate, the effect was disastrous. Our visitors were frightened to death, and left as soon as possible. We got new ones, and they too left hurriedly. I was in despair, and, to crown all, our own tiny income ceased suddenly-the Company in which it was invested failed."

"You poor dear," said Tuppence sympathetically. "What a time you have had. Did you want Mr. Blunt to investigate this 'haunting' business?"

"Not exactly. You see, three days ago, a gentleman called upon us. His name was Dr. O'Neill. He told us that he was a member of the Society for Physical Research, and that he had heard about the curious

manifestations that had taken place in our house and was much interested. So much so, that he was prepared to buy it from us, and conduct a series of experiments there."

"Well?"

"Of course, at first, I was overcome with joy. It seemed the way out of all our difficulties. But-"

"Yes?"

"Perhaps you will think me fanciful. Perhaps I am. But-oh! I'm sure I haven't made a mistake. It was the same man!"

"What same man?"

"The same man who wanted to buy it before. Oh! I'm sure I'm right."

"But why shouldn't it be?"

"You don't understand. The two men were quite different, different name and everything. The first man was quite young, a spruce dark young man of thirty odd. Dr. O'Neill is about fifty, he has a grey beard and wears glasses and stoops. But when he talked I saw a gold tooth on one side of his mouth. It only shows when he laughs. The other man had a tooth in just the same position, and then I looked at his ears. I had noticed the other man's ears, because they were a peculiar shape with hardly any lobe. Dr. O'Neill's were just the same. Both things couldn't be a coincidence, could they? I thought and thought and finally I wrote and said I would let him know in a week. I had noticed

Mr. Blunt's advertisement some time ago-as a matter of fact in an old paper that lined one of the kitchen drawers. I cut it out and came up to town."

"You were quite right," said Tuppence, nodding her head with vigor. "This needs looking into."

"A very interesting case, Miss Deane," observed Tommy. "We shall be pleased to look into this for you-eh, Miss Sheringham?"

"Rather," said Tuppence, "and we'll get to the bottom of it too."

"I understand, Miss Deane," went on Tommy, "that the household consists of you and your mother and a servant. Can you give me any particulars about the servant?"

"Her name is Crockett. She was with my aunt about eight or ten years. She is an elderly woman, not very pleasant in manner, but a good servant. She is inclined to give herself airs because her sister married out of her station. Crockett has a nephew whom she is always telling us is 'quite the gentleman.' "

"H'm," said Tommy, rather at a loss how to proceed.

Tuppence had been eyeing Monica keenly, now she spoke with sudden decision.

"I think the best plan would be for Miss Deane to come out and lunch with me. It's just on one o'clock. I can get full details from her."

"Certainly, Miss Sheringham," said Tommy. "An excellent plan."

"Look here," said Tuppence when they were comfortably ensconced at a little table in a neighboring restaurant, "I want to know. Is there any special reason why you want to find out about all this?"

Monica blushed.

"Well, you see-"

"Out with it," said Tuppence encouragingly.

"Well-there are two men who-who-want to marry me."

"The usual story, I suppose? One rich, one poor, and the poor one is the one you like!"

"I don't know how you know all these things," murmured the girl.

"That's a sort of law of Nature," explained Tuppence. "It happens to everybody. It happens to me."

"You see, even if I sell the house, it won't bring us enough to live on. Gerald is a dear, but he's desperately poor-though he's a very clever engineer and if only he had a little capital, his firm would take him into partnership. The other, Mr. Partridge, is a very good man, I am sure-and well off, and if I married him it would be an end of all our troubles. But-but-"

"I know," said Tuppence sympathetically. "It isn't the same thing at all. You can go on telling yourself how good and worthy he is, and adding up his qualities as though they were an addition sum-and it all has a simply refrigerating effect."

Monica nodded.

"Well," said Tuppence, "I think it would be as well if we went down to the neighborhood and studied matters upon the spot. What is the address?"

"The Red House, Stourton in the Marsh."

Tuppence wrote down the address in her note book.

"I didn't ask you," Monica began-"about terms-" she ended, blushing a little.

"Our payments are strictly by results," said Tuppence gravely. "If the secret of the Red House is a profitable one, as seems possible from the anxiety displayed to acquire the property, we should expect a small percentage, otherwise-nothing!"

“Thank you very much," said the girl gratefully.

"And now," said Tuppence, "don't worry. Everything's going to be all right. Let's enjoy lunch and talk of interesting things."

21. THE RED HOUSE

"Well," said Tommy, looking out of the window of the Crown and Anchor, "here we are at Toad in the Hole-or whatever this blasted village is called."

"Let us review the case," said Tuppence.

"By all means," said Tommy. "To begin with, getting my say in first, I suspect the invalid mother!"

"Why?"

"My dear Tuppence, grant that this poltergeist business is all a put up job, got up in order to persuade the girl to sell the house, someone must have thrown the things about. Now the girl said everyone was at dinner-but if the mother is a thoroughgoing invalid, she'd be upstairs in her room."

"If she was an invalid she could hardly throw furniture about."

"Ah! but she wouldn't be a real invalid. She'd be shamming."

"Why?"

"There you have me," confessed her husband. "I was really going on the well known principle of suspecting the most unlikely person."

"You always make fun of everything," said Tuppence severely. "There must be something that makes these people so anxious to get hold of the house. And if you don't care about getting to the bottom of this matter, I do. I like that girl. She's a dear."

Tommy nodded seriously enough.

"I quite agree. But I never can resist ragging you, Tuppence. Of course there's something queer about the house, and whatever it is, it's something that's difficult to get at. Otherwise a mere burglary would do the trick. But to be willing to buy the house means either that you've got to take up floors or pull down walls, or else that there's a coal mine under the back garden!"

"I don't want it to be a coal mine. Buried treasure is much more romantic."

"H'm," said Tommy. "In that case I think that I shall pay a visit to the local Bank Manager, explain that I am staying here over Christmas and probably buying the Red House, and discuss the question of opening an account."

"But why-?"

"Wait and see."

Tommy returned at the end of half an hour. His eyes were twinkling.

"We advance, Tuppence. Our interview proceeded on the lines indicated. I then asked casually whether he had had much gold paid in,

as is often the case nowadays in these small country banks-small farmers who hoarded it during the war, you understand. From that we proceeded quite naturally to the extraordinary vagaries of old ladies. I invented an aunt, who on the outbreak of the war, drove to the Army and Navy Stores in a four wheeler, and returned with sixteen hams. He immediately mentioned a client of his own who had insisted on drawing out every penny of money she had-in gold as far as possible, and who also insisted on having her securities, bearer bonds and such things, given into her own custody. I exclaimed on such an act of folly, and he mentioned casually that she was the former owner of the Red House. You see, Tuppence? She drew out all this money, and she hid it somewhere. You remember that Monica Deane mentioned that they were astonished at the small amount of her estate? Yes, she hid it in the Red House, and someone knows about it. I can make a pretty good guess who that someone is too."

"Who?"

"What about the faithful Crockett? She would know all about her mistress's peculiarities."

"And that gold-toothed Dr. O'Neill?"

"The gentlemanly nephew, of course! That's it. But whereabouts did she hide it? You know more about old ladies than I do, Tuppence. Where do they hide things?"

"Wrapped up in stockings and petticoats, under mattresses."

Tommy nodded.

"I expect you're right. All the same, she can't have done that because it would have been found when her things were turned over. It worries me-you see, an old lady like that can't have taken up floors or dug holes in the garden. All the same it's there in the Red House somewhere. Crockett hasn't found it, but she knows it's there, and once they get the house to themselves, she and her precious nephew, they can turn it upside down until they find what they're after. We've got to get ahead of them. Come on, Tuppence. We'll go to the Red House."

Monica Deane received them. To her mother and Crockett they were represented as would be purchasers of the Red House which would account for their being taken all over the house and grounds. Tommy did not tell Monica of the conclusions he had come to, but he asked her various searching questions. Of the garments and personal belongings of the dead woman, some had been given to Crockett and the others sent to various poor families. Everything had been gone through and turned out.

"Did your aunt leave any papers?"

"The desk was full, and there were some in a drawer in her bedroom, but there was nothing of importance amongst them."

"Have they been thrown away?"

"No, my mother is always very loath to throw away old papers. There were some old fashioned recipes among them which she intends to go through one day."

"Good," said Tommy approvingly. Then, indicating an old man who was at work upon one of the flower beds in the garden, he asked: "Was that old man the gardener here in your aunt's time?"

"Yes, he used to come three days a week. He lives in the village. Poor old fellow, he is past doing any really useful work. We have him just once a week to keep things tidied up. We can't afford more."

Tommy winked at Tuppence to indicate that she was to keep Monica with her, and he himself stepped across to where the gardener was working. He spoke a few pleasant words to the old man, asked him if he had been there in the old lady's time, and then said casually:

"You buried a box for her once, didn't you?"

"No, sir, I never buried naught for her. What should she want to bury a box for?"

Tommy shook his head. He strolled back to the house frowning. It was to be hoped that a study of the old lady's papers would yield some clue-otherwise the problem was a hard one to solve. The house itself was old fashioned, but not old enough to contain a secret room or passage.

Before leaving, Monica brought them down a big cardboard box, tied with string.

"I've collected all the papers," she whispered. "And they're in here. I thought you could take it away with you, and then you'll have plenty of

time to go over them-but I'm sure you won't find anything to throw light on the mysterious happenings in this house-"

Her words were interrupted by a terrific crash overhead. Tommy ran quickly up the stairs. A jug and basin in one of the front rooms was lying on the ground broken to pieces. There was no one in the room.

"The ghost up to its tricks again," he murmured with a grin.

He went down stairs again thoughtfully.

"I wonder, Miss Deane, if I might speak to the maid, Crockett, for a minute."

"Certainly. I will ask her to come to you."

Monica went off to the kitchen. She returned with the elderly maid who had opened the door to them earlier.

"We are thinking of buying this house," said Tommy pleasantly, "and my wife was wondering whether, in that case, you would care to remain on with us?"

Crockett's respectable face displayed no emotion of any kind.

"Thank you, sir," she said. "I should like to think it over if I may."

Tommy turned to Monica.

"I am delighted with the house, Miss Deane. I understand that there is another buyer in the market. I know what he has offered for the house, and I will willingly give a hundred more. And mind you, that is a good price I am offering."

Monica murmured something noncommittal, and the Beresfords took their leave.

"I was right," said Tommy, as they went down the drive. "Crockett's in it. Did you notice that she was out of breath? That was from running down the back stairs after smashing the jug and basin. Sometimes, very likely, she has admitted her nephew secretly, and he has done a little poltergeisting, or whatever you call it, whilst she has been innocently with the family. You'll see, Dr. O'Neill will make a further offer before the day is out."

True enough, after dinner a note was brought. It was from Monica.

"I have just heard from Dr. O'Neill. He raises his previous offer by £150."

"The nephew must be a man of means," said Tommy thoughtfully. "And I tell you what, Tuppence, the prize he's after must be well worth while."

"Oh! Oh! Oh! if only we could find it!"

"Well, let's get on with the spade work."

They were sorting through the big box of papers, a wearisome affair, as they were all jumbled up pell mell without any kind of order or method. Every few minutes they compared notes.

"What's the latest, Tuppence?"

"Two old receipted bills, three unimportant letters, a recipe for preserving new potatoes and one for making lemon cheesecake. What's yours?"

"One bill, poem on Spring, two newspaper cuttings: 'Why Women buy Pearls-a sound investment' and 'Man with Four Wives'-Extraordinary Story,' and a recipe for Jugged Hare."

"It's heart breaking," said Tuppence, and they fell to once more. At last the box was empty. They looked at each other.

"I put this aside," said Tommy, picking up a half sheet of notepaper, "because it struck me as peculiar. But I don't suppose it's got anything to do with what we're looking for."

"Let's see it. Oh! it's one of those funny things, what do they call them? Anagrams, charades or something." She read it:

"My first you put on glowing coal

And into it you put my whole

My second really is the first

My third mislikes the winter blast."

"H'm," said Tommy critically. "I don't think much of the poet's rhymes."

"I don't see what you find peculiar about it, though," said Tuppence. "Everybody used to have a collection of these sort of things about fifty years ago. You saved them up for winter evenings round the fire."

"I wasn't referring to the verse. It's the words written below it that strike me as peculiar.

"St. Luke XI. 9," she read. "It's a text."

"Yes. Doesn't that strike you as odd? Would an old lady of a religious persuasion write a text just under a charade?"

"It is rather odd," agreed Tuppence thoughtfully.

"I presume that you, being a clergyman's daughter, have got your Bible with you?"

"As a matter of fact I have. Aha, you didn't expect that. Wait a sec."

Tuppence ran to her suit case, extracted a small red volume and returned to the table. She turned the leaves rapidly. "Here we are. Luke, Chapter XI, Verse 9. Oh! Tommy, look."

Tommy bent over and looked where Tuppence's small finger pointed to a portion of the verse in question.

"Seek, and ye shall find."

"That's it," cried Tuppence. "We've got it! Solve the cryptogram and the treasure is ours-or rather Monica's."

"Well, let's get to work on the cryptogram, as you call it. 'My first you put on glowing coal.' What does that mean, I wonder? Then-'My second really is the first.' That's pure gibberish."

"It's quite simple really," said Tuppence kindly. "It's just a sort of knack. Let me have it."

Tommy surrendered it willingly. Tuppence ensconed herself in an arm chair, and began muttering to herself with bent brows.

"It's quite simple really," murmured Tommy when half an hour had elapsed.

"Don't crow! We're the wrong generation for this. I've a good mind to go back to town tomorrow and call on some old pussy who would probably read it as easy as winking. It's a knack, that's all."

"Well, let's have one more try."

"There aren't many things you can put on glowing coal," said Tuppence thoughtfully. "There's water, to put it out, or wood, or a kettle."

"It must be one syllable, I suppose? What about wood, then?"

"You couldn't put anything into wood, though."

"There's no one syllable word instead of water, but there must be one syllable things you can put on a fire in the kettle line."

"Saucepans," mused Tuppence. "Frying pans. How about pan? Or pot? What's a word beginning pan or pot that is something you cook?"

"Pottery," suggested Tommy. "You bake that in the fire. Wouldn't that be near enough?"

"The rest of it doesn't fit. Pancakes? No. Oh! bother."

They were interrupted by the little serving maid, who told them that dinner would be ready in a few minutes.

"Only Mrs. Lumley, she wanted to know if you'd like your potatoes fried, or boiled in their jackets? She's got some of each."

"Boiled in their jackets," said Tuppence promptly. "I love potatoes-" She stopped dead with her mouth open.

"What's the matter, Tuppence? Have you seen a ghost?"

'Tommy," cried Tuppence. "Don't you see? That's it! The word, I mean. Potatoes! 'My first you put on glowing coal'-that's pot. 'And into it you put my whole.' 'My second really is the first.' that's A, the first letter of the alphabet. 'My third mislikes the wintry blast'-cold toes of course!"

"You're right, Tuppence. Very clever of you. But I'm afraid we've wasted an awful lot of time over nothing. Potatoes don't fit in at all with missing treasure. Half a sec., though. What did you read out just now, when we were going through the box? Something about a recipe for New Potatoes. I wonder whether there's anything in that."

He rummaged hastily through the pile of recipes.

"Here it is. 'TO KEEP NEW POTATOES. Put the new potatoes into tins and bury them in the garden. Even in the middle of winter, they will taste as though freshly dug.' "

"We've got it," screamed Tuppence. "That's it. The treasure is in the garden, buried in a tin."

"But I asked the gardener. He said he'd never buried anything."

"Yes, I know, but that's because people never really answer what you say, they answer what they think you mean. He knew he'd never buried anything out of the common. We'll go to-morrow and ask him where he buried the potatoes."

The following morning was Christmas Eve. By dint of inquiry they found the old gardener's cottage. Tuppence broached the subject after some minutes' conversation.

"I wish one could have new potatoes at Christmas time," she remarked. "Wouldn't they be good with turkey? Do people round here ever bury them in tins? I've heard that keeps them fresh."

"Ay, that they do," declared the old man. "Old Miss Deane, up to the Red House, she allus had three tins buried every summer, and as often as not forgot to have 'em dug up again!"

"In the bed by the house, as a rule, didn't she?"

"No, over against the wall by the fir tree."

Having got the information they wanted, they soon took their leave of the old man, presenting him with five shillings as a Christmas box.

"And now for Monica," said Tommy.

"Tommy! You have no sense of the dramatic. Leave it to me. I've got a beautiful plan. Do you think you could manage to beg, borrow, or steal a spade?"

Somehow or other, a spade was duly produced, and that night, late, two figures might have been seen stealing into the grounds of the Red House. The place indicated by the gardener was easily found, and Tommy set to work. Presently his spade rang on metal, and a few seconds later he had unearthed a big biscuit tin. It was sealed round with adhesive plaster and firmly fastened down, but Tuppence, by the aid of Tommy's knife, soon managed to open it. Then she gave a groan.

The tin was full of potatoes. She poured them out so that the tin was completely empty, but there were no other contents.

"Go on digging, Tommy."

It was some time before a second tin rewarded their search As before Tuppence unsealed it.

"Well?" demanded Tommy anxiously.

"Potatoes again!"

"Damn!" said Tommy and set to once more

"The third time is lucky," said Tuppence consolingly.

"I believe the whole thing's a mare's nest," said Tommy gloomily, but he continued to dig.

At last a third tin was brought to light.

"Potatoes aga-" began Tuppence, then stopped. "Oh! Tommy, we've got it. It's only potatoes on top. Look!"

She held up a big old fashioned velvet bag.

"Cut along home," cried Tommy. "It's icy cold. Take the bag with you. I must just shovel back the earth. And may a thousand curses light upon your head, Tuppence, if you open that bag before I come!"

"I'll play fair. Ouch! I'm frozen." She beat a speedy retreat.

On arrival at the Inn she had not long to wait. Tommy was hard upon her heels, perspiring freely after his digging and the final brisk run.

"Now then," said Tommy. 'The private inquiry agents make good! Open the loot, Mrs. Beresford."

Inside the bag was a package done up in oil silk and a heavy chamois leather bag. They opened the latter first. It was full of gold sovereigns. Tommy counted them.

"Two hundred pounds. That was all they would let her have, I suppose. Cut open the package."

Tuppence did so. It was full of closely folded banknotes. Tommy and Tuppence counted them carefully. They amounted to exactly twenty thousand pounds!

"Whew!" said Tommy. "Isn't it lucky for Monica that we're both rich and honest? What's that done up in tissue paper?"

Tuppence unrolled the little parcel and drew out a magnificent string of pearls, exquisitely matched.

"I don't know much about these things," said Tommy slowly, "But I'm pretty sure that those pearls are worth another five thousand pounds at least. Look at the size of them. Now I see why the old lady kept that cutting about pearls being a good investment. She must have realized all her securities and turned them into notes and jewels."

"Oh! Tommy, isn't it wonderful? Darling Monica. Now she can marry her nice young man and live happily ever afterwards, like me."

"That's rather sweet of you, Tuppence. So you are happy with me?"

"As a matter of fact," said Tuppence, "I am. But I didn't mean to say so. It slipped out. What with being excited, and Christmas Eve, and one thing and another-"

"If you really love me," said Tommy, "will you answer me one question?"

"I hate these catches," said Tuppence. "But-well-all right."

"Then how did you know that Monica was a clergyman's daughter?"

"Oh, that was just cheating," said Tuppence happily. “I opened her letter making an appointment, and a Mr. Deane was Father's curate once and he had a little girl called Monica, about four or five years younger than me. So I put two and two together."

"You are a shameless creature," said Tommy. "Hullo, there's twelve o'clock striking. Happy Christmas, Tuppence."

"Happy Christmas, Tommy. It'll be a Happy Christmas for Monica too-and all owing to US. I am glad. Poor thing, she has been so miserable. Do you know, Tommy, I feel all queer and choky about the throat when I think of it."

"Darling Tuppence," said Tommy.

"Darling Tommy," said Tuppence. "How awfully sentimental we are getting."

"Christmas comes but once a year," said Tommy sententiously. "That's what our great grandmothers said and I expect there's a lot of truth in it still."

22. THE AMBASSADOR'S BOOTS

"My dear fellow, my dear fellow," said Tuppence and waved a heavily buttered muffin.

Tommy looked at her for a minute or two, then a broad grin spread over his face and he murmured.

“We do have to be so very careful."

“That's right," said Tuppence delighted. “You guessed. I am the famous Dr. Fortune and you are Superintendent Bell."

"Why are you being Reginald Fortune?"

"Well really because I feel like a lot of hot butter."

"That is the pleasant side of it," said Tommy. "But there is another. You will have to examine horribly smashed faces and very extra dead bodies a good deal."

In answer Tuppence threw across a letter. Tommy's eyebrows rose in astonishment.

"Randolph Wilmott, the American Ambassador. I wonder what he wants."

"We shall know to-morrow at eleven o'clock.

Punctually to the time named, Mr. Randolph Wilmott, United States Ambassador to the Court of St. James, was ushered into Mr. Blunt's office. He cleared his throat and commenced speaking in a deliberate and characteristic manner.

"I have come to you, Mr. Blunt-By the way, it is Mr. Blunt himself to whom I am speaking, is it not?"

"Certainly," said Tommy. "I am Theodore Blunt, the head of the firm."

"I a ways prefer to deal with heads of de-partments," said Mr. Wilmott. "It is more satisfactory in every way. As I was about to say, Mr. Blunt, this business gets my goat. There's nothing in it to trouble Scotland Yard about-I'm not a penny the worse in any way, and it's probably all due to a simple mistake. But all the same, I don't see just how that mistake arose. There's nothing criminal in it, I daresay, but I'd like just to get the thing straightened out. It makes me mad not to see the why and wherefore of a thing."

"Absolutely," said Tommy.

Mr. Wilmott went on. He was slow and given to much detail. At last Tommy managed to get a word in.

"Quite so," he said, "the position is this. You arrived by the liner Nomadic a week ago. In some way your kitbag and the kitbag of another gentleman, Mr. Ralph Westerham whose initials are the same as yours, got mixed up. You took Mr. Westerham's kitbag, and he took yours. Mr. Westerham discovered the mistake immediately, sent round your kitbag to the Embassy, and took away his own. Am I right so far?"

"That is precisely what occurred. The two bags must have been practically identical, and with the initials R.W. being the same in both cases, it is not difficult to understand that an error might have been made. I myself was not aware of what had happened until my valet informed me of the mistake, and that Mr. Westerham-he is a Senator, and a man for whom I have a great admiration-had sent round for his bag and returned mine."

"Then I don't see-"

"But you will see. That's only the beginning of the story. Yesterday, as it chanced, I ran up against Senator Westerham, and I happened to mention the matter to him jestingly. To my great surprise, he did not seem to know what I was talking about, and when I explained, he denied the story absolutely. He had not taken my bag off the ship in mistake for his own-in fact, he had not travelled with such an article amongst his luggage."

"What an extraordinary thing!"

"Mr. Blunt, it is an extraordinary thing. There seems no rhyme or reason in it. Why, if anyone wanted to steal my kitbag, he could do so easily enough without resorting to all this round about business! And anyway, it was not stolen, but returned to me. On the other hand, if it were taken by mistake, why use Senator Westerham's name? It's a crazy business-but just for curiosity I mean to get to the bottom of it. I hope the case is not too trivial for you to undertake?"

"Not at all. It is a very intriguing little problem, capable as you say, of many simple explanations, but nevertheless baffling on the face of it. The first thing, of course, is the reason of the substitution, if substitution it was. You say nothing was missing from your bag when it came back into your possession?"

"My man says not. He would know."

"What was in it, if I may ask?"

"Mostly boots."

"Boots," said Tommy discouraged.

"Yes," said Mr. Wilmott. "Boots. Odd, isn't it?"

"You'll forgive my asking you," said Tommy, "but you didn't carry any secret papers, or anything of that sort sewn in the lining of a boot or screwed into a false heel?"

The Ambassador seemed amused by the question.

"Secret diplomacy hasn't got to that pitch, I hope."

"Only in fiction," said Tommy with an answering smile, and a slightly apologetic manner. "But you see, we've got to account for the thing somehow. Who came for the bag-the other bag, I mean?"

"Supposed to be one of Westerham's servants. Quite a quiet ordinary man, so I understand. My valet saw nothing wrong with him."

"Had it been unpacked, do you know?"

"That I can't say. I presume not. But perhaps you'd like to ask the valet a few questions? He can tell you more than I can about the business."

"I think that would be the best plan, Mr. Wilmott."

The Ambassador scribbled a few words on a card and handed it to Tommy.

"I opine that you would prefer to go round to the Embassy and make your inquiries there? If not, I will have the man,-his name is Richards, by the way-sent round here."

"No, thank you, Mr. Wilmott. I should prefer to go to the Embassy."

The Ambassador rose, glancing at his watch.

"Dear me, I shall be late for an appointment. Well, good bye, Mr. Blunt. I leave the matter in your hands."

He hurried away. Tommy looked at Tuppence who had been scribbling demurely on her pad in the character of the efficient Miss Robinson.

"What about it, old thing?" he asked. "Do you see, as the old bird put it, any rhyme or reason in the proceeding?"

"None whatever," replied Tuppence cheerily.

"Well, that's a start anyway! It shows that there is really something very deep at the back of it."

"You think so?"

"It's a generally accepted hypothesis. Remember Sherlock Holmes and the depth the butter had sunk into the parsley-I mean the other way round. I've always had a devouring wish to know all about that case. Perhaps Watson will disinter it from his notebook one of these days. Then I shall die happy. But we must get busy."

"Quite so," said Tuppence. "Not a quick man, the esteemed Wilmott, but sure."

"She knows men," said Tommy. "Or do I say he knows men. It is so confusing when you assume the character of a male detective."

"Oh! My dear fellow, my dear fellow!"

"A little more action, Tuppence, and a little less repetition."

"A classic phrase cannot be repeated too often," said Tuppence with dignity.

"Have a muffin," said Tommy kindly.

"Not at eleven o'clock in the morning, thank you. Silly case, this. Boots-you know-Why boots?"

"Well," said Tommy, "why not?"

"It doesn't fit. Boots." She shook her head. "All wrong. Who wants other people's boots? The whole thing's mad."

"Perhaps they got hold of the wrong bag?" suggested Tommy.

"That's possible. But if they were after papers, a despatch case would be more likely. Papers are the only things one thinks of in connection with ambassadors."

"Boots suggest footprints," said Tommy thoughtfully. "Do you think they wanted to lay a trail of Wilmott's footsteps somewhere?"

Tuppence considered the suggestion, abandoning her role, then shook her head.

"It seems wildly impossible," she said. "No, I believe we shall have to resign ourselves to the fact that the boots have nothing to do with it."

"Well," said Tommy with a sigh. "The next step is to interview friend Richards. He may be able to throw some light on the mystery."

On production of the Ambassador's card, Tommy was admitted to the Embassy, and presently a pale young man, with a respectful manner, and a subdued voice, presented himself to undergo examination.

"I am Richards, sir, Mr. Wilmott's valet. I understood you wished to see me?"

"Yes, Richards. Mr. Wilmott called on me this morning, and suggested that I should come round and ask you a few questions. It is this matter of the kitbag."

"Mr. Wilmott was rather upset over the affair, I know, sir. I can hardly see why, since no harm was done. I certainly understood from the man who called for the other bag that it belonged to Senator Westerham, but of course I may have been mistaken."

"What kind of a man was he?"

"Middle-aged. Grey-hair. Very good class, I should say-most respectable. I understood he was Senator Westerham's valet. He left Mr. Wilmott's bag and took away the other."

"Had it been unpacked at all?"

"Which one, sir?"

"Well I meant the one you brought from the boat. But I should like to know about the other as well-Mr. Wilmott's own. Had that been unpacked, do you fancy?"

"I should say not, sir. It was just as I strapped it up on the boat. I should say the gentleman-whoever he was-just opened it-realized it wasn't his, and shut it up again."

"Nothing missing? No small article?"

"I don't think so, sir. In fact, I'm quite sure."

"And now the other one. Had you started to unpack that?" "As a matter of fact, sir, I was just opening it at the very moment Senator Westerham's man arrived. I'd just undone the straps."

"Did you open it at all?"

"We just unfastened it together, sir, to be sure no mistake had been made this time. The man said it was all right, and he strapped it up again and took it away."

"What was inside? Boots also?"

"No, sir, mostly toilet things, I fancy. I know I saw a tin of bath salts."

Tommy abandoned that line of research.

"You never saw anyone tampering with anything in your master's cabin on board ship, I suppose?"

"Oh, no, sir."

"Never anything suspicious of any kind?"

"And what do I mean by that, I wonder," he thought to himself with a trace of amusement. "Anything suspicious-just words!"

But the man in front of him hesitated.

"Now that I remember it-"

"Yes," said Tommy eagerly. "What?"

"I don't think it could have anything to do with it. But there was a young lady."

"Yes? A young lady, you say, what was she doing?"

"She was taken faint, sir. A very pleasant young lady. Miss Eileen O'Hara, her name was. A dainty looking lady, not tall, with black hair. Just a little foreign looking."

"Yes?" said Tommy, with even greater eagerness.

"As I was saying, she was taken queer. Just outside Mr. Wilmott's cabin. She asked me to fetch the doctor. I helped her to the sofa, and then went off for the doctor. I was some time finding him, and when I found him and brought him back, the young lady was nearly all right again."

"Oh!" said Tommy.

"You don't think, sir-"

"It's difficult to know what to think," said Tommy noncommittally. "Was this Miss O'Hara travelling alone?”

"Yes, I think so, sir."

"You haven't seen her since you landed?"

"No, sir."

"Well," said Tommy, after a minute or two spent in reflection. `'I think that's all. Thank you, Richards."

"Thank you, sir."

Back at the office of the Detective Agency, Tommy retailed his conversation with Richards to Tuppence who listened attentively.

"What do you think of it, Tuppence?"

"Oh! my dear fellow, we doctors are always sceptical of a sudden faintness! So very convenient. And Eileen as well as O'Hara. Almost too impossibly Irish, don't you think?"

"It's something to go upon at last. Do you know what I am going to do, Tuppence? Advertise for the lady."

"What?"

"Yes. Any information respecting Miss Eileen O'Hara, known to have travelled such and such a ship and such and such a date. Either she'll answer it herself if she's genuine, or someone may come forward to give us information about her. So far, it's the only hope of a clue."

"You'll also put her on her guard, remember."

"Well," said Tommy. "One's got to risk something."

"I still can't see any sense in the thing," said Tuppence, frowning. "If a gang of crooks get hold of the Ambassador's bag for an hour or two, and then send it back, what possible good can it do them? Unless there are papers in it they want to copy, and Mr. Wilmott swears there was nothing of the kind. "

Tommy stared at her thoughtfully.

"You put these things rather well, Tuppence," he said at last. "You've given me an idea."

It was two days later. Tuppence was out to lunch. Tommy, alone in the austere office of Mr. Theodore Blunt, was improving his mind by reading the latest sensational thriller.

The door of the office opened and Albert appeared.

"A young lady to see you, sir. Miss Cicely March. She says she has called in answer to an advertisment."

"Show her in at once," cried Tommy, thrusting his novel into a convenient drawer.

In another minute Albert had ushered in the young lady.

Tommy had just time to see that she was fair haired and extremely pretty when the amazing occurrence happened.

The door through which Albert had just passed out was rudely burst open. In the doorway stood a picturesque figure-a big dark man, Spanish in appearance, with a flaming red tie. His features were distorted with rage, and in his hand was a gleaming pistol.

"So this is the office of Mr. Busybody Blunt," he said in perfect English. His voice was low and venomous. "Hands up at once-or I shoot."

It sounded no idle threat. Tommy's hands went up obediently. The girl, crouched against the wall, gave a gasp of terror.

"This young lady will come with me," said the man. "Yes, you will, my dear. You have never seen me before, but that doesn't matter. I can't have my plans ruined by a silly little chit like you. I seem to remember that you were one of the passengers on the Nomadic. You must have been peering into things that didn't concern you-but I've no intention of letting you blab any secrets to Mr. Blunt here. A very clever gentleman, Mr. Blunt, with his fancy advertisements. But as it happens. I keep an

eye on the advertisement columns. That's how I got wise to his little game."

"You interest me exceedingly," said Tommy. "Won't you go on?"

"Cheek won't help you, Mr. Blunt. From now on, you're a marked man. Give up this investigation, and we'll leave you alone. Otherwise-God help you! Death comes swiftly to those who thwart our plans."

Tommy did not reply. He was staring over the intruder's shoulder as though he saw a ghost.

As a matter of fact he was seeing something that caused him far more apprehension than any ghost could have done. Up to now, he had not given a thought to Albert as a factor in the game. He had taken for granted that Albert had already been dealt with by the mysterious stranger. If he had thought of him at all, it was as one lying stunned on the carpet in the outer office.

He now saw that Albert had miraculously escaped the stranger's attention. But instead of rushing out to fetch a policeman in good sound British fashion, Albert had elected to play a lone hand. The door behind the stranger had opened noiselessly, and Albert stood in the aperture enveloped in a coil of rope.

An agonized yelp of protest burst from Tommy, but too late. Fired with enthusiasm, Albert flung a loop of rope over the intruder's head, and jerked him backwards off his feet.

The inevitable happened. The pistol went off with a roar and Tommy felt the bullet scorch his ear in passing, ere it buried itself in the plaster behind him.

"I've got him, sir," cried Albert, flushed with triumph. "I've lassoed him. I've been practicing with a lasso in my spare time, sir. Can you give me a hand? He's very violent."

Tommy hastened to his faithful henchman's assistance, mentally determining that Albert should have no further spare time.

"You damned idiot," he said. "Why didn't you go for a policeman? Owing to this fool's play of yours, he as near as anything plugged me through the head. Whew! I've never had such a near escape."

"Lassoed him in the nick of time, I did," said Albert, his ardor quite undamped. "It's wonderful what those chaps can do on the prairies, sir."

"Quite so," said Tommy, "but we're not on the prairies. We happen to be in a highly civilized city. And now, my dear sir," he added to his prostrate foe. "What are we going to do with you?"

A stream of oaths in a foreign language was his only reply.

"Hush," said Tommy. "I don't understand a word of what you're saying, but I've got a shrewd idea it's not the kind of language to use before a lady. You'll excuse him, won't you, Miss-do you know, in the excitement of this little upset, I've quite forgotten your name?"

"March," said the girl. She was still white and shaken. But she came forward now and stood by Tommy looking down on the recumbent figure of the discomfited stranger. “What are you going to do with him?"

"I could fetch a bobby now," said Albert helpfully.

But Tommy, looking up, caught a very faint negative movement of the girl's head, and took his cue accordingly.

"We'll let him off this time," he remarked. "Nevertheless I shall give myself the pleasure of kicking him downstairs- if it's only to teach him manners to a lady."

He removed the rope, hauled the victim to his feet, and propelled him briskly through the outer office.

A series of shrill yelps was heard and then a thud. Tommy came back, flushed but smiling.

The girl was staring at him with round eyes.

"Did you-hurt him?"

"I hope so," said Tommy. "But these foreigners make a practice of crying out before they're hurt-so I can't be quite sure about it. Shall we come back into my office, Miss March, and resume our interrupted conversation? I don't think we shall be interrupted again."

"I'll have my lasso ready, sir, in case," said the helpful Albert.

"Put it away," ordered Tommy sternly.

He followed the girl into the inner office, and sat down at his desk whilst she took a chair facing him.

"I don't quite know where to begin," said the girl. "As you heard that man say, I was a passenger on the Nomadic. The lady you advertised about, Miss O'Hara, was also on board."

"Exactly," said Tommy. "That we know already, but I suspect you must know something about her doings on board that boat or else that picturesque gentleman would not have been in such a hurry to intervene."

"I will tell you everything. The American Ambassador was on board. One day, as I was passing his cabin, I saw this woman inside, and she was doing something so extraordinary that I stopped to watch. She had a man's boot in her hand-"

"A boot?" cried Tommy excitedly. "I'm sorry, Miss March, go on."

"With a little pair of scissors, she was slitting up the lining. Then she seemed to push something inside. Just at that minute the doctor and another man came down the passage, and immediately she dropped back on the couch and groaned. I waited, and I gathered from what was being said that she had pretended to feel faint. I say pretended- because when I first caught sight of her, she was obviously feeling nothing of the kind."

Tommy nodded.

"Well?"

"I rather hate to tell you the next part. I was-curious. And also I'd been reading silly books, and I wondered if she'd put a bomb or a poisoned needle or something like that in Mr. Wilmott's boot. I know it's absurd-but I did think so. Anyway, next time I passed the empty cabin, I slipped in, and examined the boot. I drew out from the lining a slip of paper. Just as I had it in my hand, I heard the steward coming, and I hurried out so as not to be caught. The folded paper was still in my hand. When I got into my own cabin, I examined it. Mr. Blunt, it was nothing but some verses from the Bible."

"Verses from the Bible?" said Tommy, very much intrigued.

"At least I thought so at the time. I couldn't understand it, but I thought perhaps it was the work of a religious maniac. Anyway, I didn't feel it was worth while replacing it. I kept it without thinking much about it until yesterday when I used it to make into a boat for my little nephew to sail in his bath. As the paper got wet, I saw a queer kind of design coming out all over it. I hastily took it out of the bath, and smoothed it out flat. The water had brought out the hidden message. It was a kind of tracing-and looked like the mouth of a harbor. Immediately after that I read your advertisement."

Tommy sprang from his chair.

"But this is most important. I see it all now. That tracing is probably the plan of some important harbor defences. It had been stolen by this

woman. She feared someone was on her track, and not daring to conceal it amongst her own belongings, she contrived this hiding-place. Later, she obtained possession of the bag in which the boot was packed-only to discover that the paper had vanished. Tell me, Miss March, you have brought this paper with you?"

The girl shook her head.

"It's at my place of business. I run a beauty parlor in Bond Street. I am really an agent for the 'Cyclamen' preparations in New York. That is why I had been over there. I thought the paper might be important, so I locked it up in the safe before coming out. Ought not Scotland Yard to know about it?"

"Yes, indeed."

"Then shall we go there now, get it out, and take it straight to Scotland Yard?"

"I am very busy this afternoon," said Tommy adopting his professional manner and consulting his watch. "The Bishop of London wants me to take up a case for him. A very curious problem, concerning some vestments and two curates."

"Then in that case," said Miss March, rising, "I will go alone."

Tommy raised a hand in protest.

"As I was about to say," he said, "the Bishop must wait. I will leave a few words with Albert. I am convinced, Miss March, that until that

paper has been safely deposited with Scotland Yard you are in active danger."

"Do you think so?" said the girl doubtfully.

"I don't think, I'm sure. Excuse me." He scribbled some words on the pad in front of him, then tore off the leaf and folded it.

Taking his hat and stick, he intimated to the girl that he was ready to accompany her. In the outer office, he handed the folded paper to Albert with an air of importance.

"I am called out on an urgent case. Explain that to his lordship if he comes. Here are my notes on the case for Miss Robinson."

"Very good, sir," said Albert playing up. "And what about the Duchess's pearls?"

Tommy waved his hand irritably.

"That must wait also."

He and Miss March hurried out. Half way down the stairs they encountered Tuppence coming up. Tommy passed her with a brusque: "Late again, Miss Robinson. I am called out on an important case."

Tuppence stood still on the stairs and stared after them. Then, with raised eyebrows, she went on up to the office.

As they reached the street, a taxi came sailing up to them. Tommy, on the point of hailing it, changed his mind.

"Are you a good walker, Miss March?" he asked seriously.

"Yes, why? Hadn't we better take that taxi? It will be quicker."

"Perhaps you did not notice. That taxi driver has just refused a fare a little lower down the street. He was waiting for us. Your enemies are on the look out. If you feel equal to it, it would be better for us to walk to Bond Street. In the crowded streets, they will not be able to attempt much against us."

"Very well," said the girl, rather doubtfully.

They walked westwards. The streets, as Tommy had said, were crowded, and progress was slow. Tommy kept a sharp look out. Occasionally he drew the girl to one side with a quick gesture, though she herself had seen nothing suspicious.

Suddenly glancing at her, he was seized with compunction.

"I say, you look awfully done up. The shock of that man. Come into this place and have a good cup of strong coffee. I suppose you wouldn't hear of a nip of brandy."

The girl shook her head, with a faint smile.

"Coffee be it then," said Tommy. "I think we can safely risk its being poisoned."

They lingered some time over their coffee, and finally set off at a brisker pace.

"We've thrown them off, I think," said Tommy, looking over his shoulder.

Cyclamen Ltd. was a small establishment in Bond Street, with pale pink taffeta curtains, and one or two jars of face cream and a cake of soap decorating the window.

Cicely March entered, and Tommy followed. The place inside was tiny. On the left was a glass counter with toilet preparations. Behind this counter was a middle-aged woman with grey hair and an exquisite complexion who acknowledged Cicely March's entrance with a faint inclination of the head before continuing to talk to the customer she was serving.

This customer was a small dark woman. Her back was to them and they could not see her face. She was speaking in slow difficult English. On the right was a sofa and a couple of chairs with some magazines on a table. Here sat two men-apparently bored husbands waiting for their wives.

Cicely March passed straight on through a door at the end which she held ajar for Tommy to follow her. As he did so, the woman customer exclaimed. "Ah! but I think that is an amico of mine," and rushed after them, inserting her foot in the door just in time to prevent its closing. At the same time, the two men rose to their feet. One followed her through the door, the other advanced to the shop attendant and

clapped his hand over her mouth to drown the scream rising to her lips.

In the meantime, things were happening rather quickly beyond the swing door. As Tommy passed through, a cloth was flung over his head, and a sickly odor assailed his nostrils. Almost as soon however, it was jerked off again, and a woman's scream rang out.

Tommy blinked a little and coughed as he took in the scene in front of him. On his right was the mysterious stranger of a few hours ago, and busily fitting handcuffs upon him was one of the bored men from the shop parlor. Just in front of him was Cicely March wrestling vainly to free herself, whilst the woman customer from the shop held her firmly pinioned. As the latter turned her head, and the veil she wore unfastened itself and fell off, the well known features of Tuppence were revealed.

"Well done, Tuppence," said Tommy, moving forward. "Let me give you a hand. I shouldn't struggle if I were you, Miss O'Hara-or do you prefer to be called Miss March?"

"This is Inspector Grace, Tommy," said Tuppence. "As soon as I read the note you left I rang up Scotland Yard, and Inspector Grace and another man met me outside here."

"Very glad to get hold of this gentleman," said the Inspector, indicating his prisoner. "He's wanted badly. But we've never had cause to suspect this place-thought it was a genuine beauty shop."

"You see," explained Tommy gently. "We do have to be so very careful! Why should anyone want the Ambassador's bag for an hour or so? I put the question the other way round. Supposing it was the other bag that was the important one. Someone wanted that bag to be in the Ambassador's possession for an hour or so. Much more illuminating! Diplomatic luggage is not subjected to the indignities of a Customs examination. Clearly smuggling. But smuggling of what? Nothing too bulky. At once I thought of drugs. Then that picturesque comedy was enacted in my office. They'd seen my advertisement and wanted to put me off the scent-or failing that, out of the way altogether. But I happened to notice an expression of blank dismay in the charming lady's eyes when Albert did his lasso act. That didn't fit in very well with her supposed part. The stranger's attack was meant to assure my confidence in her. I played the part of the credulous sleuth with all my might-swallowed her rather impossible story and permitted her to lure me here, carefully leaving behind full instructions for dealing with the situation. Under various pretexts I delayed our arrival, so as to give you all plenty of time."

Cicely March was looking at him with a stony expression.

"You are mad. What do you expect to find here?"

"Remembering that Richards saw a tin of bath salts, what do you say about beginning with the bath salts, eh Inspector?"

"A very sound idea, sir."

He picked up one of the dainty pink tins, and emptied it on the table. The girl laughed.

"Genuine crystals, eh?" said Tommy. "Nothing more deadly than carbonate of soda?"

"Try the safe," suggested Tuppence.

There was a small wall safe in the corner. The key was in the lock. Tommy swung it open and gave a shout of satisfaction. The back of the safe opened out into a big recess in the wall, and that recess was stacked with the same elegant tins of bath salts. Rows and rows of them. He took one out and prised up the lid. The top showed the same pink crystals, but underneath was a fine white powder.

The Inspector uttered an ejaculation.

"You've got it, sir. Ten to one, that tin's full of pure cocaine. We knew there was a distributing area somewhere round here, handy to the West End, but we haven't been able to get a clue to it. This is a fine coup of yours, sir."

"Rather a triumph for Blunt's Brilliant Detectives," said Tommy to Tuppence, as they emerged into the street together. "It's a great thing to be a married man. Your persistent schooling has at last taught me to recognize peroxide when I see it. Golden hair has got to be the genuine article to take me in. We will concoct a businesslike letter to the Ambassador, informing him that the matter has been dealt with satisfactorily. And now, my dear fellow, what about tea, and lots of hot buttered muffins?"

23. THE MAN WHO WAS No.16

Tommy and Tuppence were closeted with the Chief in his private room. His commendation had been warm and sincere.

"You have succeeded admirably. Thanks to you we have laid our hands on no less than five very interesting personages, and from them we have received much valuable information. Meanwhile I learn from a creditable source that headquarters in Moscow have taken alarm at the failure of their agents to report. I think, that in spite of all our precautions, they have begun to suspect that all is not well at what I may call the distributing centre-the office of Mr. Theodore Blunt-the International Detective Bureau."

"Well," said Tommy. "I suppose they were bound to tumble to it sometime or other, sir."

"As you say, it was only to be expected. But I am a little worried-about Mrs. Tommy."

"I can look after her all right, sir," said Tommy, at exactly the same minute as Tuppence said, "I can take care of myself."

"H'm," said Mr. Carter. "Excessive self-confidence was always a characteristic of you two. Whether your immunity is entirely due to your own superhuman cleverness, or whether a small percentage of luck creeps in, I'm not prepared to say. But luck changes, you know. However, I won't argue the point. From my extensive knowledge of

Mrs. Tommy, I suppose it's quite useless to ask her to keep out of the limelight for the next week or two?"

Tuppence shook her head very energetically.

"Then all I can do is to give you all the information that I can. We have reason to believe that a special agent has been despatched from Moscow to this country. We don't know what name he is travelling under, we don't know when he will arrive. But we do know something about him. He is a man who gave us great trouble in the war, a ubiquitous kind of fellow who turned up all over the place where we least wanted him. He is a Russian by birth, and an accomplished linguist-so much so that he can pass as half a dozen other nationalities, including our own. He is also a past master in the art of disguise. And he has brains. It was he who devised the No. 16 code.

"When and how he will turn up, I do not know. But I am fairly certain that he will turn up. We do know this-he was not personally acquainted with the real Mr. Theodore Blunt. I think that he will turn up at your office, on the pretext of a case which he will wish you to take up, and will try you with the passwords. The first, as you know, is the mention of the number sixteen-which is replied to by a sentence containing the same number. The second, which we have only just learnt, is an inquiry as to whether you have ever crossed the Channel. The answer to that is: "I was in Berlin on the 13th of last month." As far as we know, that is all. I would suggest that you reply correctly, and so endeavor to gain his confidence. Sustain the fiction if you possibly can. But even if he appears to be completely deceived, remain on your guard. Our friend is particularly astute, and can play a double game as well, or better, than you can. But in either case, I hope to get him through you.

From this day forward I am adopting special precautions. A dictaphone was installed last night in your office, so that one of my men in the room below will be able to hear everything that passes in your office. In this way, I shall be immediately informed if anything arises, and can take the necessary steps to safeguard you and your wife whilst securing the man I am after."

After a few more instructions, and a general discussion of tactics, the two young people departed, and made their way as rapidly as possible to the office of Blunt's Brilliant Detectives.

"It's late," said Tommy, looking at his watch. "Just on twelve o'clock. We've been a long time with the Chief. I hope we haven't missed a particularly spicy case."

"On the whole," said Tuppence, “we've not done badly. I was tabulating results the other day. We've solved four baffling murder mysteries, rounded up a gang of counterfeiters, ditto gang of smugglers-"

"Actually two gangs," interpolated Tommy. "So we have! I'm glad of that. 'Gangs' sounds so professional."

Tuppence continued, ticking off the items on her fingers.

"One jewel robbery, two escapes from violent death, one case of missing lady reducing her figure, one young girl befriended, an alibi successfully exploded, and alas! one case where we made utter fools of ourselves. On the whole, jolly good! We're very clever, I think."

"You would think so," said Tommy. "You always do. Now I have a secret feeling that once or twice we've been rather lucky."

"Nonsense," said Tuppence. "All done by the little grey cells."

"Well, I was damned lucky once," said Tommy. "The day that Albert did his lasso act! But you speak, Tuppence, as though it was all over?"

"So it is," said Tuppence. She lowered her voice impressively. "This is our last case. When they have laid the super spy by the heels, the great detectives intend to retire and take to bee keeping or vegetable-marrow growing. It's always done."

"Tired of it, eh?"

"Ye-es, I think I am. Besides, we're so successful now- the luck might change."

"Who's talking about luck now?" asked Tommy triumphantly.

At that moment they turned in at the doorway of the block of buildings in which the International Detective Bureau had its offices, and Tuppence did not reply.

Albert was on duty in the outer office, employing his leisure in balancing, or endeavoring to balance, the office ruler upon his nose.

With a stern frown of reproof, the great Mr. Blunt passed into his own private office. Divesting himself of his overcoat and hat, he opened the

cupboard, on the shelves of which reposed his classic library of the great detectives of fiction.

"The choice narrows," murmured Tommy. "On whom shall I model myself to-day?"

Tuppence's voice, with an unusual note in it, made him turn sharply.

"Tommy," she said. "What day of the month is it?"

"Let me see-the eleventh-why?"

"Look at the calendar."

Hanging on the wall was one of those calendars from which you tear a leaf every day. It bore the legend of Sunday the 16th. To-day was Monday.

"By Jove, that's odd. Albert must have torn off too many. Careless little devil."

"I don't believe he did," said Tuppence. "But we'll ask him."

Albert, summoned and questioned, seemed very astonished. He swore he had only torn off one leaf-that of the day before. His statement was presently supported, for whereas, the leaf torn off by Albert was found in the grate, the succeeding ones were lying in the waste paper basket.

"A neat and methodical criminal," said Tommy. "Who's been here this morning, Albert? A client of any kind?"

"Just one, sir."

"What was he like?"

"It was a she. A Hospital Nurse. Very upset and anxious to see you. Said she'd wait until you came. I put her in 'Clerks' because it was warmer."

"And from there she could walk in here, of course, without your seeing her. How long has she been gone?"

"About half an hour, sir. Said she'd call again this afternoon. A nice motherly looking body."

"A nice motherly-oh! get out, Albert."

Albert withdrew, injured.

"Queer start, that," said Tommy. "It seems a little purposeless. Puts us on our guard. I suppose there isn't a bomb concealed in the fireplace or anything of that kind?"

He reassured himself on that point, then he seated himself at the desk and addressed Tuppence.

"Mon ami," he said. "We are here faced with a matter of the utmost gravity. You recall, do you not, the man who was No. 4. Him whom I

crushed like an egg shell in the Dolomites-with the aid of high explosives, bien entendu. But he was not really dead-ah! no, they are never really dead, these super criminals. This is the man-but even more so, if I may so put it. He is the 4 squared-in other words, he is now the No. 16. You comprehend, my friend?"

"Perfectly," said Tuppence. "You are the great Hercule Poirot."

"Exactly. No moustaches, but lots of grey cells."

"I've a feeling," said Tuppence, "that this particular adventure will be called the 'Triumph of Hastings.' "

"Never," said Tommy. "It isn't done. Once the idiot friend, always the idiot friend. There's an etiquette in these matters. By the way, man ami, can you not part your hair in the middle instead of one side? The present effect is unsymmetrical and deplorable."

The buzzer rang sharply on Tommy's desk. He returned the signal and Albert appeared bearing a card.

"Prince Vladiroffsky," read Tommy, in a low voice. He looked at Tuppence. "I wonder-Show him in, Albert."

The man who entered was of middle height, graceful in bearing, with a fair beard, and apparently about thirty-five years of age.

"Mr. Blunt?" he inquired. His English was perfect. "You have been most highly recommended to me. Will you take up a case for me?"

"If you will give me the details-?"

"Certainly. It concerns the daughter of a friend of mine-a girl of sixteen. We are anxious for no scandal-you understand."

"My dear sir," said Tommy. “This business has been running successfully for sixteen years owing to our strict attention to that particular principle."

He fancied he saw a sudden gleam in the other's eye. If so, it passed as quickly as it came.

"You have branches, I believe, on the other side of the Channel?"

"Oh! yes. As a matter of fact," he brought out the word with great deliberation, "I myself was in Berlin on the 13th of last month."

"In that case," said the stranger, "it is hardly necessary to keep up the little fiction. The daughter of my friend can be conveniently dismissed. You know who I am-at any rate I see you have had warning of my coming."

He nodded towards the calendar on the wall.

"Quite so," said Tommy.

"My friends-I have come over here to investigate matters. What has been happening?"

“Treachery," said Tuppence, no longer able to remain quiescent.

The Russian shifted his attention to her, and raised his eyebrows.

"Ah ha, that is so, is it? I thought as much. Was it Sergius?"

"We think so," said Tuppence unblushingly.

"It would not surprise me. But you yourselves, you are under no suspicion?"

"I do not think so. We handle a good deal of bona fide business, you see," explained Tommy.

The Russian nodded.

“That is wise. All the same, I think it would be better if I did not come here again. For the moment, I am staying at the Blitz. I will take Marise- this is Marise, I suppose?"

Tuppence nodded.

"What is she known as here?"

"Oh! Miss Robinson."

"Very well, Miss Robinson, you will return with me to the Blitz and lunch with me there. We will all meet at headquarters at three o'clock. Is that clear?" He looked at Tommy.

"Perfectly clear," replied Tommy, wondering where on earth headquarters might be.

But he guessed that it was just those very headquarters that Mr. Carter was so anxious to discover.

Tuppence rose and slipped on her long black coat with its leopardskin collar. Then, demurely, she declared herself ready to accompany the Prince.

They went out together, and Tommy was left behind, a prey to conflicting emotions.

Supposing something had gone wrong with the dictaphone? Supposing the mysterious Hospital Nurse had somehow or other learnt of its installation, and had rendered it useless?

He seized the telephone and called a certain number. There was a moment's delay, and then a well known voice spoke.

"Quite O.K. Come round to the Blitz at once."

Five minutes later Tommy and Mr. Carter met in the Palm Court of the Blitz. The latter was crisp and reassuring.

"You've done excellently. The Prince and the little lady are at lunch in the Restaurant. I've got two of my men in there as waiters. Whether he suspects, or whether he doesn't-and I'm fairly sure he doesn't-we've got him on toast. There are two men posted upstairs to watch his suite, and more outside ready to follow wherever they go. Don't be worried

about your wife. She'll be kept in sight the whole time. I'm not going to run any risks."

Occasionally one of the Secret Service men came to report progress. The first time it was a waiter who took their orders for cocktails, the second time it was a fashionable vacant-faced young man.

"They're coming out," said Mr. Carter. "We'll retire behind this pillar in case they sit down here, but I fancy he'll take her up to his suite. Ah! yes, I thought so."

From their post of vantage, Tommy saw the Russian and Tuppence cross the hall and enter the lift.

The minutes passed and Tommy began to fidget.

"Do you think, sir. I mean, alone in that suite-"

"One of my men's inside-behind the sofa. Don't worry, man."

A waiter crossed the hall and came up to Mr. Carter.

"Got the signal they were coming up, sir-but they haven't come. Is it all right?"

"What?" Mr. Carter spun around. "I saw them go into the lift myself. Just"-he glanced up at the clock-“four and a half minutes ago. And they haven't shown up...."

He hurried across to the lift which had just that minute come down again, and spoke to the uniformed attendant.

"You took up a gentleman with a fair beard and a young lady a few minutes ago to the second floor."

"Not the second floor. Third floor the gentleman asked for."

"Oh!" The Chief jumped in, motioning Tommy to accompany him. "Take us up to the third floor, please."

"I don't understand this," he murmured in a low voice. "But keep calm. Every exit from the Hotel is watched, and I've got a man on the third floor as well-on every floor, in fact. I was taking no chances."

The lift door opened on the third floor and they sprang out, hurrying down the corridor. Half way along it, a man dressed as a waiter came to meet them.

"It's all right, Chief. They're in No. 318."

Carter breathed a sigh of relief.

"That's all right. No other exit?"

"It's a suite, but there are only these two doors into the corridor, and to get out from any of these rooms, they'd have to pass us to get to the staircase or the lifts."

"That's all right, then. Just telephone down and find out who is supposed to be occupying this suite."

The waiter returned in a minute or two.

"Mrs. Cortlandt Van Snyder of Detroit."

Mr. Carter became very thoughtful.

"I wonder now. Is this Mrs. Van Snyder an accomplice, or is she-"

He left the sentence unfinished.

"Hear any noise from inside?" he asked abruptly.

"Not a thing. But the doors fit well. One couldn't hope to hear much."

Mr. Carter made up his mind suddenly.

"I don't like this business. We're going in. Got the master key?"

"Of course, sir."

"Call up Evans and Clydesly."

Reinforced by the other two men, they advanced towards the door of the suite. It opened noiselessly when the first man inserted his key.

They found themselves in a small hall. To the right was the open door of a bathroom, and in front of them was the sitting room. On the left

was a closed door and from behind it a faint sound-rather like an asthmatic pug-could be heard. Mr. Carter pushed the door open and entered.

The room was a bedroom, with a big double bed ornately covered with a bedspread of rose and gold. On it, bound hand and foot, with her mouth secured by a gag and her eyes almost starting out of her head with pain and rage, was a middle aged fashionably dressed woman.

On a brief order from Mr. Carter, the other men had covered the whole suite. Only Tommy and his Chief had entered the bedroom. As he leant over the bed and strove to unfasten the knots, Carter's eyes went roving round the room in perplexity. Save for an immense quantity of truly American luggage, the room was empty. There was no sign of the Russian or Tuppence.

In another minute the waiter came hurrying in, and reported that the other rooms were also empty. Tommy went to the window, only to draw back and shake his head. There was no balcony-nothing but a sheer drop to the street below.

"Certain it was this room they entered?" asked Carter peremptorily.

"Sure. Besides-" The man indicated the woman on the bed.

With the aid of a pen knife, Carter parted the scarf that was half choking her, and it was at once clear that whatever her sufferings, they had not deprived Mrs. Cortlandt Van Snyder of the use of her tongue.

When she had exhausted her first indignation, Mr. Carter spoke mildly.

"Would you mind telling me exactly what happened-from the beginning?"

"I guess I'll sue the Hotel for this. It's a perfect outrage. I was just looking for my bottle of 'Killagrippe' when a man sprang on me from behind and broke a little glass bottle right under my nose, and before I could get my breath I was all in. When I came to I was lying here, all trussed up, and goodness knows what's happened to my jewels. He's gotten the lot, I guess."

"Your jewels are quite safe, I fancy," said Mr. Carter drily. He wheeled round and picked up something from the floor. "You were standing just where I am when he sprang upon you?"

"That's so," assented Mrs. Van Snyder.

It was a fragment of thin glass that Mr. Carter had picked up. He sniffed it and handed it to Tommy.

"Ethyl Chloride," he murmured. "Instant anaesthetic. But it only keeps one under for a moment or two. Surely he must still have been in the room when you came to, Mrs. Van Snyder?"

"Isn't that just what I'm telling you? Oh! it drove me half crazy to see him getting away and me not able to move or do anything at all."

"Getting away?" said Mr. Carter sharply. "Which way?"

"Through that door." She pointed to one in the opposite wall. "He had a girl with him, but she seemed kind of limp as though she'd had a dose of the same dope."

Carter looked a question at his henchman.

"Leads into the next suite, sir. But double doors-supposed to be bolted each side."

Mr. Carter examined the door carefully. Then he straightened himself up and turned towards the bed.

"Mrs. Van Snyder," he said quietly. "Do you still persist in your assertion that the man went out this way?"

"Why, certainly he did. Why shouldn't he?"

"Because the door happens to be bolted on this side," said Mr. Carter drily. He rattled the handle as he spoke.

A look of the utmost astonishment spread over Mrs. Van Snyder's face.

"Unless someone bolted the door behind him," said Mr. Carter, "he cannot have gone out that way."

He turned to Evans who had just entered the room.

"Sure they're not anywhere in this suite? Any other communicating doors?"

"No, sir, and I'm quite sure."

Carter turned his gaze this way and that about the room. He opened the big hanging wardrobe, looked under the bed, up the chimney and behind all the curtains. Finally, struck by a sudden idea, and disregarding Mrs. Van Snyder's shrill protests, he opened the large wardrobe trunk and rummaged swiftly in the interior.

Suddenly Tommy, who had been examining the communicating door, gave an exclamation.

"Come here, sir, look at this. They did go this way."

The bolt had been very cleverly filed through, so close to the socket that the join was hardly perceptible.

"The door won't open because it's locked on the other side," explained Tommy.

In another minute they were out in the corridor again and the waiter was opening the door of the adjoining suite with his pass key. This suite was untenanted. When they came to the communicating door, they saw that the same plan had been adopted. The bolt had been filed through, and the door was locked, the key having been removed. But nowhere in the suite was there any sign of Tuppence or the fair-bearded Russian, and there was no other communicating door, only the one on the corridor.

"But I'd have seen them come out," protested the waiter. "I couldn't have helped seeing them. I can take my oath they never did."

"Damn it all," cried Tommy. "They can't have vanished into thin air!"

Carter was calm again now, his keen brain working.

"Telephone down and find who had this suite last, and when."

Evans, who had come with them, leaving Clydesly on guard in the other suite, obeyed. Presently he raised his head from the telephone.

"An invalid French lad, M. Paul de Varez. He had a Hospital Nurse with him. They left this morning."

An exclamation burst from the other Secret Service man, the waiter. He had gone deathly pale.

"The invalid boy-the Hospital Nurse," he stammered. "I-they passed me in the passage. I never dreamed-I had seen them so often before."

"Are you sure they were the same?" cried Mr. Carter. "Are you sure, man? You looked at them well?"

The man shook his head.

"I hardly glanced at them. I was waiting, you understand, on the alert for the others, the man with the fair beard and the girl."

"Of course," said Mr. Carter, with a groan. "They counted on that."

With a sudden exclamation, Tommy stooped down and pulled something out from under the sofa. It was a small rolled up bundle of black. Tommy unrolled it and several articles fell out. The outside wrapper was the long black coat Tuppence had worn that day. Inside was her walking dress, her hat and a long fair beard.

"It's clear enough now," he said bitterly. "They've got her-got Tuppence. That Russian devil has given us the slip. The Hospital Nurse and the boy were accomplices. They stayed here for a day or two to get the Hotel people accustomed to their presence. The man must have realized at lunch that he was trapped and proceeded to carry out his plan. Probably he counted on the room next door being empty since it was when he fixed the bolts. Anyway he managed to silence both the woman next door and Tuppence, brought her in here, dressed her in boy's clothes, altered his own appearance, and walked out as bold as brass. The clothes must have been hidden ready. But I don't quite see how he managed Tuppence's acquiescence."

"I can see," said Mr. Carter. He picked up a little shining piece of steel from the carpet. "That's a fragment of a hypodermic needle. She was doped."

"My God!" groaned Tommy. "And he's got clear away."

"We won't know that," said Carter quickly. "Remember every exit is watched."

"For a man and a girl. Not for a Hospital Nurse and an invalid boy. They'll have left the Hotel by now."

Such, on inquiry, proved to be the case. The nurse and her patient had driven away in a taxi some five minutes earlier.

"Look here, Beresford," said Mr. Carter. "For God's sake, pull yourself together. You know that I won't leave a stone unturned to find that girl. I'm going back to my office at once and in less than five minutes every resource of the department will be at work. We'll get them yet."

"Will you, sir? He's a clever devil, that Russian. Look at the cunning of this coup of his. But I know you'll do your best. Only-pray God it's not too late. They've got it in for us badly."

He left the Blitz Hotel and walked blindly along the street, hardly knowing where he was going. He felt completely paralyzed. Where to search? What to do?

He went into the Green Park, and dropped down upon a seat. He hardly noticed when someone else sat down at the opposite end, and was quite startled to hear a well known voice.

"If you please, sir, if I might make so bold-"

Tommy looked up.

"Hullo, Albert," he said dully.

"I know all about it, sir-but don't take on so."

"Don't take on-" He gave a short laugh. "Easily said, isn't it?"

"Ah, but think, sir. Blunt's Brilliant Detectives! Never beaten. And if you'll excuse my saying so, I happen to overhear what you and the Missus was ragging about this morning. Mr. Poirot, and his little grey cells. Well, sir, why not use your little grey cells, and see what you can do?"

"It's easier to use your little grey cells in fiction than it is in fact, my boy."

"Well," said Albert stoutly, "I don't believe anybody could put the Missus out, for good and all. You know what she is sir, just like one of those rubber bones you buy for little dorgs-guaranteed indestructible."

"Albert," said Tommy, "you cheer me."

"Then what about using your little grey cells, sir?"

"You're a persistent lad, Albert. Playing the fool has served us pretty well up to now. We'll try it again. Let us arrange our facts neatly, and with method. At ten minutes past two exactly, our quarry enters the lift. Five minutes later we speak to the lift man, and having heard what he says, we also go up to the third floor. At, say, nineteen minutes past two we enter the suite of Mrs. Van Snyder. And now, what significant fact strikes us?"

There was a pause, no significant fact striking either of them.

“There wasn't such a thing as a trunk in the room, was there?" asked Albert, his eyes lighting suddenly.

"Mon ami," said Tommy. "You do not understand the psychology of an American woman who has just returned from Paris. There were, I should say, about nineteen trunks in the room."

"What I meantersay is, a trunk's a handy thing if you've got a dead body about you want to get rid of-not that she is dead, for a minute."

"We searched the only two that were big enough to contain a body. What is the next fact in chronological order?"

"You've missed one out-when the Missus and the bloke dressed up as a Hospital Nurse passed the waiter in the passage."

"It must have been just before we came up in the lift," said Tommy. "They must have had a narrow escape of meeting us face to face. Pretty quick work, that. I-"

He stopped.

"What is it, sir?"

"Be silent, mon ami. I have the kind of little idea-colossal, stupendous-that always comes sooner or later to Hercule Poirot. But if so-if that's it-Oh! Lord, I hope I'm in time."

He raced out of the Park, Albert hard on his heels, inquiring breathlessly as he ran. "What's up, sir? I don't understand."

"That's all right," said Tommy. "You're not supposed to. Hastings never did. If your grey cells weren't of a very inferior order to mine, what fun do you think I should get out of this game? I'm talking damned rot-but I can't help it. You're a good lad, Albert. You know what Tuppence is worth-she's worth a dozen of you and me."

Thus talking breathlessly as he ran, Tommy reentered the portals of the Blitz. He caught sight of Evans, and drew him aside with a few hurried words. The two men entered the lift, Albert with them.

"Third floor," said Tommy.

At the door of No. 318 they paused. Evans had a pass key, and used it forthwith. Without a word of warning, they walked straight into Mrs. Van Snyder's bedroom. The lady was still lying on the bed, but was now arrayed in a becoming negligee. She stared at them in surprise.

"Pardon my failure to knock," said Tommy, pleasantly. "But I want my wife. Do you mind getting off that bed?"

"I guess you've gone plumb crazy," cried Mrs. Van Snyder.

Tommy surveyed her thoughtfully, his head on one side.

"Very artistic," he pronounced. "But it won't do. We looked under the bed-but not in it. I remember using that hiding-place myself when young. Horizontally across the bed, underneath the bolster. And that nice wardrobe trunk all ready to take away the body in later. But we were a bit too quick for you just now. You'd had time to dope Tuppence, put her under the bolster, and be gagged and bound by

your accomplices next door, and I'll admit we swallowed your story all right for the moment. But when one came to think it out-with order and method-impossible to drug a girl, dress her in boy's clothes, gag and bind another woman, and change one's own appearance-all in five minutes. Simply a physical impossibility. The Hospital Nurse and the boy were to be a decoy. We were to follow that trail, and Mrs. Van Snyder was to be a pitied victim. Just help the lady off the bed, will you, Evans? You have automatic? Good."

Protesting shrilly, Mrs. Van Snyder was hauled from her place of repose. Tommy tore off the coverings and the bolster.

There, lying horizontally across the top of the bed was Tuppence, her eyes closed, and her face waxen. For a moment, Tommy felt a sudden dread, then he saw the slight rise and fall of her breast. She was drugged, not dead.

He turned to Albert and Evans.

"And now, Messieurs," he said dramatically. "The final coup!"

With a swift unexpected gesture, he seized Mrs. Van Snyder by her elaborately dressed hair. It came off in his hand.

"As I thought," said Tommy. "No. 16!"

It was about half an hour later when Tuppence opened her eyes and found a doctor and Tommy bending over her.

Over the events of the next quarter of an hour a decent veil had better be drawn, but after that period the doctor departed with the assurance that all was now well.

"Mon ami, Hastings," said Tommy fondly. "How I rejoice that you are still alive."

"Have we got No. 16?"

"Once more have I crushed him like an egg shell-In other words, Carter's got him. The little grey cells! By the way, I'm raising Albert's wages."

“Tell me all about it."

Tommy gave her a spirited narrative, with certain omissions.

"Weren't you half frantic about me?" asked Tuppence faintly.

"Not particularly. One must keep calm, you know."

"Liar!" said Tuppence. "You look quite haggard still."

"Well, perhaps I was just a little worried, darling. I say-we're going to give it up now, aren't we?"

"Certainly we are."

Tommy gave a sigh of relief.

"I hoped you'd be sensible. After a shock like this-“

"It's not the shock. You know I never mind shocks."

"A rubber bone-indestructible," murmured Tommy.

"I've got something better to do," continued Tuppence. "Something ever so much more exciting. Something I've never done before."

Tommy looked at her with lively apprehension.

"I forbid it, Tuppence."

"You can't," said Tuppence. "It's a law of nature."

"What are you talking about, Tuppence?"

"I'm talking," said Tuppence, "of Our Baby. Wives don't whisper nowadays. They shout. OUR BABY! Tommy, isn't everything marvellous?"

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Chapter 1

THE COMING OF MR QUIN

It was New Year's Eve.

The elder members of the house party at Royston were assembled in the big hall.

Mr Satterthwaite was glad that the young people had gone to bed. He was not fond of young people in herds. He thought them

uninteresting and crude. They lacked subtlety and as life went he had become increasingly fond of subtleties.

Mr Satterthwaite was sixty-two - a little bent, dried-up man with a peering face oddly elf-like, and an intense and inordinate interest in other people's lives. All his life, so to speak, he had sat in the front row of the stalls watching various dramas of human nature unfold before him. His rφle had always been that of the onlooker. Only now, with old age holding him in its clutch, he found himself increasingly critical of the drama submitted to him. He demanded now something a little out of the common.

There was no doubt that he had a flair for these things. He knew instinctively when the elements of drama were at hand. Like a war horse, he sniffed the scent. Since his arrival at Royston this afternoon, that strange inner sense of his had stirred and bid him be ready. Something interesting was happening or going to happen.

The house party was not a large one. There was Tom Evesham their genial good-humoured host and his serious political wife who had been before her marriage Lady Laura Keene. There was Sir Richard Conway, soldier, traveler and sportsman, there were six or seven young people whose names Mr Satterthwaite had not grasped and there were the Portals.

It was the Portals who interested Mr Satterthwaite.

He had never met Alex Portal before, but he knew all about him. Had known his father and his grandfather. Alex Portal ran pretty true to type. He was a man of close on forty, fair-haired, and blue-eyed like

all the Portals, fond of sport, good at games, devoid of imagination. Nothing unusual about Alex Portal. The usual good sound English stock.

But his wife was different. She was, Mr Satterthwaite knew, an Australian. Portal had been out in Australia two years ago, had met her out there and had married her and brought her home. She had never been to England previous to her marriage. All the same, she wasn't at all like any other Australian woman Mr Satterthwaite had met.

He observed her now, covertly. Interesting woman - very. So still, and yet so - alive. Alive! That was just it! Not exactly beautiful - no, you wouldn't call her beautiful, but there was a kind of calamitous magic about her that you couldn't miss - that no man could miss. The masculine side of Mr Satterthwaite spoke there, but the feminine side (for Mr Satterthwaite had a large share of femininity) was equally interested in another question. Why did Mrs Portal dye her hair?

No other man would probably have known that she dyed her hair, but Mr Satterthwaite knew. He knew all those things. And it puzzled him. Many dark women dye their hair blonde - he had never before come across a fair woman who dyed her hair black.

Everything about her intrigued him. In a queer intuitive way, he felt certain that she was either very happy or very unhappy - but he didn't know which, and it annoyed him not to know. Furthermore there was the curious effect she had upon her husband.

"He adores her," said Mr Satterthwaite to himself, "but sometimes he's - yes, afraid of her! That's very interesting. That's uncommonly interesting."

Portal drank too much. That was certain. And he had a curious way of watching his wife when she wasn't looking.

"Nerves," said Mr Satterthwaite. "The fellow's all nerves. She knows it too, but she won't do anything about it."

He felt very curious about the pair of them. Something was going on that he couldn't fathom.

He was roused from his meditations on the subject by the solemn chiming of the big clock in the corner.

"Twelve o'clock," said Evesham. "New Year's Day. Happy New Year everybody. As a matter of fact that clock's five minutes fast - I don't know why the children wouldn't wait up and see the New Year in?"

"I don't suppose for a minute they've really gone to bed," said his wife placidly. "They're probably putting hairbrushes or something in our beds. That sort of thing does so amuse them. I can't think why. We should never have been allowed to do such a thing in my young days."

"Autre temps, autre moeurs," said Conway, smiling.

He was a tall soldierly-looking man. Both he and Evesham were much of the same type honest upright kindly men with no great pretensions to brains.

"In my young days we all joined hands in a circle and sang Auld Lang Syne," continued Lady Laura. "Should auld acquaintance be forgot - so touching, I always think the words are."

Evesham moved uneasily.

"Oh! Drop it, Laura," He muttered. "Not here."

He strode across the wide hall where they were sitting, and switched on an extra light.

"Very stupid of me," said Lady Laura, sotto voce. "Reminds him of poor Mr Capel, of course. My dear, is the fire too hot for you?"

Eleanor Portal made a brusque movement.

"Thank you. I'll move my chair back a little."

What a lovely voice she had - one of those low murmuring echoing voices that stay in your memory, thought Mr Satterthwaite. Her face was in shadow now. What a pity.

From her place in the shadow she spoke again. "Mr Capel?"

"Yes. The man who originally owned this house. He shot himself you know - oh! Very well, Tom dear, I won't speak of it unless you like. It

was a great shock for Tom, of course, because he was here when it happened. So were you, weren't you, Sir Richard?"

"Yes, Lady Laura."

An old grandfather clock in the corner groaned, wheezed, snorted asthmatically, and then struck twelve.

"Happy New Year, Tom," grunted Evesham perfunctorily.

Lady Laura wound up her knitting with some deliberation.

"Well, we've seen the New Year in," she observed, and added, looking towards Mrs Portal, "What do you think, my dear?"

Eleanor Portal rose quickly to her feet "Bed, by all means," she said lightly.

"She's very pale," thought Mr Satterthwaite, as he too rose, and began busying himself with candlesticks. "She's not usually as pale as that."

He lighted her candle and handed it to her with a funny little old-fashioned bow. She took it from him with a word of acknowledgment and went slowly up the stairs.

Suddenly a very odd impulse swept over Mr Satterthwaite. He wanted to go after her, to reassure her - he had the strangest feeling that she was in danger of some kind. The impulse died down, and he felt ashamed. He was getting nervy too.

She hadn't looked at her husband as she went up the stairs, but now she turned her head over her shoulder and gave him a long searching glance which had a queer intensity in it. It affected Mr Satterthwaite very oddly.

He found himself saying good night to his hostess in quite a flustered manner.

"I'm sure I hope it will be a happy New Year," Lady Laura was saying. "But the political situation seems to me to be fraught with grave uncertainty."

"I'm sure it is," said Mr Satterthwaite earnestly. "I'm sure it is."

"I only hope," continued Lady Laura, without the least change of manner, "that it will be a dark man who first crosses the threshold. You know that superstition, I suppose, Mr Satterthwaite? No? You surprise me. To bring luck to the house it must be a dark man who first steps over the door step on New Year's Day. Dear me, I hope I shan't find anything very unpleasant in my bed, I never trust the children. They have such very high spirits."

Shaking her head in sad foreboding, Lady Laura moved majestically up the staircase.

With the departure of the women, chairs were pulled in closer round the blazing logs on the big open hearth.

"Say when," said Evesham, hospitably, as he held up the whisky decanter.

When everybody had said when, the talk reverted to the subject which had been tabooed before.

"You knew Derek Capel, didn't you, Satterthwaite?" asked Conway.

"Slightly - yes."

"And you, Portal?"

"No, I never met him."

So fiercely and defensively did he say it that Mr Satterthwaite looked up in surprise.

"I always hate it when Laura brings up the subject," said Evesham slowly. "After the tragedy, you know, this place was sold to a big manufacturer fellow. He cleared out after a year - didn't suit him or something. A lot of tommy rot was talked about the place being haunted, of course, and it gave the house a bad name. Then, when Laura got me to stand for West Kidleby, of course it meant living up in these parts, and it wasn't so easy to find a suitable house. Royston was going cheap, and - well, in the end I bought it. Ghosts are all tommy rot, but all the same one doesn't exactly care to be reminded that you're living in a house where one of your own friends shot himself. Poor old Derek - we shall never know why he did it."

"He won't be the first or the last fellow who's shot himself without being able to give a reason," said Alex Portal heavily.

He rose and poured himself out another drink, splashing the whisky in with a liberal hand.

"There's something very wrong with him," said Mr Satterthwaite, to himself. "Very wrong indeed. I wish I knew what it was all about."

"Gad!" said Conway. "Listen to the wind. It's a wild night."

"A good night for ghosts to walk," said Portal with a reckless laugh. "All the devils in Hell are abroad tonight."

"According to Lady Laura, even the blackest of them would bring us luck," observed Conway, with a laugh. "Hark to that!"

The wind rose in another terrific wail, and as it died away there came three loud knocks on the big nailed doorway.

Everyone started.

"Who on earth can that be at this time of night?" cried Evesham.

They stared at each other.

"I will open it," said Evesham. "The servants have gone to bed."

He strode across to the door, fumbled a little over the heavy bars, and finally flung it open. An icy blast of wind came sweeping into the hall.

Framed in the doorway stood a man's figure, tall and slender. To Mr Satterthwaite, watching, he appeared by some curious effect of the stained glass above the door, to be dressed in every colour of the rainbow. Then, as he stepped forward, he showed himself to be a thin dark man dressed in motoring clothes.

"I must really apologise for this intrusion," said the stranger, in a pleasant level voice. "But my car broke down. Nothing much, my chauffeur is putting it to rights, but it will take half an hour or so, and it is so confoundedly cold outside -"

He broke off, and Evesham took up the thread quickly.

"I should think it was. Come in and have a drink. We can't give you any assistance about the car, can we?"

"No, thanks. My man knows what to do. By the way, my name is Quin - Harley Quin."

"Sit down, Mr Quin," said Evesham. "Sir Richard Conway, Mr Satterthwaite. My name is Evesham."

Mr Quin acknowledged the introductions, and dropped into the chair that Evesham had hospitably pulled forward. As he sat, some effect of the firelight threw a bar of shadow across his face which gave almost the impression of a mask.

Evesham threw a couple more logs on the fire.

"A drink?"

"Thanks."

Evesham brought it to him and asked as he did so:

"So you know this part of the world well, Mr Quin?"

"I passed through it some years ago."

"Really?"

"Yes. This house belonged then to a man called Capel."

"Ah! Yes," said Evesham. "Poor Derek Capel. You knew him?"

"Yes, I knew him."

Evesham's manner underwent a faint change, almost imperceptible to one who had not studied the English character. Before, it had contained a subtle reserve, now this was laid aside. Mr Quin had known Derek Capel. He was the friend of a friend, and, as such, was vouched for and fully accredited.

"Astounding affair, that," he said confidentially. "We were just talking about it. I can tell you, it went against the grain, buying this place. If there had been anything else suitable, but there wasn't you

see. I was in the house the night he shot himself - so was Conway, and upon my word, I've always expected his ghost to walk."

"A very inexplicable business," said Mr Quin, slowly and deliberately, and he paused with the air of an actor who has just spoken an important cue.

"You may well say inexplicable," burst in Conway. "The thing's a black mystery - always will be."

"I wonder," said Mr Quin, noncommittally. "Yes, Sir Richard, you were saying?"

"Astounding - that's what it was. Here's a man in the prime of life, gay, light-hearted, without a care in the world. Five or six old pals staying with him. Top of his spirits at dinner, full of plans for the future. And from the dinner table he goes straight upstairs to his room, takes a revolver from a drawer and shoots himself. Why? Nobody ever knew. Nobody ever will know."

"Isn't that rather a sweeping statement, Sir Richard?" asked Mr Quin, smiling.

Conway stared at him.

"What d'you mean? I don't understand."

"A problem is not necessarily unsolvable because it has remained unsolved."

"Oh! Come, man, if nothing came out at the time, it's not likely to come out now - ten years afterwards?"

Mr Quin shook his head gently.

"I disagree with you. The evidence of history is against you. The contemporary historian never writes such a true history as the historian of a later generation. It is a question of getting the true perspective, of seeing things in proportion. If you like to call it so, it is, like everything else, a question of relativity."

Alex Portal leant forward, his face twitching painfully.

"You are right, Mr Quin," he cried," you are right. Time does not dispose of a question - it only presents it anew in a different guise."

Evesham was smiling tolerantly.

"Then you mean to say, Mr Quin, that if we were to hold, let us say, a Court of Inquiry tonight, into the circumstances of Derek Capel's death, we are as likely to arrive at the truth as we should have been at the time?"

"More likely, Mr Evesham. The personal equation has largely dropped out, and you will remember facts as facts without seeking to put your own interpretation upon them."

Evesham frowned doubtfully.

"One must have a starting point, of course," said Mr Quin in his quiet level voice. "A starting point is usually a theory. One of you must have a theory, I am sure. How about you, Sir Richard?"

Conway frowned thoughtfully.

"Well, of course," he said apologetically, "we thought - naturally we all thought - that there must be a woman in it somewhere. It's usually either that or money, isn't it? And it certainly wasn't money. No trouble of that description. So - what else could it have been?"

Mr Satterthwaite started. He had leant forward to contribute a small remark of his own and in the act of doing so, he had caught sight of a woman's figure crouched against the balustrade of the gallery above. She was huddled down against it, invisible from everywhere but where he himself sat, and she was evidently listening with strained attention to what was going on below. So immovable was she that he hardly believed the evidence of his own eyes.

But he recognised the pattern of the dress easily enough - an old-world brocade. It was Eleanor Portal.

And suddenly all the events of the night seemed to fall into pattern - Mr Quin's arrival, no fortuitous chance, but the appearance of an actor when his cue was given. There was a drama being played in the big hall at Royston tonight - a drama none the less real in that one of the actors was dead. Oh! Yes, Derek Capel had a part in the play. Mr Satterthwaite was sure of that.

And, again suddenly, a new illumination came to him. This was Mr Quin's doing. It was he who was staging the play - was giving the actors their cues. He was at the heart of the mystery pulling the strings, making the puppets work. He knew everything, even to the presence of the woman crouched against the woodwork upstairs. Yes, he knew.

Sitting well back in his chair, secure in his rφle of audience, Mr Satterthwaite watched the drama unfold before his eyes. Quietly and naturally, Mr Quin was pulling the strings, setting his puppets in motion.

"A woman - yes," he murmured thoughtfully. "There was no mention of any woman at dinner?"

"Why, of course," cried Evesham, "he announced his engagement. That's just what made it seem so absolutely mad. Very bucked about it he was. Said it wasn't to be announced just yet - but gave us the hint that he was in the running for the Benedick stakes."

"Of course we all guessed who the lady was," said Conway. "Marjorie Dilke. Nice girl."

It seemed to be Mr Quin's turn to speak, but he did not do so, and something about his silence seemed oddly provocative. It was as though he challenged the last statement. It had the effect of putting Conway in a defensive position.

"Who else could it have been? Eh, Evesham?"

"I don't know," said Tom Evesham slowly. "What did he say exactly now? Something about being in the running for the Benedick stakes - that he couldn't tell us the lady's name till he had her permission - it wasn't to be announced yet. He said, I remember, that he was a damned lucky fellow. That he wanted his two old friends to know that by that time next year he'd be a happy married man. Of course, we assumed it was Marjorie. They were great friends and he'd been about with her a lot."

"The only thing -" began Conway and stopped.

"What were you going to say, Dick?"

"Well, I mean, it was odd in a way, if it were Marjorie, that the engagement shouldn't be announced at once. I mean, why the secrecy? Sounds more as though it were a married woman - you know, someone whose husband had just died, or who was divorcing him."

"That's true," said Evesham. "If that were the case, of course, the engagement couldn't be announced at once. And you know, thinking back about it, I don't believe he had been seeing much of Marjorie. All that was the year before. I remember thinking things seemed to have cooled off between them."

"Curious," said Mr Quin.

"Yes - looked almost as though someone had come between them."

"Another woman," said Conway thoughtfully.

"By Jove," said Evesham. "You know, there was something almost indecently hilarious about old Derek that night. He looked almost drunk with happiness. And yet - I can't quite explain what I mean - but he looked oddly defiant too."

"Like a man defying Fate," said Alex Portal heavily.

Was it of Derek Capel he was speaking - or was it of himself? Mr Satterthwaite, looked at him, inclined to the latter view. Yes, that was what Alex Portal represented - a man defying Fate.

His imagination, muddled by drink, responded suddenly to that note in the story which recalled his own secret preoccupation.

Mr Satterthwaite looked up. She was still there. Watching, listening - still motionless, frozen - like a dead woman.

"Perfectly true," said Conway. "Capel was excited - curiously so. I'd describe him as a man who has staked heavily and won against well nigh overwhelming odds."

"Getting up courage, perhaps, for what he's made up his mind to do?" suggested Portal.

And as though moved by an association of ideas, he got up and helped himself to another drink.

"Not a bit of it," said Evesham sharply. "I'd almost swear nothing of that kind was in his mind. Conway's right. A successful gambler who has brought off a long shot and can hardly believe in his own good fortune. That was the attitude."

Conway gave a gesture of discouragement.

"And yet," he said. "Ten minutes later -"

They sat in silence. Evesham brought his hand down with a bang on the table.

"Something must have happened in that ten minutes," he cried. "It must! But what? Let's go over it carefully. We were all talking. In the middle of it Capel got up suddenly and left the room -"

"Why?" said Mr Quin.

The interruption seemed to disconcert Evesham.

"I beg your pardon?"

"I only said: Why?" said Mr Quin. Evesham frowned in an effort of memory.

"It didn't seem vital at the time. Oh! Of course, the post. Don't you remember that jangling bell, and how excited we were. We'd been snowed up for three days, remember. Biggest snowstorm for years and years. All the roads were impassable. No newspapers, no letters. Capel went out to see if something had come through at last,

and got a great pile of things. Newspapers and letters. He opened the paper to see if there was any news, and then went upstairs with his letters. Three minutes afterwards, we heard a shot... Inexplicable - absolutely inexplicable."

"That's not inexplicable," said Portal "Of course the fellow got some unexpected news in a letter. Obvious, I should have said."

"Oh! Don't think we missed anything so obvious as that. It was one of the Coroner's first questions. But Capel never opened one of his letters. The whole pile lay unopened on his dressing-table."

Portal looked crestfallen.

"You're sure he didn't open just one of them? He might have destroyed it after reading it?"

"No, I'm quite positive. Of course, that would have been the natural solution. No, every one of the letters was unopened. Nothing burnt - nothing torn up - There was no fire in the room?"

Portal shook his head.

"Extraordinary."

"It was a ghastly business altogether," said Evesham in a low voice. "Conway and I went up when we heard the shot, and found him - It gave me a shock, I can tell you."

"Nothing to be done but telephone for the police, I suppose?" said Mr Quin.

"Royston wasn't on the telephone then. I had it put in when I bought the place. No, luckily enough, the local constable happened to be in the kitchen at the time. One of the dogs - you remember poor old Rover, Conway? - had strayed the day before. A passing carter had found it half buried in a snowdrift and had taken it to the police station. They recognised it as Capel's, and a dog he was particularly fond of, and the constable came up with it. He'd just arrived a minute before the shot was fired. It saved us some trouble."

"Gad, that was a snowstorm," said Conway reminiscently. "About this time of year, wasn't it? Early January."

"February, I think. Let me see, we went abroad soon afterwards."

"I'm pretty sure it was January. My hunter Ned - you remember Ned? - lamed himself the end of January. That was just after this business."

"It must have been quite the end of January then. Funny how difficult it is to recall dates after a lapse of years."

"One of the most difficult things in the world," said Mr Quin, conversationally. "Unless you can find a landmark in some big public event - an assassination of a crowned head, or a big murder trial."

"Why, of course," cried Conway, "it was just before the Appleton case."

"Just after, wasn't it?"

"No, no, don't you remember - Capel knew the Appletons - he'd stayed with the old man the previous Spring - just a week before he died. He was talking of him one night - what an old curmudgeon he was, and how awful, it must have been for a young and beautiful woman like Mrs Appleton to be tied to him. There was no suspicion then that she had done away with him."

"By Jove, you're right. I remember reading the paragraph in the paper saying an exhumation order had been granted. It would have been that same day - I remember only seeing it with half my mind, you know, the other half wondering about poor old Derek lying dead upstairs."

"A common, but very curious phenomenon, that," observed Mr Quin. "In moments of great stress, the mind focuses itself upon some quite unimportant matter which is remembered long afterwards with the utmost fidelity, driven in, as it were, by the mental stress of the moment. It may be some quite irrelevant detail, like the pattern of a wallpaper, but it will never be forgotten."

"Rather extraordinary, your saying that, Mr Quin," said Conway. "Just as you were speaking, I suddenly felt myself back in Derek Capel's room with Derek lying dead on the floor. I saw as plainly as possible the big tree outside the window, and the shadow it threw upon the snow outside. Yes, the moonlight, the snow, and the shadow of the tree I can see them again this minute. By Gad, I

believe I could draw them, and yet I never realised I was looking at them at the time."

"His room was the big one over the porch, was it not?" asked Mr Quin.

"Yes, and the tree was the big beech, just at the angle of the drive."

Mr Quin nodded, as though satisfied. Mr Satterthwaite was curiously thrilled. He was convinced that every word, every inflection of Mr Quin's voice, was pregnant with purpose. He was driving at something - exactly what Mr Satterthwaite did not know, but he was quite convinced as to whose was the master hand.

There was a momentary pause, and then Evesham reverted to the preceding topic.

"That Appleton case, I remember it very well now. What a sensation it made. She got off, didn't she? Pretty woman, very fair - remarkably fair."

Almost against his will, Mr Satterthwaite's eyes sought the kneeling figure up above. Was it his fancy, or did he see it shrink a little as though at a blow. Did he see a hand slide upwards to the table cloth - and then pause.

There was a crash of falling glass. Alex Portal, helping himself to whisky, had let the decanter slip.

"I say - sir, dam' sorry. Can't think what came over me."

Evesham cut short his apologies.

"Quite all right. Quite all right, my dear fellow. Curious - That smash reminded me. That's what she did, didn't she? Mrs Appleton? Smashed the port decanter?"

"Yes. Old Appleton had his glass of port - only one - each night. The day after his death, one of the servants saw her take the decanter out and smash it deliberately. That set them talking, of course. They all knew she had been perfectly wretched with him. Rumour grew and grew, and in the end, months later, some of his relatives applied for an exhumation order. And sure enough, the old fellow had been poisoned. Arsenic, wasn't it?"

"No - strychnine, I think. It doesn't much matter. Well, of course, there it was. Only one person was likely to have done it. Mrs Appleton stood her trial. She was acquitted more through lack of evidence against her than from any overwhelming proof of innocence. In other words, she was lucky. Yes, I don't suppose there's much doubt she did it right enough. What happened to her afterwards?"

"Went out to Canada, I believe. Or was it Australia? She had an uncle or something of the sort out there who offered her a home. Best thing she could do under the circumstances."

Mr Satterthwaite was fascinated by Alex Portal's right hand as it clasped his glass. How tightly he was gripping it.

"You'll smash that in a minute or two, if you're not careful," thought Mr Satterthwaite. "Dear me, how interesting all this is."

Evesham rose and helped himself to a drink.

"Well, we're not much nearer to knowing why poor Derek Capel shot himself," he remarked. "The Court of Inquiry hasn't been a great success, has it, Mr Quin?"

Mr Quin laughed...

It was a strange laugh, mocking - yet sad. It made everyone jump.

"I beg your pardon," he said. "You are still living in the past, Mr Evesham. You are still hampered by your preconceived notion. But I - the man from outside, the stranger passing by, see only - facts!"

"Facts?"

"Yes - facts."

"What do you mean?" said Evesham,

"I see a clear sequence of facts, outlined by yourselves, but of which you have not seen the significance. Let us go back ten years and look at what we see untrammelled by ideas or sentiment."

Mr Quin had risen. He looked very tall. The fire leaped fitfully behind him. He spoke in a low compelling voice.

"You are at dinner. Derek Capel announces his engagement. You think then it was to Marjorie Dilke. You are not so sure now. He has the restlessly excited manner of a man who has successfully defied Fate - who, in your own words, has pulled off a big coup against overwhelming odds. Then comes the clanging of the bell. He goes out to get the long overdue mail. He doesn't open his letters, but you mention yourselves that he opened the paper to glance at the news. It is ten years ago - so we cannot know what the news was that day - a far-off earthquake, a near at hand political crisis? The only thing we do know about the contents of that paper is that it contained one small paragraph - a paragraph stating that the Home Office had given permission to exhume the body of Mr Appleton three days ago."

"What?"

Mr Quin went on.

"Derek Capel goes up to his room, and there he sees something out of the window. Sir Richard Conway has told us that the curtain was not drawn across it and further that it gave on to the drive. What did he see? What could he have seen that forced him to take his life?"

"What do you mean? What did he see?"

"I think," said Mr Quin, "that he saw a policeman. A policeman who had come about a dog - But Derek Capel didn't know that - he just saw - a policeman."

There was a long silence - as though it took some time to drive the inference home.

"My God!" whispered Evesham at last. "You can't mean that? Appleton? But he wasn't there at the time Appleton died. The old man was alone with his wife -"

"But he may have been there a week earlier. Strychnine is not very soluble unless it is in the form of hydrochloride. The greater part of it, put into the port, would be taken in the last glass, perhaps a week after he left."

Portal sprung forward. His voice was hoarse his eyes bloodshot.

"Why did she break the decanter?" he cried. "Why did she break the decanter? Tell me that!"

For the first time that evening, Mr Quin addressed himself to Mr Satterthwaite.

"You have a wide experience of life, Mr Satterthwaite. Perhaps you can tell us that."

Mr Satterthwaite's voice trembled a little. His cue had come at last. He was to speak some of the most important lines in the play. He was an actor now - not a looker-on.

"As I see it," he murmured modestly, "she cared for Derek Capel. She was, I think, a good woman - and she had sent him away. When her husband died, she suspected the truth. And so, to save the man

she loved, she tried to destroy the evidence against him. Later, I think, he persuaded her that her suspicions were unfounded, and she consented to marry him. But even then, she hung back - women, I fancy, have a lot of instinct."

Mr Satterthwaite had spoken his part.

Suddenly a long trembling sigh filled the air.

"My God!" cried Evesham, starting, "what was that?"

Mr Satterthwaite could have told him that it was Eleanor Portal in the gallery above, but he was too artistic to spoil a good effect.

Mr Quin was smiling.

"My car will be ready by now. Thank you for your hospitality, Mr Evesham. I have, I hope, done something for my friend."

They stared at him in blank amazement

"That aspect of the matter has not struck you? He loved this woman, you know. Loved her enough to commit murder for her sake. When retribution overtook him, as he mistakenly thought, he took his own life. But unwittingly, he left her to face the music."

"She was acquitted," muttered Evesham.

"Because the case against her could not be proved. I fancy - it may be only a fancy - that she is still - facing the music."

Portal had sunk into a chair, his face buried in his hands.

Quin turned to Satterthwaite.

"Good-bye, Mr Satterthwaite. You are interested in the drama, are you not?"

Mr Satterthwaite nodded surprised.

"I must recommend the Harlequinade to your attention. It is dying out nowadays - but it repays attention, I assure you. Its symbolism is a little difficult to follow - but the immortals are always immortal, you know. I wish you all good-night."

They saw him stride out into the dark. As before, the coloured glass gave the effect of motley...

Mr Satterthwaite went upstairs. He went to draw down his window, for the air was cold. The figure of Mr Quin moved down the drive, and from a side door came a woman's figure, running. For a moment they spoke together, then she retraced her steps to the house. She passed just below the window, and Mr Satterthwaite was struck anew by the vitality of her face. She moved now like a woman in a happy dream.

"Eleanor!"

Alex Portal had joined her.

"Eleanor, forgive me - forgive me - You told me the truth, but God forgive me - I did not quite believe..."

Mr Satterthwaite was intensely interested in other people's affairs, but he was also a gentleman It was borne in upon him that he must shut the window. He did so.

But he shut it very slowly.

He heard her voice, exquisite and indescribable.

"I know - I know. You have been in hell. So was I once. Loving - yet alternately believing and suspecting - thrusting aside one's doubts and having them spring up again with leering faces... I know, Alex, I know... But there is a worse hell than that, the hell I have lived in with you. I have seen your doubt - your fear of me... poisoning all our love. That man - that chance passer by, saved me. I could bear it no longer, you understand. Tonight - tonight I was going to kill myself... Alex... Alex..."

Chapter 2

THE SHADOW ON THE GLASS

"Listen to this," said Lady Cynthia Drage.

She read aloud from the journal she held in her hand.

"Mr and Mrs Unkerton are entertaining a party at Greenways House this week. Amongst the guests are Lady Cynthia Drage, Mr and Mrs Richard Scott, Major Porter, D.S.O., Mrs Staverton, Captain Allenson and Mr Satterthwaite."

"It's as well, "remarked Lady Cynthia, casting away the paper, "to know what we're in for. But they have made a mess of things!"

Her companion, that same Mr Satterthwaite whose name figured at the end of the list of guests, looked at her interrogatively. It had been said that if Mr Satterthwaite were found at the houses of those rich who had newly arrived, it was a sign either that the cooking was unusually good, or that a drama of human life was to be enacted there. Mr Satterthwaite was abnormally interested in the comedies and tragedies of his fellow men.

Lady Cynthia, who was a middle-aged woman, with a hard face and a liberal allowance of make-up, tapped him smartly with the newest thing in parasols which lay rakishly across her knee.

"Don't pretend you don't understand me. You do perfectly. What's more, I believe you're here on purpose to see the fur fly!"

Mr Satterthwaite protested vigorously. He didn't know what she was talking about.

"I'm talking about Richard Scott. Do you pretend you've never heard of him?"

"No, of course not. He's the Big Game man, isn't he?"

"That's it - 'Great big bears and tigers, etc.' as the song says. Of course, he's a great lion himself just now - the Unkertons would naturally be mad to get hold of him - and the bride! A charming child - Oh! Quite a charming child - but so naпve, only twenty, you know, and he must be at least forty-five."

"Mrs Scott seems to be very charming," said Mr Satterthwaite sedately.

"Yes, poor child."

"Why poor child?"

Lady Cynthia cast him a look of reproach, and went on approaching the point at issue in her own manner.

"Porter's all right - a dull dog, though - another of these African hunters, all sunburnt and silent. Second fiddle to Richard Scott and always has been - life-long friends and all that sort of thing. When I come to think of it, I believe they were together on that trip -"

"Which trip?"

"The trip. The Mrs Staverton trip. You'll be saying next you've never heard of Mrs Staverton."

"I have heard of Mrs Staverton," said Mr Satterthwaite, almost with unwillingness.

And he and Lady Cynthia exchanged glances.

"It's so exactly like the Unkertons," wailed the latter, "they are absolutely hopeless - socially, I mean. The idea of asking those two together! Of course they'd heard that Mrs Staverton was a sportswoman and a traveller and all that, and about her book. People like the Unkertons don't even begin to realise what pitfalls there are! I've been running them, myself, for the last year, and what I've gone through nobody knows. One has to be constantly at their elbow. 'Don't do that!' 'You can't do this!' Thank goodness, I'm through with it now. Not that we've quarrelled - Oh! No, I never quarrel, but somebody else can take on the job. As I've always said, I can put up with vulgarity, but I can't stand meanness!"

After this somewhat cryptic utterance, Lady Cynthia was silent for a moment, ruminating on the Unkertons' meanness as displayed to herself.

"If I'd still been running the show for them," she went on presently, "I should have said quite firmly and plainly - 'You can't ask Mrs Staverton with the Richard Scotts. She and he were once -'"

She stopped eloquently.

"But were they once?" asked Mr Satterthwaite.

"My dear man! It's well known. That trip into the Interior! I'm surprised the woman had the face to accept the invitation."

"Perhaps she didn't know the others were coming?" suggested Mr Satterthwaite.

"Perhaps she did. That's far more likely."

"You think -?"

"She's what I call a dangerous woman - the sort of woman who'd stick at nothing. I wouldn't be in Richard Scott's shoes this weekend."

"And his wife knows nothing, you think?"

"I'm certain of it. But I suppose some kind friend will enlighten her sooner or later. Here's Jimmy Allenson. Such a nice boy. He saved my life in Egypt last winter - I was so bored, you know. Hullo, Jimmy, come here at once."

Captain Allenson obeyed, dropping down on the turf beside her. He was a handsome young fellow of thirty, with white teeth and an infectious smile.

"I'm glad somebody wants me," he observed. "The Scotts are doing the turtle dove stunt, two required, not three, Porter's devouring the Field, and I've been in mortal danger of being entertained by my hostess."

He laughed. Lady Cynthia laughed with him. Mr Satterthwaite, who was in some ways a little old-fashioned, so much so that he seldom

made fun of his host and hostess until after he had left their house, remained grave.

"Poor Jimmy," said Lady Cynthia,

"Mine not to reason why, mine but to swiftly fly. I had a narrow escape of being told the family ghost story."

"An Unkerton ghost," said Lady Cynthia. "How screaming."

"Not an Unkerton ghost," said Mr Satterthwaite. "A Greenways ghost. They bought it with the house."

"Of course," said Lady Cynthia. "I remember now. But it doesn't clank chains, does it? It's only something to do with a window."

Jimmy Allenson looked up quickly.

"A window?"

But for the moment Mr Satterthwaite did not answer. He was looking over Jimmy's head at three figures approaching from the direction of the house - a slim girl between two men. There was a superficial resemblance between the men, both were tall and dark with bronzed faces and quick eyes, but looked at more closely the resemblance vanished. Richard Scott, hunter and explorer, was a man of extraordinarily vivid personality. He had a manner that radiated magnetism. John Porter, his friend and fellow hunter, was a man of squarer build with an impassive, rather wooden face, and very

thoughtful grey eyes. He was a quiet man, content always to play second fiddle to his friend.

And between these two walked Moira Scott who, until three months ago, had been Moira O'Connell. A slender figure, big wistful brown eyes, and golden red hair that stood out round her small face like a saint's halo.

"That child mustn't be hurt," said Mr Satterthwaite to himself. "It would be abominable that a child like that should be hurt."

Lady Cynthia greeted the newcomers with a wave of the latest thing in parasols.

"Sit down, and don't interrupt," she said. "Mr Satterthwaite is telling us a ghost story."

"I love ghost stories," said Moira Scott. She dropped down on the grass.

"The ghost of Greenways House?" asked Richard Scott.

"Yes. You know about it?"

Scott nodded.

"I used to stay here in the old days," he explained. "Before the Elliots had to sell up. The Watching Cavalier, that's it, isn't it?"

"The Watching Cavalier," said his wife softly. "I like that. It sounds interesting. Please go on."

But Mr Satterthwaite seemed somewhat loath to do so. He assured her that it was not really interesting at all.

"Now you've done it, Satterthwaite," said Richard Scott sardonically. "That hint of reluctance clinches it."

In response to popular clamour, Mr Satterthwaite was forced to speak.

"It's really very uninteresting," he said apologetically. "I believe the original story centres round a Cavalier ancestor of the Elliot family. His wife had a Roundhead lover. The husband was killed by the lover in an upstairs room, and the guilty pair fled, but as they fled, they looked back at the house, and saw the face of the dead husband at the window, watching them. That is the legend, but the ghost story is only concerned with a pane of glass in the window of that particular room on which is an irregular stain, almost imperceptible from near at hand, but which from far away certainly gives the effect of a man's face looking out."

"Which window is it?" asked Mrs Scott, looking up at the house.

"You can't see it from here," said Mr Satterthwaite. "It is round the other side but was boarded up from the inside some years ago - forty years ago, I think, to be accurate."

"What did they do that for? I thought you said the ghost didn't walk."

"It doesn't," Mr Satterthwaite assured her. "I suppose - well, I suppose there grew to be a superstitious feeling about it, that's all."

Then, deftly enough, he succeeded in turning the conversation. Jimmy Allenson was perfectly ready to hold forth upon Egyptians and diviners.

"Frauds, most of them. Ready enough to tell you vague things about the past, but won't commit themselves as to the future."

"I should have thought it was usually the other way about," remarked John Porter.

"It's illegal to tell the future in this country, isn't it?" said Richard Scott. "Moira persuaded a gypsy into telling her fortune, but the woman gave her her shilling back, and said there was nothing doing, or words to that effect."

"Perhaps she saw something so frightful that she didn't like to tell it me," said Moira.

"Don't pile on the agony, Mrs Scott," said Allenson lightly. "I, for one, refuse to believe that an unlucky fate is hanging over you."

"I wonder," thought Mr Satterthwaite to himself. "I wonder..."

Then he looked up sharply. Two women were coming from the house, a short stout woman with black hair, inappropriately dressed in jade green, and a tall slim figure in creamy white. The first woman

was his hostess, Mrs Unkerton, the second was a woman he had often heard of, but never met.

"Here's Mrs Staverton," announced Mrs Unkerton, in a tone of great satisfaction. "All friends here, I think."

"These people have an uncanny gift for saying just the most awful things they can, "murmured Lady Cynthia, but Mr Satterthwaite was not listening. He was watching Mrs Staverton.

Very easy - very natural Her careless "Hullo! Richard, ages since we met. Sorry I couldn't come to the wedding. Is this your wife? You must be tired of meeting all your husband's weather-beaten old friends." Moira's response - suitable, rather shy. The elder woman's swift appraising glance that went on lightly to another old friend.

"Hullo, John!" The same easy tone, but with a subtle difference in it - a warming quality that had been absent before.

And then that sudden smile. It transformed her. Lady Cynthia had been quite right. A dangerous woman! Very fair - deep blue eyes - not the traditional colouring of the siren - a face almost haggard in repose. A woman with a slow dragging voice and a sudden dazzling smile.

Iris Staverton sat down. She became naturally and inevitably the centre of the group. So you felt it would always be.

Mr Satterthwaite was recalled from his thoughts by Major Porter's suggesting a stroll. Mr Satterthwaite, who was not as a general rule

much given to strolling, acquiesced. The two men sauntered off together across the lawn.

"Very interesting story of yours just now," said the Major.

"I will show you the window," said Mr Satterthwaite.

He led the way round to the west side of the house. Here there was a small formal garden - the Privy Garden, it was always called, and there was some point in the name, for it was surrounded by high holly hedges, and even the entrance to it ran zigzag between the same high prickly hedges.

Once inside, it was very charming with an old-world charm of formal flower beds, flagged paths and a low stone seat, exquisitely carved. When they had reached the centre of the garden, Mr Satterthwaite turned and pointed up at the house. The length of Greenways House ran north and south. In this narrow west wall there was only one window, a window on the first floor, almost overgrown by ivy, with grimy panes, and which you could just see was boarded up on the inside.

"There you are," said Mr Satterthwaite.

Craning his neck a little, Porter looked up.

"H'm. I can see a kind of discolouration on one of the panes, nothing more."

"We're too near," said Mr Satterthwaite. "There's a clearing higher up in the woods where you get a really good view."

He led the way out of the Privy Garden, and turning sharply to the left, struck into the woods. A certain enthusiasm of showmanship possessed him, and he hardly noticed that the man at his side was absent and inattentive.

"They had, of course, to make another window, when they boarded up this one," he explained. "The new one faces south overlooking the lawn where we were sitting just now. I rather fancy the Scotts have the room in question. That is why I didn't want to pursue the subject. Mrs Scott might have felt nervous if she had realised that she was sleeping in what might be called the haunted room."

"Yes, I see," said Porter.

Mr Satterthwaite looked at him sharply, and realised that the other had not heard a word of what he was saying.

"Very interesting," said Porter. He slashed with his stick at some tall foxgloves, and, frowning, he said. "She ought not to have come. She ought never to have come."

People often spoke after this fashion to Mr Satterthwaite. He seemed to matter so little, to have so negative a personality. He was merely a glorified listener.

"No," said Porter, "she ought never to have come."

Mr Satterthwaite knew instinctively that it was not of Mrs Scott he spoke.

"You think not?" he asked.

Porter shook his head as though in foreboding.

"I was on that trip," he said abruptly. "The three of us went. Scott and I and Iris. She's a wonderful woman - and a damned fine shot." he paused. "What made them ask her?" he finished abruptly.

Mr Satterthwaite shrugged his shoulders.

"Ignorance," he said.

"There's going to be trouble," said the other. "We must stand by - and do what we can."

"But surely Mrs Staverton -?"

"I'm talking of Scott." he paused. "You see - there's Mrs Scott to consider."

Mr Satterthwaite had been considering her all along, but he did not think it necessary to say so, since the other man had so clearly forgotten her until this minute.

"How did Scott meet his wife?" he asked.

"Last winter, in Cairo. A quick business. They were engaged in three weeks, and married in six."

"She seems to me very charming."

"She is, no doubt about it. And he adores her - but that will make no difference. "And again Major Porter repeated to himself, using the pronoun that meant to him one person only: "Hang it all, she shouldn't have come..."

Just then they stepped out upon a high grassy knoll at some little distance from the house. With again something of the pride of the showman, Mr Satterthwaite stretched out his arm.

"Look," he said.

It was fast growing dusk. The window could still be plainly observed, and apparently pressed against one of the panes was a man's face surmounted by a plumed cavalier's hat.

"Very curious," said Porter. "Really very curious. What will happen when that pane of glass gets smashed some day?"

Mr Satterthwaite smiled.

"That is one of the most interesting parts of the story. That pane of glass has been replaced to my certain knowledge at least eleven times, perhaps oftener. The last time was twelve years ago when the then owner of the house determined to destroy the myth. But it's

always the same. The stain reappears - not all at once, the discolouration spreads gradually. It takes a month or two as a rule."

For the first time, Porter showed signs of real interest. He gave a sudden quick shiver.

"Damned odd, these things. No accounting for them. What's the real reason of having the room boarded up inside?"

"Well, an idea got about that the room was - unlucky. The Eveshams were in it just before the divorce. Then Stanley and his wife were staying here, and had that room when he ran off with his chorus girl"

Porter raised his eyebrows.

"I see. Danger, not to life, but to morals."

"And now," thought Mr Satterthwaite to himself, "the Scotts have it... I wonder..."

They retraced their steps in silence to the house. Walking almost noiselessly on the soft turf, each absorbed in his own thoughts, they became unwittingly eavesdroppers.

They were rounding the corner of the holly hedge when they heard Iris Staverton's voice raised fierce and clear from the depths of the Privy Garden.

"You shall be sorry - sorry - for this!"

Scott's voice answered low and uncertain, so that the words could not be distinguished, and then the woman's voice rose again, speaking words that they were to remember later.

"Jealousy - it drives one to the Devil - it is the Devil! It can drive one to black murder. Be careful, Richard, for God's sake, be careful!"

And then on that she had come out of the Privy Garden ahead of them, and on round the corner of the house without seeing them, walking swiftly, almost running, like a woman hag-ridden and pursued.

Mr Satterthwaite thought again of Lady Cynthia's words. A dangerous woman. For the first time, he had a premonition of tragedy, coming swift and inexorable, not to be gainsaid.

Yet that evening he felt ashamed of his fears. Everything seemed normal and pleasant. Mrs Staverton, with her easy insouciance, showed no sign of strain. Moira Scott was her charming, unaffected self. The two women appeared to be getting on very well. Richard Scott himself seemed to be in boisterous spirits.

The most worried looking person was stout Mrs Unkerton. She confided at length in Mr Satterthwaite.

"Think it silly or not, as you like, there's something giving me the creeps. And I'll tell you frankly, I've sent for the glazier unbeknown to Ned."

"The glazier?"

"To put a new pane of glass in that window. It's all very well. Ned's proud of it - says it gives the house a tone I don't like it. I tell you flat. We'll have a nice plain modern pane of glass, with no nasty stories attached to it."

"You forget," said Mr Satterthwaite, "or perhaps you don't know. The stain comes back."

"That's as it may be," said Mrs Unkerton. "All I can say is if it does, it's against nature!"

Mr Satterthwaite raised his eyebrows, but did not reply.

"And what if it does?" pursued Mrs Unkerton defiantly. "We're not so bankrupt, Ned and I, that we can't afford a new pane of glass every month - or every week if need be for the matter of that."

Mr Satterthwaite did not meet the challenge. He had seen too many things crumple and fall before the power of money to believe that even a Cavalier ghost could put up a successful fight. Nevertheless, he was interested by Mrs Unkerton's manifest uneasiness. Even she was not exempt from the tension in the atmosphere - only she attributed it to an attenuated ghost story, not to the clash of personalities amongst her guests.

Mr Satterthwaite was fated to hear yet another scrap of conversation which threw light upon the situation. He was going up the wide staircase to bed, John Porter and Mrs Staverton were sitting

together in an alcove of the big hall. She was speaking with a faint irritation in her golden voice.

"I hadn't the least idea the Scotts were going to be here. I daresay, if I had known, I shouldn't have come, but I can assure you, my dear John, that now I am here, I'm not going to run away -"

Mr Satterthwaite passed on up the staircase out of earshot. He thought to himself - "I wonder now - How much of that is true? Did she know? I wonder - what's going to come of it?"

He shook his head.

In the clear light of the morning he felt that he had perhaps been a little melodramatic in his imaginings of the evening before. A moment of strain - yes, certainly - inevitable under the circumstances - but nothing more. People adjusted themselves. His fancy that some great catastrophe was pending was nerves - pure nerves - or possibly liver.

Yes, that was it, liver. He was due at Carlsbad in another fortnight.

On his own account he proposed a little stroll that evening just as it was growing dusk. He suggested to Major Porter that they should go up to the clearing and see if Mrs Unkerton had been as good as her word, and had a new pane of glass put in. To himself, he said - "Exercise, that's what I need. Exercise."

The two men walked slowly through the woods. Porter, as usual, was taciturn.

"I can't help feeling," said Mr Satterthwaite loquaciously, "that we were a little foolish in our imaginings yesterday. Expecting - er - trouble, you know. After all, people have to behave themselves - swallow their feelings and that sort of thing."

"Perhaps," said Porter. After a minute or two he added, "Civilised people."

"You mean -?"

"People who've lived outside civilisation a good deal sometimes go back. Revert. Whatever you call it."

They emerged on to the grassy knoll. Mr Satterthwaite was breathing rather fast. He never enjoyed going up hill.

He looked towards the window. The face was still there, more life-like than ever.

"Our hostess has repented, I see." Porter threw it only a cursory glance.

"Unkerton cut up rough, I expect," he said indifferently. "He's the sort of man who is willing to be proud of another family's ghost, and who isn't going to run the risk of having it driven away when he's paid spot cash for it."

He was silent a minute or two, staring, not at the house, but at the thick undergrowth by which they were surrounded.

"Has it ever struck you," he said, "that civilisation's damned dangerous?"

"Dangerous?" Such a revolutionary remark shocked Mr Satterthwaite to the core.

"Yes. There are no safety valves, you see."

He turned abruptly, and they descended the path by which they had come.

"I really am quite at a loss to understand you," said Mr Satterthwaite, pattering along with nimble steps to keep up with the other's strides. "Reasonable people -"

Porter laughed. A short disconcerting laugh. Then he looked at the correct little gentleman by his side.

"You think it's all bunkum on my part, Mr Satterthwaite? But there are people, you know, who can tell you when a storm's coming. They feel it beforehand in the air. And other people can foretell trouble. There's trouble coming now, Mr Satterthwaite, big trouble. It may come any minute. It may -"

He stopped dead, clutching Mr Satterthwaite's arm. And in that tense minute of silence it came - the sound of two shots and following them a cry - a cry in a woman's voice.

"My God!" cried Porter, "it's come."

He raced down the path, Mr Satterthwaite panting behind him. In a minute they came out on to the lawn, close by the hedge of the Privy Garden. At the same time, Richard Scott and Mr Unkerton came round the opposite corner of the house. They halted, facing each other, to left and right of the entrance to the Privy Garden.

"It - it came from in there," said Unkerton, pointing with a flabby hand.

"We must see," said Porter. He led the way into the enclosure. As he rounded the last bend of the holly hedge, he stopped dead. Mr Satterthwaite peered over his shoulder. A loud cry burst from Richard Scott.

There were three people in the Privy Garden. Two of them lay on the grass near the stone seat, a man and a woman. The third was Mrs Staverton. She was standing quite close to them by the holly hedge, gazing with horror-stricken eyes, and holding something in her right hand.

"Iris," cried Porter. "Iris. For God's sake! What's that you've got in your hand?"

She looked down at it then - with a kind of wonder, an unbelievable indifference.

"It's a pistol," she said wonderingly. And then - after what seemed an interminable time, but was in reality only a few seconds, "I - picked it up."

Mr Satterthwaite had gone forward to where Unkerton and Scott were kneeling on the turf.

"A doctor," the latter was murmuring. "We must have a doctor."

But it was too late for any doctor. Jimmy Allenson who had complained that the hand diviners hedged about the future, and Moira Scott to whom the gypsy had returned a shilling, lay there in the last great stillness.

It was Richard Scott who completed a brief examination. The iron nerve of the man showed in this crisis. After the first cry of agony, he was himself again.

He laid his wife gently down again.

"Shot from behind," he said briefly. "The bullet has passed right through her."

Then he handled Jimmy Allenson. The wound here was in the breast and the bullet was lodged in the body.

John Porter came towards them.

"Nothing should be touched," he said sternly. "The police must see it all exactly as it is now."

"The police," said Richard Scott. His eyes lit up with a sudden flame as he looked at the woman standing by the holly hedge. He made a

step in that direction, but at the same time John Porter also moved, so as to bar his way. For a moment it seemed as though there was a duel of eyes between the two friends.

Porter very quietly shook his head

"No, Richard," he said. "It looks like it - but you're wrong."

Richard Scott spoke with difficulty, moistening his dry lips.

"Then why - has she got that in her hand?"

And again Iris Staverton said in the same lifeless tone - "I - picked it up."

"The police," said Unkerton rising. "We must send for the police - at once. You will telephone perhaps, Scott? Someone should stay here - yes, I am sure someone should stay here."

In his quiet gentlemanly manner, Mr Satterthwaite offered to do so. His host accepted the offer with manifest relief.

"The ladies," he explained. "I must break the news to the ladies, Lady Cynthia and my dear wife."

Mr Satterthwaite stayed in the Privy Garden looking down on the body of that which had once been Moira Scott.

"Poor child," he said to himself. "Poor child..."

He quoted to himself the tag about the evil men do living after them. For was not Richard Scott in a way responsible for his innocent wife's death? They would hang Iris Staverton, he supposed, not that he liked to think of it, but was not it at least a part of the blame he laid at the man's door? The evil that men do -

And the girl, the innocent girl, had paid.

He looked down at her with a very deep pity. Her small face, so white and wistful, a half smile on the lips still. The ruffled golden hair, the delicate ear. There was a spot of blood on the lobe of it. With an inner feeling of being something of a detective, Mr Satterthwaite deduced an earring, torn away in her fall. He craned his neck forward. Yes, he was right, there was a small pearl drop hanging from the other ear.

Poor child, poor child

"And now, sir," said Inspector Winkfield

They were in the library. The Inspector, a shrewd-looking forceful man of forty odd, was concluding his investigations. He had questioned most of the guests, and had by now pretty well made up his mind on the case. He was listening to what Major Porter and Mr Satterthwaite had to say. Mr Unkerton sat heavily in a chair, staring with protruding eyes at the opposite wall.

"As I understand it, gentlemen," said the Inspector, "you'd been for a walk. You were returning to the house by a path that winds round the left side of what they call the Privy Garden. Is that correct?"

"Quite correct, Inspector."

"You heard two shots, and a woman's scream?"

"Yes."

"You then ran as fast as you could, emerged from the woods and made your way to the entrance of the Privy Garden. If anybody had left that garden, they could only do so by one entrance. The holly bushes are impassable. If anyone had run out of the garden and turned to the right, he would have been met by Mr Unkerton and Mr Scott. If he had turned to the left, he could not have done so without being seen by you. Is that right?"

"That is so," said Major Porter. His face was very white.

"That seems to settle it," said the Inspector. "Mr and Mrs Unkerton and Lady Cynthia Drage were sitting on the lawn, Mr Scott was in the Billiard Room which opens on to that lawn. At ten minutes past six, Mrs Staverton came out of the house, spoke a word or two to those sitting there, and went round the corner of the house towards the Privy Garden. Two minutes later the shots were heard. Mr Scott rushed out of the house and together with Mr Unkerton ran to the Privy Garden. At the same time you and Mr - er - Satterthwaite arrived from the opposite direction. Mrs Staverton was in the Privy Garden with a pistol in her hand from which two shots had been fired. As I see it, she shot the lady first from behind as she was sitting on the bench. Then Captain Allenson sprang up and went for her, and she shot him in the chest as he came towards her. I understand

that there had been a - er - previous attachment between her and Mr Richard Scott -"

"That's a damned lie," said Porter.

His voice rang out hoarse and defiant. The Inspector said nothing, merely shook his head.

"What is her own story?" asked Mr Satterthwaite.

"She says that she went into the Privy Garden to be quiet for a little. Just before she rounded the last hedge, she heard the shots. She came round the corner, saw the pistol lying at her feet, and picked it up. No one passed her, and she saw no one in the garden but the two victims." The Inspector gave an eloquent pause. "That's what she says - and although I cautioned her, she insisted on making a statement."

"If she said that," said Major Porter, and his face was still deadly white, "she was speaking the truth. I know Iris Staverton."

"Well, sir," said the Inspector, "there'll be plenty of time to go into all that later. In the meantime, I've got my duty to do."

With an abrupt movement, Porter turned to Mr Satterthwaite.

"You! Can't you help? Can't you do something?"

Mr Satterthwaite could not help feeling immensely flattered. He had been appealed to, he, most insignificant of men, and by a man like John Porter.

He was just about to flutter out a regretful reply, when the butler, Thompson, entered, with a card upon a salver which he took to his master with an apologetic cough. Mr Unkerton was still sitting huddled up in a chair, taking no part in the proceedings.

"I told the gentleman you would probably not be able to see him, sir," said Thompson. "But he insisted that he had an appointment and that it was most urgent."

Unkerton took the card.

"Mr Harley Quin," he read. "I remember, he was to see me about a picture. I did make an appointment, but as things are -"

But Mr Satterthwaite had started forward.

"Mr Harley Quin, did you say?" he cried. "How extraordinary, how very extraordinary. Major Porter, you asked me if I could help you. I think I can. This Mr Quin is a friend - or I should say, an acquaintance of mine. He is a most remarkable man."

"One of these amateur solvers of crime, I suppose," remarked the Inspector disparagingly.

"No," said Mr Satterthwaite. "He is not that kind of man at all. But he has a power - an almost uncanny power - of showing you what you have seen with your own eyes, of making clear to you what you have heard with your own ears. Let us, at any rate, give him an outline of the case, and hear what he has to say."

Mr Unkerton glanced at the Inspector, who merely snorted and looked at the ceiling. Then the former gave a short nod to Thompson, who left the room and returned ushering in a tall, slim stranger.

"Mr Unkerton?" The stranger shook him by the hand. "I am sorry to intrude upon you at such a time. We must leave our little picture chat until another time. Ah! My friend Mr Satterthwaite. Still as fond of the drama as ever?"

A faint smile played for a minute round the stranger's lips as he said these last words.

"Mr Quin," said Mr Satterthwaite impressively, "we have a drama here, we are in the midst of one. I should like, and my friend, Major Porter, would like, to have your opinion of it."

Mr Quin sat down. The red-shaded lamp threw a broad band of coloured light over the checked pattern of his overcoat, and left his face in shadow almost as though he wore a mask.

Succinctly, Mr Satterthwaite recited the main points of the tragedy. Then he paused, breathlessly awaiting the words of the oracle.

But Mr Quin merely shook his head.

"A sad story," he said. "A very sad and shocking tragedy. The lack of motive makes it very intriguing."

Unkerton stared at him.

"You don't understand," he said. "Mrs Staverton was heard to threaten Richard Scott. She was bitterly jealous of his wife. Jealousy -"

"I agree," said Mr Quin. "Jealousy or Demoniac Possession. It's all the same. But you misunderstand me. I was not referring to the murder of Mrs Scott, but to that of Captain Allenson."

"You're right," cried Porter, springing forward. "There's a flaw there. If Iris had ever contemplated shooting Mrs Scott, she'd have got her alone somewhere. No, we're on the wrong tack. And I think I see another solution. Only those three people went into the Privy Garden. That is indisputable and I don't intend to dispute it. But I reconstruct the tragedy differently. Supposing Jimmy Allenson shoots first Mrs Scott and then himself. That's possible, isn't it? He flings the pistol from him as he falls - Mrs Staverton finds it lying on the ground and picks it up just as she said. How's that?"

The Inspector shook his head.

"Won't wash, Major Porter. If Captain Allenson had fired that shot close to his body, the cloth would have been singed."

"He might have held the pistol at arm's length."

"Why should he? No sense in it. Besides, there's no motive."

"Might have gone off his head suddenly," muttered Porter, but without any great conviction. He fell to silence again, suddenly rousing himself to say defiantly - "Well, Mr Quin?"

The latter shook his head.

"I'm not a magician. I'm not even a criminologist. But I will tell you one thing - I believe in the value of impressions. In any time of crisis, there is always one moment that stands out from all the others, one picture that remains when all else has faded. Mr Satterthwaite is, I think, likely to have been the most unprejudiced observer of those present. Will you cast your mind back, Mr Satterthwaite, and tell us the moment that made the strongest impression on you? Was it when you heard the shots? Was it when you first saw the dead bodies? Was it when you first observed the pistol in Mrs Staverton's hand? Clear your mind of any preconceived standard of values, and tell us."

Mr Satterthwaite fixed his eyes on Mr Quin's face, rather as a schoolboy might repeat a lesson of which he was not sure.

"No," he said slowly. "It was not any of those. The moment that I shall always remember was when I stood alone by the bodies - afterwards - looking down on Mrs Scott. She was lying on her side. Her hair was ruffled. There was a spot of blood on her little ear."

And instantly, as he said it, he felt that he had said a terrific, a significant thing.

"Blood on her ear? Yes, I remember," said Unkerton slowly.

"Her earring must have been torn out when she fell," explained Mr Satterthwaite.

But it sounded a little improbable as he said it.

"She was lying on her left side," said Porter. "I suppose it was that ear?"

"No," said Mr Satterthwaite quickly. "It was her right ear."

The Inspector coughed.

"I found this in the grass," he vouchsafed. He held up a loop of gold wire.

"But, my God, man," cried Porter. "The thing can't have been wrenched to pieces by a mere fall. It's more as though it had been shot away by a bullet."

"So it was," cried Mr Satterthwaite. "It was a bullet. It must have been."

"There were only two shots," said the Inspector. "A shot can't have grazed her ear and shot her in the back as well. And if one shot carried away the earring, and the second shot killed her, it can't have killed Captain Allenson as well - not unless he was standing

close in front of her - very close - facing her as it might be. Oh - I - no, not even then, unless, that is -"

"Unless she was in his arms, you were going to say," said Mr Quin, with a queer little smile. "Well, why not?"

Everyone stared at each other. The idea was so vitally strange to them - Allenson and Mrs Scott - Mr Unkerton voiced the same feeling.

"But they hardly knew each other," he said.

"I don't know," said Mr Satterthwaite thoughtfully. "They might have known each other better than we thought. Lady Cynthia said he saved her from being bored in Egypt last winter, and you -" he turned to Porter - "you told me that Richard Scott met his wife in Cairo last winter. They might have known each other very well indeed out there..."

"They didn't seem to be together much," said Unkerton.

"No - they rather avoided each other. It was almost unnatural, now I come to think of it."

They all looked at Mr Quin, as if a little startled at the conclusions at which they had arrived so unexpectedly.

Mr Quin rose to his feet.

"You see," he said, "what Mr Satterthwaite's impression has done for us." he turned to Unkerton, "It is your turn now."

"Eh? I don't understand you."

"You were very thoughtful when I came into this room. I should like to know exactly what thought it was that obsessed you. Never mind if it has nothing to do with the tragedy. Never mind if it seems to you - superstitious -"

Mr Unkerton started, ever so slightly. "Tell us."

"I don't mind telling you," said Unkerton. "Though it's nothing to do with the business, and you'll probably laugh at me into the bargain. I was wishing that my Missus had left well alone and not replaced that pane of glass in the haunted window. I feel as though doing that has maybe brought a curse upon us."

He was unable to understand why the two men opposite him stared so.

"But she hasn't replaced it yet," said Mr Satterthwaite at last.

"Yes, she has. Man came first thing this morning."

"My God!" said Porter, "I begin to understand. That room, it's panelled, I supposed, not papered?"

"Yes, but what does that -?"

But Porter had swung out of the room. The other followed him. He went straight upstairs to the Scotts' bedroom. It was a charming

room, panelled in cream with two windows facing south. Porter felt with his hands along the panels on the western wall.

"There's a spring somewhere - must be. Ah!" There was a click, and a section of the panelling rolled back. It disclosed the grimy panes of the haunted window. One pane of glass was clean and new. Porter stooped quickly and picked up something. He held it out on the palm of his hand. It was a fragment of ostrich feather. Then he looked at Mr Quin. Mr Quin nodded.

He went across to the hat cupboard in the bedroom. There were several hats in it - the dead woman's hats. He took out one with a large brim and curling feathers - an elaborate Ascot hat.

Mr Quin began speaking in a gentle, reflective voice. "Let us suppose," said Mr Quin, "a man who is by nature intensely jealous. A man who has stayed here in bygone years and knows the secret of the spring in the panelling. To amuse himself he opens it one day, and looks out over the Privy Garden. There, secure as they think from being overlooked, he sees his wife and another man. There can be no possible doubt in his mind as to the relations between them. He is mad with rage. What shall he do? An idea comes to him. He goes to the cupboard and puts on the hat with the brim and feathers. It is growing dusk, and he remembers the story of the stain on the glass. Anyone looking up at the window will see as they think the Watching Cavalier. Thus secure he watches them, and at the moment they are clasped in each other's arms, he shoots. He is a good shot - a wonderful shot. As they fall, he fires once more - that shot carries away the earring. He flings the pistol out of the window

into the Privy Garden, rushes downstairs and out through the billiard room." Porter took a step towards him.

"But he let her be accused!" he cried. "He stood by and let her be accused. Why? Why?"

"I think I know why," said Mr Quin. "I should guess - it's only guess-work on my part, mind - that Richard Scott was once madly in love with Iris Staverton - so madly that even meeting her years afterwards stirred up the embers of jealousy again. I should say that Iris Staverton once fancied that she might love him, that she went on a hunting trip with him and another - and that she came back in love with the better man."

"The better man," muttered Porter, dazed. "You mean -?"

"Yes," said Mr Quin, with a faint smile. "I mean you." He paused a minute, and then said: "If I were you - I should go to her now."

"I will," said Porter.

He turned and left the room.

Chapter 3

AT THE "BELLS AND MOTLEY"

Mr Satterthwaite was annoyed. Altogether it had been an unfortunate day. They had started late, there had been two punctures already, finally, they had taken the wrong turning and lost themselves amidst the wilds of Salisbury Plain. Now it was close on eight o'clock, they were still a matter of forty miles from Marswick Manor whither they were bound, and a third puncture had supervened to render matters still more trying.

Mr Satterthwaite, looking like some small bird whose plumage had been ruffled, walked up and down in front of the village garage whilst his chauffeur conversed in hoarse undertones with the local expert.

"Half an hour at least" said that worthy pronouncing judgment.

"And lucky at that," supplemented Masters, the chauffeur. "More like three quarters if you ask me."

"What is this place, anyway?" demanded Mr Satterthwaite fretfully. Being a little gentleman considerate of the feelings of others, he substituted the word "place" for "God-forsaken hole" which had first risen to his lips.

"Kirtlington Mallet."

Mr Satterthwaite was not much wiser, and yet a faint familiarity seemed to linger round the name. He looked round him disparagingly. Kirtlington Mallet seemed to consist of one straggling street, the garage and the post office on one side of it balanced by three indeterminate shops on the other side. Farther down the road, however, Mr Satterthwaite perceived something that creaked and swung in the wind, and his spirits rose ever so slightly. "There's an Inn here, I see," he remarked.

"'Bells and Motley,'" said the garage man. "That's it - yonder."

"If I might make a suggestion, sir," said Masters, "why not try it? They would be able to give you some sort of a meal, no doubt - not, of course, what you are accustomed to." He paused apologetically, for Mr Satterthwaite was accustomed to the best cooking of continental chefs, and had in his own service a cordon bleu to whom he paid a fabulous salary.

"We shan't be able to take the road again for another three quarters of an hour, sir. I'm sure of that. And it's already past eight o'clock. You could ring up Sir George Foster, sir, from the Inn, and acquaint him with the cause of our delay."

"You seem to think you can arrange everything, Masters," said Mr Satterthwaite snappily.

Masters, who did think so, maintained a respectful silence Mr Satterthwaite, in spite of his earnest wish to discountenance any suggestion that might possibly be made to him - he was in that mood - nevertheless looked down the road towards the creaking Inn sign

with faint inward approval. He was a man of birdlike appetite, an epicure, but even such men can be hungry.

"'The Bells and Motley,'" he said thoughtfully. "That's an odd name for an Inn. I don't know that I ever heard it before."

"There's odd folks come to it by all account," said the local man.

He was bending over the wheel, and his voice came muffled and indistinct

"Odd folks?" queried Mr Satterthwaite. "Now what do you mean by that?"

The other hardly seemed to know what he meant.

"Folks that come and go. That kind," he said vaguely.

Mr Satterthwaite reflected that people who come to an Inn are almost of necessity those who "come and go." The definition seemed to him to lack precision. But nevertheless his curiosity was stimulated. Somehow or other he had got to put in three quarters of an hour. The "Bells and Motley" would be as good as anywhere else.

With his usual small mincing steps he walked away down the road. From afar there came a rumble of thunder. The mechanic looked up and spoke to Masters.

"There's a storm coming over. Thought I could feel it in the air."

"Crikey," said Masters. "And forty miles to go."

"Ah!" said the other. "There's no need to be hurrying over this job. You'll not be wanting to take the road till the storm's passed over. That little boss of yours doesn't look as though he'd relish being out in thunder and lightning."

"Hope they'll do him well at that place," muttered the chauffeur. "I'll be pushing along there for a bite myself presently."

"Billy Jones is all right," said the garage man. "Keeps a good table."

Mr William Jones, a big burly man of fifty and landlord of the "Bells and Motley," was at this minute beaming ingratiatingly down on little Mr Satterthwaite.

"Can do you a nice steak, sir - and fried potatoes, and as good a cheese as any gentleman could wish for. This way, sir, in the coffee-room. We're not very full at present, the last of the fishing gentlemen just gone. A little later we'll be full again for the hunting. Only one gentleman here at present, name of Quin -"

Mr Satterthwaite stopped dead.

"Quin?" he said excitedly. "Did you say Quin?"

"That's the name, sir. Friend of yours perhaps?"

"Yes, indeed. Oh! Yes, most certainly." Twittering with excitement, Mr Satterthwaite hardly realised that the world might contain more

than one man of that name. He had no doubts at all. In an odd way, the information fitted in with what the man at the garage had said. "Folks that come and go..." a very apt description of Mr Quin. And the name of the Inn, too, seemed a peculiarly fitting and appropriate one.

"Dear me, dear me," said Mr Satterthwaite. "What a very odd thing. That we should meet like this! Mr Harley Quin, is it not?"

"That's right, sir. This is the coffee-room, sir. Ah! Here is the gentleman."

Tall, dark, smiling, the familiar figure of Mr Quin rose from the table at which he was sitting, and the well-remembered voice spoke.

"Ah! Mr Satterthwaite, we meet again. An unexpected meeting!"

Mr Satterthwaite was shaking him warmly by the hand. "Delighted. Delighted, I'm sure. A lucky breakdown for me. My car, you know. And you are staying here? For long?"

"One night only."

"Then I am indeed fortunate."

Mr Satterthwaite sat down opposite his friend with a little sigh of satisfaction, and regarded the dark, smiling face opposite him with a pleasurable expectancy. The other man shook his head gently. "I assure you," he said, "that I have not a bowl of goldfish or a rabbit to produce from my sleeve."

"Too bad," cried Mr Satterthwaite, a little taken aback. "Yes, I must confess - I do rather adopt that attitude towards you. A man of magic. Ha, ha. That is how I regard you. A man of magic."

"And yet," said Mr Quin, "it is you who do the conjuring tricks, not I."

"Ah!" said Mr Satterthwaite eagerly. "But I cannot do them without you. I lack - shall we say - inspiration?" Mr Quin smilingly shook his head.

"That is too big a word. I speak the cue, that is all."

The landlord came in at that minute with bread and a slab of yellow butter. As he set the things on the table there was a vivid flash of lightning, and a clap of thunder almost overhead.

"A wild night, gentlemen."

"On such a night -" began Mr Satterthwaite, and stopped.

"Funny now," said the landlord, unconscious of the question, "if those weren't just the words I was going to use myself. It was just such a night as this when Captain Harwell brought his bride home, the very day before he disappeared for ever."

"Ah!" cried Mr Satterthwaite suddenly. "Of course!"

He had got the clue. He knew now why the name Kirtlington Mallet was familiar. Three months before he had read every detail of the

astonishing disappearance of Captain Richard Harwell. Like other newspaper readers all over Great Britain he had puzzled over the details of the disappearance, and, also like every other Briton, had evolved his own theories.

"Of course," he repeated. "It was at Kirtlington Mallet it happened."

"It was at this house he stayed for the hunting last winter," said the landlord. "Oh! I knew him well. A handsome young gentleman and not one that you'd think had a care on his mind. He was done away with - that's my belief. Many's the time I've seen them come riding home together - he and Miss Le Couteau, and all the village saying there'd be a match come of it - and sure enough, so it did. A very beautiful young lady, and well thought of, for all she was a Canadian and a stranger. Ah! There's some dark mystery there. We'll never know the rights of it. It broke her heart, it did, sure enough. You've heard as she's sold the place up and gone abroad, couldn't bear to go on here with everyone staring and pointing after her - through no fault of her own, poor young dear! A black mystery, that's what it is."

He shook his head, then suddenly recollecting his duties, hurried from the room.

"A black mystery," said Mr Quin softly.

His voice was provocative in Mr Satterthwaite's ears.

"Are you pretending that we can solve the mystery where Scotland Yard failed?" he asked sharply.

The other made a characteristic gesture.

"Why not? Time has passed. Three months. That makes a difference."

"That is a curious idea of yours," said Mr Satterthwaite slowly. "That one sees things better afterwards than at the time."

"The longer the time that has elapsed, the more things fall into proportion. One sees them in their true relationship to one another."

There was a silence which lasted for some minutes.

"I am not sure," said Mr Satterthwaite, in a hesitating voice, "that I remember the facts clearly by now."

"I think you do," said Mr Quin quietly.

It was all the encouragement Mr Satterthwaite needed. His general rфle in life was that of listener and looker-on. Only in the company of Mr Quin was the position reversed. There Mr Quin was the appreciative listener, and Mr Satterthwaite took the centre of the stage.

"It was just over a year ago," he said, "that Ashley Grange passed into the possession of Miss Eleanor Le Couteau. It is a beautiful old house, but it had been neglected and allowed to remain empty for many years. It could not have found a better chвtelaine. Miss Le Couteau was a French Canadian, her forebears were emigrйs from the French Revolution, and had handed down to her a collection of

almost priceless French relics and antiques. She was a buyer and a collector also, with a very fine and discriminating taste. So much so, that when she decided to sell Ashley Grange and everything it contained after the tragedy, Mr Cyrus G. Bradburn, the American millionaire, made no bones about paying the fancy price of sixty thousand pounds for the Grange as it stood."

Mr Satterthwaite paused.

"I mention these things," he said apologetically, "not because they are relevant to the story - strictly speaking, they are not - but to convey an atmosphere, the atmosphere of young Mrs Harwell."

Mr Quin nodded.

"Atmosphere is always valuable," he said gravely.

"So we get a picture of this girl," continued the other. "Just twenty-three, dark, beautiful, accomplished, nothing crude and unfinished about her. And rich - we must not forget that. She was an orphan. A Mrs St Clair, a lady of unimpeachable breeding and social standing, lived with her as duenna. But Eleanor Le Couteau had complete control of her own fortune. And fortune-hunters are never hard to seek. At least a dozen impecunious young men were to be found dangling round her on all occasions, in the hunting field, in the ballroom, wherever she went. Young Lord Leccan, the most eligible parti in the country, is reported to have asked her to marry him, but she remained heart free. That is, until the coming of Captain Richard Harwell.

"Captain Harwell had put up at the local Inn for the hunting. He was a dashing rider to hounds. A handsome, laughing daredevil of a fellow. You remember the old saying, Mr Quin? 'Happy the wooing that's not long doing.' The adage was carried out at least in part. At the end of two months, Richard Harwell and Eleanor Le Couteau were engaged."

"The marriage followed three months afterwards. The happy pair went abroad for a two weeks' honeymoon, and then returned to take up their residence at Ashley Grange. The landlord has just told us that it was on a night of storm such as this that they returned to their home. An omen, I wonder? Who can tell? Be that as it may, the following morning very early - about half-past seven, Captain Harwell was seen walking in the garden by one of the gardeners, John Mathias. He was bareheaded, and was whistling. We have a picture there, a picture of light-heartedness, of careless happiness. And yet from that minute, as far as we know, no one ever set eyes on Captain Richard Harwell again."

Mr Satterthwaite paused, pleasantly conscious of a dramatic moment. The admiring glance of Mr Quin gave him the tribute he needed, and he went on.

"The disappearance was remarkable - unaccountable. It was not till the following day that the distracted wife called in the police. As you know, they have not succeeded in solving the mystery."

"There have, I suppose, been theories?" asked Mr Quin.

"Oh! Theories, I grant you. Theory No. 1, that Captain Harwell had been murdered, done away with. But if so, where was the body? It could hardly have been spirited away. And besides, what motive was there? As far as was known, Captain Harwell had not an enemy in the world."

He paused abruptly, as though uncertain. Mr Quin leaned forward.

"You are thinking," he said softly, "of young Stephen Grant."

"I am," admitted Mr Satterthwaite. "Stephen Grant, if I remember rightly, had been in charge of Captain Harwell's horses, and had been discharged by his master for some trifling offence. On the morning after the homecoming, very early, Stephen Grant was seen in the vicinity of Ashley Grange, and could give no good account of his presence there. He was detained by the police as being concerned in the disappearance of Captain Harwell, but nothing could be proved against him, and he was eventually discharged. It is true that he might be supposed to bear a grudge against Captain Harwell for his summary dismissal, but the motive was undeniably of the flimsiest. I suppose the police felt they must do something. You see, as I said just now, Captain Harwell had not an enemy in the world."

"As far as was known," said Mr Quin reflectively.

Mr Satterthwaite nodded appreciatively.

"We are coming to that. What, after all, was known of Captain Harwell? When the police came to look into his antecedents they

were confronted with a singular paucity of material. Who was Richard Harwell? Where did he come from? He had appeared, literally out of the blue as it seemed. He was a magnificent rider, and apparently well off. Nobody in Kirtlington Mallet had bothered to inquire further. Miss Le Couteau had had no parents or guardians to make inquiries into the prospects and standing of her fiancй. She was her own mistress. The police theory at this point was clear enough. A rich girl and an impudent impostor. The old story!

"But it was not quite that. True, Miss Le Couteau had no parents or guardians, but she had an excellent firm of solicitors in London who acted for her. Their evidence made the mystery deeper. Eleanor Le Couteau had wished to settle a sum outright upon her prospective husband, but he had refused. He himself was well off, he declared. It was proved conclusively that Harwell never had a penny of his wife's money. Her fortune was absolutely intact.

"He was, therefore, no common swindler, but was his object a refinement of the art? Did he propose blackmail at some future date if Eleanor Harwell should wish to marry some other man? I will admit that something of that kind seemed to me the most likely solution. It has always seemed so to me - until tonight."

Mr Quin leaned forward, prompting him.

"Tonight?"

"Tonight. I am not satisfied with that. How did he manage to disappear so suddenly and completely - at that hour in the morning,

with every labourer bestirring himself and tramping to work? Bareheaded, too."

"There is no doubt about the latter point - since the gardener saw him?"

"Yes - the gardener - John Mathias. Was there anything there, I wonder?"

"The police would not overlook him," said Mr Quin.

"They questioned him closely. He never wavered in his statement. His wife bore him out. He left his cottage at seven to attend to the greenhouses, he returned at twenty minutes to eight. The servants in the house heard the front door slam at about a quarter after seven. That fixes the time when Captain Harwell left the house. Ah! Yes, I know what you are thinking."

"Do you, I wonder?" said Mr Quin.

"I fancy so. Time enough for Mathias to have made away with his master. But why, man, why? And if so, where did he hide the body?"

The landlord came in bearing a tray.

"Sorry to have kept you so long, gentlemen."

He set upon the table a mammoth steak and beside it a dish filled to overflowing with crisp brown potatoes. The odour from the dishes was pleasant to Mr Satterthwaite's nostrils. He felt gracious.

"This looks excellent," he said. "Most excellent. We have been discussing the disappearance of Captain Harwell. What became of the gardener, Mathias?"

"Took a place in Essay, I believe. Didn't care to stay hereabouts. There were some as looked askance at him, you understand. Not that I ever believe he had anything to do with it."

Mr Satterthwaite helped himself to steak. Mr Quin followed suit. The landlord seemed disposed to linger and chat. Mr Satterthwaite had no objection, on the contrary.

"This Mathias now," he said. "What kind of a man was he?"

"Middle-aged chap, must have been a powerful fellow once but bent and crippled with rheumatism. He had that mortal bad, was laid up many a time with it, unable to do any work. For my part, I think it was sheer kindness on Miss Eleanor's part to keep him on. He'd outgrown his usefulness as a gardener, though his wife managed to make herself useful up at the house. Been a cook she had, and always willing to lend a hand."

"What sort of a woman was she?" asked Mr Satterthwaite, quickly.

The landlord's answer disappointed him.

"A plain body. Middle-aged, and dour like in manner. Deaf, too. Not that I ever knew much of them. They'd only been here a month, you understand, when the thing happened. They say he'd been a rare

good gardener in his time, though. Wonderful testimonials Miss Eleanor had with him."

"Was she interested in gardening?" asked Mr Quin, softly.

"No, sir, I couldn't say that she was, not like some of the ladies round here who pay good money to gardeners and spend the whole of their time grubbing about on their knees as well. Foolishness I call it. You see, Miss Le Couteau wasn't here very much except in the winter for hunting. The rest of the time she was up in London and away in those foreign seaside places where they say the French ladies don't so much as put a toe into the water for fear of spoiling their costumes, or so I've heard." Mr Satterthwaite smiled.

"There was no - er - woman of any kind mixed up with Captain Harwell?" he asked.

Though his first theory was disposed of, he nevertheless clung to his idea.

Mr William Jones shook his head. "Nothing of that sort. Never a whisper of it. No, it's a dark mystery, that's what it is."

"And your theory? What do you yourself think?" persisted Mr Satterthwaite.

"What do I think?"

"Yes."

"Don't know what to think. It's my belief as how he was done in, but who by I can't say. I'll fetch you gentlemen the cheese."

He stumped from the room bearing empty dishes. The Storm, which had been quietening down, suddenly broke out with redoubled vigour. A flash of forked lightning and a great clap of thunder close upon each other made little Mr Satterthwaite jump, and before the last echoes of the thunder had died away, a girl came into the room carrying the advertised cheese.

She was tall and dark, and handsome in a sullen fashion of her own. Her likeness to the landlord of the "Bells and Motley" was apparent enough to proclaim her his daughter.

"Good evening, Mary," said Mr Quin, "A stormy night"

She nodded.

"I hate these stormy nights," she muttered.

"You are afraid of thunder, perhaps?" said Mr Satterthwaite kindly.

"Afraid of thunder? Not me! There's little that I'm afraid of. No, but the storm sets them off. Talking, talking, the same thing over and over again, like a lot of parrots. Father begins it. 'It reminds me, this does, of the night poor Captain Harwell...' And so on, and so on." She turned on Mr Quin. "You've heard how he goes on. What's the sense of it? Can't anyone let past things be?"

"A thing is only past when it is done with," said Mr Quin.

"Isn't this done with? Suppose he wanted to disappear? These fine gentlemen do sometimes."

"You think he disappeared of his own free will?"

"Why not? It would make better sense than to suppose a kind-hearted creature like Stephen Grant murdered him. What should he murder him for, I should like to know? Stephen had had a drop too much one day and spoke to him saucy like, and got the sack for it. But what of it? He got another place just as good. Is that a reason to murder a man in cold blood?"

"But surely," said Mr Satterthwaite, "the police were quite satisfied of his innocence?"

"The police! What do the police matter? When Stephen comes into the bar of an evening, every man looks at him queer like. They don't really believe he murdered Harwell, but they're not sure, and so they look at him sideways and edge away. Nice life for a man, to see people shrink away from you, as though you were something different from the rest of folks. Why won't Father hear of our getting married, Stephen and I? 'You can take your pigs to a better market, my girl. I've nothing against Stephen, but - well, we don't know, do we?'"

She stopped, her breast heaving with the violence of her resentment.

"It's cruel, cruel, that's what it is," she burst out. "Stephen, that wouldn't hurt a fly! And all through life there'll be people who'll think

he did. It's turning him queer and bitter like. I don't wonder, I'm sure. And the more he's like that, the more people think there must have been something in it."

Again she stopped. Her eyes were fixed on Mr Quin's face, as though something in it was drawing this outburst from her.

"Can nothing be done?" said Mr Satterthwaite.

He was genuinely distressed. The thing was, he saw, inevitable. The very vagueness and unsatisfactoriness of the evidence against Stephen Grant made it the more difficult for him to disprove the accusation.

The girl whirled round on him.

"Nothing but the truth can help him," she cried. "If Captain Harwell were to be found, if he was to come back. If the true rights of it were only known -"

She broke off with something very like a sob, and hurried quickly from the room.

"A fine-looking girl," said Mr Satterthwaite. "A sad case altogether. I wish - I very much wish that something could be done about it."

His kind heart was troubled.

"We are doing what we can," said Mr Quin. "There is still nearly half an hour before your car can be ready."

Mr Satterthwaite stared at him.

"You think we can come at the truth just by - talking it over like this?"

"You have seen much of life," said Mr Quin gravely. "More than most people."

"Life has passed me by," said Mr Satterthwaite bitterly.

"But in so doing has sharpened your vision. Where others are blind you can see."

"It is true," said Mr Satterthwaite. "I am a great observer."

He plumed himself complacently. The moment of bitterness was passed.

"I look at it like this," he said after a minute or two. "To get at the cause for a thing, we must study the effect."

"Very good," said Mr Quin approvingly.

"The effect in this case is that Miss Le Couteau - Mrs Harwell, I mean, is a wife and yet not a wife. She is not free - she cannot marry again. And look at it as we will, we see Richard Harwell as a sinister figure, a man from nowhere with a mysterious past."

"I agree," said Mr Quin. "You see what all are bound to see, what cannot be missed, Captain Harwell in the limelight, a suspicious figure."

Mr Satterthwaite looked at him doubtfully. The words seemed somehow to suggest a faintly different picture to his mind.

"We have studied the effect," he said. "Or call it the result. We can now pass -"

Mr Quin interrupted him.

"You have not touched on the result on the strictly material side."

"You are right," said Mr Satterthwaite, after a moment or two for consideration. "One should do the thing thoroughly. Let us say then that the result of the tragedy is that Mrs Harwell is a wife and not a wife, unable to marry again, that Mr Cyrus Bradburn has been able to buy Ashley Grange and its contents for - sixty thousand pounds, was it? - and that somebody in Essex has been able to secure John Mathias as a gardener! For all that we do not suspect 'somebody in Essex' or Mr Cyrus Bradburn of having engineered the disappearance of Captain Harwell."

"You are sarcastic," said Mr Quin.

Mr Satterthwaite looked sharply at him.

"But surely you agree -?"

"Oh! I agree," said Mr Quin. "The idea is absurd. What next?"

"Let us imagine ourselves back on the fatal day. The disappearance has taken place, let us say, this very morning."

"No, no," said Mr Quin, smiling. "Since, in our imagination, at least, we have power over time, let us turn it the other way. Let us say the disappearance of Captain Harwell took place a hundred years ago. That we, in the year two thousand and twenty-five are looking back."

"You are a strange man," said Mr Satterthwaite slowly. "You believe in the past, not the present. Why?"

"You used, not long ago, the word atmosphere. There is no atmosphere in the present."

"That is true, perhaps," said Mr Satterthwaite thoughtfully. "Yes, it is true. The present is apt to be - parochial"

"A good word," said Mr Quin.

Mr Satterthwaite gave a funny little bow.

"You are too kind," he said.

"Let us take - not this present year, that would be too difficult, but say - last year," continued the other. "Sum it up for me, you who have the gift of the neat phrase."

Mr Satterthwaite thought for a minute. He was jealous of his reputation.

"A hundred years ago we have the age of powder and patches," he said. "Shall we say that 1924 was the age of Crossword Puzzles and Cat Burglars?"

"Very good," approved Mr Quin. "You mean that nationally, not internationally, I presume?"

"As to Crossword Puzzles, I must confess that I do not know," said Mr Satterthwaite. "But the Cat Burglar had a great innings on the Continent. You remember that series of famous thefts from French chBteaux? It is surmised that one man alone could not have done it. The most miraculous feats were performed to gain admission. There was a theory that a troupe of acrobats were concerned - the Clondinis. I once saw their performance - truly masterly. A mother, son and daughter. They vanished from the stage in a rather mysterious fashion. But we are wandering from our subject."

"Not very far," said Mr Quin. "Only across the Channel."

"Where the French ladies will not wet their toes, according to our worthy host," said Mr Satterthwaite, laughing.

There was a pause. It seemed somehow significant.

"Why did he disappear?" cried Mr Satterthwaite. "Why? Why? It is incredible, a kind of conjuring trick."

"Yes," said Mr Quin. "A conjuring trick. That describes it exactly. Atmosphere again, you see. And wherein does the essence of a conjuring trick lie?"

"The quickness of the hand deceives the eye," quoted Mr Satterthwaite glibly.

"That is everything, is it not? To deceive the eye? Sometimes by the quickness of the hand, sometimes - by other means. There are many devices, the pistol shot, the waving of a red handkerchief, something that seems important, but in reality is not. The eye is diverted from the real business, it is caught by the spectacular action that means nothing - nothing at all."

Mr Satterthwaite leant forward, his eyes shining.

"There is something in that. It is an idea."

He went on softly. "The pistol shot. What was the pistol shot in the conjuring trick we were discussing? What is the spectacular moment that holds the imagination?"

He drew in his breath sharply.

"The disappearance," breathed Mr Satterthwaite. "Take that away, and it leaves nothing."

"Nothing? Suppose things took the same course without that dramatic gesture?"

"You mean - supposing Miss Le Couteau were still to sell Ashley Grange and leave - for no reason?"

"Well."

"Well, why not? It would have aroused talk, I suppose, there would have been a lot of interest displayed in the value of the contents in - Ah! Wait!"

He was silent a minute, then burst out.

"You are right, there is too much limelight, the limelight on Captain Harwell. And because of that, she has been in shadow. Miss Le Couteau! Everyone asking "Who was Captain Harwell? Where did he come from?" But because she is the injured party, no one makes inquiries about her. Was she really a French Canadian? Were those wonderful heirlooms really handed down to her? You were right when you said just now that we had not wandered far from our subject - only across the Channel. Those so-called heirlooms were stolen from the French chвteaux, most of them valuable objets d'art, and in consequence difficult to dispose of. She buys the house - for a mere song, probably. Settles down there and pays a good sum to an irreproachable English woman to chaperone her. Then he comes. The plot is laid beforehand. The marriage, the disappearance and the nine days' wonder! What more natural than that a brokenhearted woman should want to sell everything that reminds her of her past happiness. The American is a connoisseur, the things are genuine and beautiful, some of them beyond price. He makes an offer, she accepts it. She leaves the neighbourhood, a sad and tragic figure. The great coup has come off. The eye of the public has been

deceived by the quickness of the hand and the spectacular nature of the trick."

Mr Satterthwaite paused, flushed with triumph.

"But for you, I should never have seen it," he said with sudden humility. "You have a most curious effect upon me. One says things so often without even seeing what they really mean. You have the knack of showing one. But it is still not quite clear to me. It must have been most difficult for Harwell to disappear as he did. After all, the police all over England were looking for him."

"They were probably looking," said Mr Quin, "all over England."

"It would have been simplest to remain hidden at the Grange," mused Mr Satterthwaite. "If it could be managed."

"He was, I think, very near the Grange," said Mr Quin.

His look of significance was not lost on Mr Satterthwaite.

"Mathias' cottage?" he exclaimed. "But the police must have searched it?"

"Repeatedly, I should imagine," said Mr Quin.

"Mathias," said Mr Satterthwaite, frowning.

"And Mrs Mathias," said Mr Quin.

Mr Satterthwaite stared hard at him.

"If that gang was really the Clondinis," he said dreamily, "there were three of them in it. The two young ones were Harwell and Eleanor Le Couteau. The mother now, was she Mrs Mathias? But in that case..."

"Mathias suffered from rheumatism, did he not?" said Mr Quin innocently.

"Oh!" cried Mr Satterthwaite. "I have it. But could it be done? I believe it could. Listen. Mathias was there a month. During that time, Harwell and Eleanor were away for a fortnight on a honeymoon. For the fortnight before the wedding, they were supposedly in town. A clever man could have doubled the parts of Harwell and Mathias. When Harwell was at Kirtlington Mallet, Mathias was conveniently laid up with rheumatism, with Mrs Mathias to sustain the fiction. Her part was very necessary. Without her, someone might have suspected the truth. As you say, Harwell was hidden in Mathias' cottage. He was Mathias. When at last the plans matured, and Ashley Grange was sold, he and his wife gave out that they were taking a place in Essex. Exit John Mathias and his wife - for ever."

There was a knock at the coffee-room door, and Masters entered. "The car is at the door, sir," he said.

Mr Satterthwaite rose. So did Mr Quin, who went across to the window, pulling the curtains. A beam of moonlight streamed into the room.

"The storm is over," he said.

Mr Satterthwaite was pulling on his gloves.

"The Commissioner is dining with me next week," he said importantly. "I shall put my theory - ah! - before him."

"It will be easily proved or disproved," said Mr Quin." A comparison of the objects at Ashley Grange with a list supplied by the French police -!"

"Just so," said Mr Satterthwaite. "Rather hard luck on Mr Bradburn, but, well -"

"He can, I believe, stand the loss," said Mr Quin,

Mr Satterthwaite held out his hand.

"Good-bye," he said. "I cannot tell you how much I have appreciated this unexpected meeting. You are leaving here tomorrow, I think you said?"

"Possibly tonight. My business here is done... I come and go, you know."

Mr Satterthwaite remembered hearing those same words earlier in the evening. Rather curious.

He went out to the car and the waiting masters. From the open door into the bar the landlord's voice floated out, rich and complacent.

"A dark mystery," he was saying. "A dark mystery, that's what it is."

But he did not use the word "dark." The word he used suggested quite a different colour. Mr William Jones was a man of discrimination who suited his adjectives to his company. The company in the bar liked their adjectives full flavoured.

Mr Satterthwaite reclined luxuriously in the comfortable limousine. His breast was swelled with triumph. He saw the girl Mary come out on the steps and stand under the creaking Inn sign.

"She little knows," said Mr Satterthwaite to himself. "She little knows what I am going to do!"

The sign of the "Bells and Motley" swayed gently in the wind.

Chapter 4

THE SIGN IN THE SKY

The Judge was finishing his charge to the jury.

"Now, gentlemen, I have almost finished what I want to say to you. There is evidence for you to consider as to whether this case is plainly made out against this man so that you may say he is guilty of the murder of Vivien Barnaby. You have had the evidence of the

servants as to the time the shot was fired. They have one and all agreed upon it. You have had the evidence of the letter written to the defendant by Vivien Barnaby on the morning of that same day, Friday, September 13th - a letter which the defence has not attempted to deny. You have had evidence that the prisoner first denied having been at Deering Hill, and later, after evidence had been given by the police, admitted he had. You will draw your own conclusions from that denial. This is not a case of direct evidence. You will have to come to your own conclusions on the subject of motive - of means, of opportunity. The contention of the defence is that some person unknown entered the music room after the defendant had left it, and shot Vivien Barnaby with the gun which, by strange forgetfulness, the defendant had left behind him. You have heard the defendant's story of the reason it took him half an hour to get home. If you disbelieve the defendant's story and are satisfied, beyond any reasonable doubt, that the defendant did, upon Friday, September 13th, discharge his gun at close quarters to Vivien Barnaby's head with intent to kill her, then, gentlemen, your verdict must be Guilty. If, on the other hand, you have any reasonable doubt, it is your duty to acquit the prisoner. I will now ask you to retire to your room and consider and let me know when you have arrived at a conclusion."

The jury were absent a little under half an hour. They returned the verdict that to everyone had seemed a foregone conclusion, the verdict of "Guilty."

Mr Satterthwaite left the court after hearing the verdict, with a thoughtful frown on his face.

A mere murder trial as such did not attract him. He was of too fastidious a temperament to find interest in the sordid details of the average crime. But the Wylde case had been different. Young Martin Wylde was what is termed a gentleman - and the victim, Sir George Barnaby's young wife, had been personally known to the elderly gentleman.

He was thinking of all this as he walked up Holborn, and then plunged into a tangle of mean streets leading in the direction of Soho. In one of these streets there was a small restaurant, known only to the few, of whom Mr Satterthwaite was one. It was not cheap - it was, on the contrary, exceedingly expensive, since it catered exclusively for the palate of the jaded gourmet. It was quiet - no strains of jazz were allowed to disturb the hushed atmosphere - it was rather dark, waiters appeared soft-footed out of the twilight, bearing silver dishes with the air of participating in some holy rite. The name of the restaurant was Arlecchino.

Still thoughtful, Mr Satterthwaite turned into the Arlecchino and made for his favourite table in a recess in the far corner. Owing to the twilight before mentioned, it was not until he was quite close to it that he saw it was already occupied by a tall dark man who sat with his face in shadow, and with a play of colour from a stained window turning his sober garb into a kind of riotous motley.

Mr Satterthwaite would have turned back, but just at that moment the stranger moved slightly and the other recognised him.

"God bless my soul," said Mr Satterthwaite, who was given to old-fashioned expressions. "Why, it's Mr Quin!"

Three times before he had met Mr Quin, and each time the meeting had resulted in something a little out of the ordinary. A strange person, this Mr Quin, with a knack of showing you the things you had known all along in a totally different light.

At once Mr Satterthwaite felt excited - pleasurably excited. His rφle was that of the looker-on, and he knew it, but sometimes when in the company of Mr Quin he had the illusion of being an actor - and the principal actor at that.

"This is very pleasant," he said, beaming all over his dried-up little face. "Very pleasant indeed. You've no objection to my joining you, I hope?"

"I shall be delighted," said Mr Quin. "As you see, I have not yet begun my meal."

A deferential head waiter hovered up out of the shadows. Mr Satterthwaite, as befitted a man with a seasoned palate, gave his whole mind to the task of selection. In a few minutes, the head waiter, a slight smile of approbation on his lips, retired, and a young satellite began his ministrations. Mr Satterthwaite turned to Mr Quin.

"I have just come from the Old Bailey," he began. "A sad business, I thought."

"He was found guilty?" said Mr Quin.

"Yes, the jury were out only half an hour."

Mr Quin bowed his head.

"An inevitable result - on the evidence," he said.

"And yet," began Mr Satterthwaite - and stopped.

Mr Quin finished the sentence for him.

"And yet your sympathies were with the accused? Is that what you were going to say?"

"I suppose it was. Martin Wylde is a nice-looking young fellow - one can hardly believe it of him. All the same, there have been a good many nice-looking young fellows lately who have turned out to be murderers of a particularly cold-blooded and repellent type."

"Too many," said Mr Quin quietly.

"I beg your pardon?" said Mr Satterthwaite, slightly startled.

"Too many for Martin Wylde. There has been a tendency from the beginning to regard this as just one more of a series of the same type of crime - a man seeking to free himself from one woman in order to marry another."

"Well," said Mr Satterthwaite doubtfully. "On the evidence -"

"Ah!" said Mr Quin quickly. "I am afraid I have not followed all the evidence."

Mr Satterthwaite's self-confidence came back to him with a rush. He felt a sudden sense of power. He was tempted to be consciously dramatic.

"Let me try and show it to you. I have met the Barnabys, you understand. I know the peculiar circumstances. With me, you will come behind the scenes - you will see the thing from inside."

Mr Quin leant forward with his quick encouraging smile.

"If anyone can show me that, it will be Mr Satterthwaite," he murmured.

Mr Satterthwaite gripped the table with both hands. He was uplifted, carried out of himself. For the moment, he was an artist pure and simple - an artist whose medium was words.

Swiftly, with a dozen broad strokes, he etched in the picture of life at Deering Hill. Sir George Barnaby, elderly, obese, purse-proud. A man perpetually fussing over the little things of life. A man who wound up his clocks every Friday afternoon, and who paid his own house-keeping books every Tuesday morning, and who always saw to the locking of his own front door every night. A careful man.

And from Sir George he went on to Lady Barnaby. Here his touch was gentler, but none the less sure. He had seen her but once, but his impression of her was definite and lasting. A vivid defiant creature - pitifully young. A trapped child, that was how he described her.

"She hated him, you understand? She had married him before she knew what she was doing. And now -"

She was desperate - that was how he put it. Turning this way and that. She had no money of her own, she was entirely dependent on this elderly husband. But all the same she was a creature at bay - still unsure of her own powers, with a beauty that was as yet more promise than actuality. And she was greedy. Mr Satterthwaite affirmed that definitely. Side by side with defiance there ran a greedy streak - a clasping and a clutching at life.

"I never met Martin Wylde," continued Mr Satterthwaite. "But I heard of him. He lived less than a mile away. Farming, that was his line. And she took an interest in farming - or pretended to. If you ask me, it was pretending. I think that she saw in him her only way of escape - and she grabbed at him, greedily, like a child might have done. Well, there could only be one end to that. We know what that end was, because the letters were read out in court. He kept her letters - she didn't keep his, but from the text of hers one can see that he was cooling off. He admits as much. There was the other girl. She also lived in the village of Deering Vale. Her father was the doctor there. You saw her in court, perhaps? No, I remember, you were not there, you said. I shall have to describe her to you. A fair girl - very fair. Gentle. Perhaps - yes, perhaps a tiny bit stupid. But very restful, you know. And loyal. Above all, loyal."

He looked at Mr Quin for encouragement, and Mr Quin gave it him by a slow appreciative smile. Mr Satterthwaite went on.

"You heard that last letter read - you must have seen it, in the papers, I mean. The one written on the morning of Friday, September 13th. It was full of desperate reproaches and vague threats, and it ended by begging Martin Wylde to come to Deering Hill that same evening at six o'clock. 'I will leave the side door open for you, so that no one need know you have been here. I shall be in the music room.' It was sent by hand."

Mr Satterthwaite paused for a minute or two.

"When he was first arrested, you remember, Martin Wylde denied that he had been to the house at all that evening. His statement was that he had taken his gun and gone out shooting in the woods. But when the police brought forward their evidence, that statement broke down. They had found his finger-prints, you remember, both on the wood of the side door and on one of the two cocktail glasses on the table in the music room. He admitted then that he had come to see Lady Barnaby, that they had had a stormy interview, but that it had ended in his having managed to soothe her down. He swore that he left his gun outside leaning against the wall near the door, and that he left Lady Barnaby alive and well, the time being then a minute or two after a quarter past six. He went straight home, he says. But evidence was called to show that he did not reach his farm until a quarter to seven, and as I have just mentioned, it is barely a mile away. It would not take half an hour to get there. He forgot all about his gun, he declares. Not a very likely statement - and yet -"

"And yet?" queried Mr Quin.

"Well," said Mr Satterthwaite slowly, "it's a possible one, isn't it? Counsel ridiculed the supposition, of course, but I think he was wrong. You see, I've known a good many young men, and these emotional scenes upset them very much - especially the dark, nervous type like Martin Wylde. Women now, can go through a scene like that and feel positively better for it afterwards, with all their wits about them. It acts like a safety valve for them, steadies their nerves down and all that. But I can see Martin Wylde going away with his head in a whirl, sick and miserable, and without a thought of the gun he had left leaning up against the wall - He was silent for some minutes before he went on.

"Not that it matters. For the next part is only too clear, unfortunately. It was exactly twenty minutes past six when the shot was heard. All the servants heard it, the cook, the kitchen-maid, the butler, the housemaid and Lady Barnaby's own maid. They came rushing to the music room. She was lying huddled over the arm of her chair. The gun had been discharged close to the back of her head, so that the shot hadn't a chance to scatter. At least two of them penetrated the brain."

He paused again and Mr Quin asked casually.

"The servants gave evidence, I suppose?"

Mr Satterthwaite nodded.

"Yes. The butler got there a second or two before the others, but their evidence was practically a repetition of each other's."

"So they all gave evidence," said Mr Quin musingly. "There were no exceptions?"

"Now I remember it," said Mr Satterthwaite, "the housemaid was only called at the inquest. She's gone to Canada since, I believe."

"I see," said Mr Quin.

There was a silence, and somehow the air of the little restaurant seemed to be charged with an uneasy feeling. Mr Satterthwaite felt suddenly as though he were on the defensive.

"Why shouldn't she?" he said abruptly.

"Why should she?" said Mr Quin with a very slight shrug of the shoulders.

Somehow, the question annoyed Mr Satterthwaite. He wanted to shy away from it - to get back on familiar ground.

"There couldn't be much doubt who fired the shot. As a matter of fact the servants seemed to have lost their heads a bit. There was no one in the house to take charge. It was some minutes before anyone thought of ringing up the police, and when they did so they found that the telephone was out of order."

"Oh!" said Mr Quin. "The telephone was out of order."

"It was," said Mr Satterthwaite - and was struck suddenly by the feeling that he had said something tremendously important. "It

might, of course, have been done on purpose," he said slowly. "But there seems no point in that. Death was practically instantaneous."

Mr Quin said nothing, and Mr Satterthwaite felt that his explanation was unsatisfactory.

"There was absolutely no one to suspect but young Wylde," he went on. "By his own account, even, he was only out of the house three minutes before the shot was fired. And who else could have fired it? Sir George was at a bridge party a few houses away. He left there at half-past six and was met just outside the gate by a servant bringing him the news. The last rubber finished at half-past six exactly - no doubt about that. Then there was Sir George's secretary, Henry Thompson. He was in London that day, and actually at a business meeting at the moment the shot was fired. Finally, there is Sylvia Dale who, after all, had a perfectly good motive, impossible as it seems that she should have had anything to do with such a crime. She was at the station of Deering Vale seeing a friend off by the 6.28 train. That lets her out. Then the servants. What earthly motive could any one of them have? Besides they all arrived on the spot practically simultaneously. No, it must have been Martin Wylde."

But he said it in a dissatisfied kind of voice.

They went on with their lunch. Mr Quin was not in a talkative mood, and Mr Satterthwaite had said all he had to say. But the silence was not a barren one. It was filled with the growing dissatisfaction of Mr Satterthwaite, heightened and fostered in some strange way by the mere acquiescence of the other man.

Mr Satterthwaite suddenly put down his knife and fork with a clatter.

"Supposing that that young man is really innocent," he said. "he's going to be hanged."

He looked very startled and upset about it. And still Mr Quin said nothing.

"It's not as though -" began Mr Satterthwaite, and stopped. "Why shouldn't the woman go to Canada?" he ended inconsequently.

Mr Quin shook his head.

"I don't even know what part of Canada she went to," continued Mr Satterthwaite peevishly.

"Could you find out?" suggested the other.

"I suppose I could. The butler, now. He'd know. Or possibly Thompson, the secretary."

He paused again. When he resumed speech, his voice sounded almost pleading.

"It's not as though it were anything to do with me?"

"That a young man is going to be hanged in a little over three weeks?"

"Well, yes - if you put it that way, I suppose. Yes, I see what you mean. Life and death. And that poor girl, too. It's not that I'm hard-headed - but, after all - what good will it do? Isn't the whole thing rather fantastic? Even if I found out where the woman's gone in Canada - why, it would probably mean that I should have to go out there myself." Mr Satterthwaite looked seriously upset. "And I was thinking of going to the Riviera next week," he said pathetically.

And his glance towards Mr Quin said as plainly as it could be said, "Do let me off, won't you?"

"You have never been to Canada?"

"Never."

"A very interesting country."

Mr Satterthwaite looked at him undecidedly. "You think I ought to go?"

Mr Quin leaned back in his chair and lighted a cigarette. Between puffs of smoke, he spoke deliberately.

"You are, I believe, a rich man, Mr Satterthwaite. Not a millionaire, but a man able to indulge a hobby without counting the expense. You have looked on at the dramas of other people. Have you never contemplated stepping in and playing a part? Have you never seen yourself for a minute as the arbiter of other peoples' destinies - standing in the centre of the stage with life and death in your hands?"

Mr Satterthwaite leant forward. The old eagerness surged over him.

"You mean - if I go on this wild-goose chase to Canada -?"

Mr Quin smiled.

"Oh! It was your suggestion, going to Canada, not mine," he said lightly.

"You can't put me off like that," said Mr Satterthwaite earnestly. "Whenever I have come across you -" he stopped. "Well?"

"There is something about you I do not understand. Perhaps I never shall. The last time I met you -"

"On Midsummer's Eve."

Mr Satterthwaite was startled, as though the words held a clue that he did not quite understand.

"Was it Midsummer's Eve?" he asked confusedly.

"Yes. But let us not dwell on that. It is unimportant, is it not?"

"Since you say so," said Mr Satterthwaite courteously. He felt that elusive clue slipping through his fingers. "When I come back from Canada -" he paused a little awkwardly - "I - I - should much like to see you again."

"I am afraid I have no fixed address for the moment," said Mr Quin regretfully. "But I often come to this place. If you also frequent it, we shall no doubt meet before very long."

They parted pleasantly.

Mr Satterthwaite was very excited. He hurried round to Cook's and inquired about boat sailings. Then he rang up Deering Hill. The voice of a butler, suave and deferential, answered him.

"My name is Satterthwaite. I am speaking for a - er - firm of solicitors. I wished to make a few inquiries about a young woman who was recently housemaid in your establishment."

"Would that be Louisa, sir? Louisa Bullard?"

"That is the name," said Mr Satterthwaite, very pleased to be told it.

"I regret she is not in this country, sir. She went to Canada six months ago."

"Can you give me her present address?"

The butler was afraid he couldn't. It was a place in the mountains she had gone to - a Scotch name - ah! Banff, that was it. Some of the other young women in the house had been expecting to hear from her, but she had never written or given them any address.

Mr Satterthwaite thanked him and rang off. He was still undaunted. The adventurous spirit was strong in his breast.

He would go to Banff. If this Louisa Bullard was there, he would track her down somehow or other.

To his own surprise, he enjoyed the trip greatly. It was many years since he had taken a long sea voyage. The Riviera, Le Touquet and Deauville, and Scotland had been his usual round. The feeling that he was setting off on an impossible mission added a secret zest to his journey. What an utter fool these fellow travellers of his would think him did they but know the object of his quest! But then - they were not acquainted with Mr Quin.

In Banff he found his objective easily attained. Louisa Bullard was employed in the large Hotel there. Twelve hours after his arrival he was standing face to face with her.

She was a woman of about thirty-five, anaemic looking, but with a strong frame. She had pale brown hair inclined to curl, and a pair of honest brown eyes. She was, he thought, slightly stupid, but very trustworthy.

She accepted quite readily his statement that he had been asked to collect a few further facts from her about the tragedy at Deering Hill.

"I saw in the paper that Mr Martin Wylde had been convicted, sir. Very sad, it is, too."

She seemed, however, to have no doubt as to his guilt. "A nice young gentleman gone wrong. But though I wouldn't speak ill of the dead, it was her ladyship what led him on. Wouldn't leave him alone, she

wouldn't. Well, they've both got their punishment. There's a text used to hang on my wall when I was a child, 'God is not mocked,' and it's very true. I knew something was going to happen that very evening - and sure enough it did."

"How was that?" said Mr Satterthwaite.

"I was in my room, sir, changing my dress, and I happened to glance out of the window. There was a train going along, and the white smoke of it rose up in the air, and if you'll believe me it formed itself into the sign of a gigantic hand. A great white hand against the crimson of the sky. The fingers were crooked like, as though they were reaching out for something. It fair gave me a turn. 'Did you ever now?' I said to myself. 'That's a sign of something coming -' and sure enough at that very minute I heard the shot. "It's come," I said to myself, and I rushed downstairs and joined Carrie and the others who were in the hall, and we went into the music room and there she was, shot through the head - and the blood and everything. Horrible! I spoke up, I did, and told Sir George how I'd seen the sign beforehand, but he didn't seem to think much of it. An unlucky day, that was, I'd felt it in my bones from early in the morning. Friday, and the 13th - what could you expect?"

She rambled on. Mr Satterthwaite was patient. Again and again he took her back to the crime, questioning her closely. In the end he was forced to confess defeat. Louisa Bullard had told all she knew, and her story was perfectly simple and straightforward.

Yet he did discover one fact of importance. The post in question had been suggested to her by Mr Thompson, Sir George's secretary. The wages attached were so large that she was tempted, and accepted the job, although it involved her leaving England very hurriedly. A Mr Denman had made all the arrangements this end and had also warned her not to write to her fellow-servants in England, as this might get her into trouble with the immigration authorities, which statement she had accepted in blind faith.

The amount of wages, casually mentioned by her, was indeed so large that Mr Satterthwaite was startled. After some hesitation he made up his mind to approach this Mr Denman.

He found very little difficulty in inducing Mr Denman to tell all he knew. The latter had come across Thompson in London and Thompson had done him a good turn. The secretary had written to him in September saying that for personal reasons Sir George was anxious to get this girl out of England. Could he find her a job? A sum of money had been sent to raise the wages to a high figure.

"Usual trouble, I guess," said Mr Denman, leaning back nonchalantly in his chair. "Seems a nice quiet girl, too."

Mr Satterthwaite did not agree that this was the usual trouble. Louisa Bullard, he was sure, was not a cast-off fancy of Sir George Barnaby's. For some reason it had been vital to get her out of England. But why? And who was at the bottom of it? Sir George himself, working through Thompson? Or the latter working on his own initiative, and dragging in his employer's name?

Still pondering over these questions, Mr Satterthwaite made the return journey. He was cast down and despondent. His journey had done no good.

Suffering under a sense of failure, he made his way to the Arlecchino the day after his return. He hardly expected to be successful the first time, but to his satisfaction the familiar figure was sitting at the table in the recess, and the dark face of Mr Harley Quin smiled a welcome.

"Well," said Mr Satterthwaite as he helped himself to a pat of butter, "you sent me on a nice wild-goose chase."

Mr Quin raised his eyebrows.

"I sent you?" he objected. "It was your own idea entirely."

"Whosever idea it was, it's not succeeded. Louisa Bullard has nothing to tell."

Thereupon Mr Satterthwaite related the details of his conversation with the housemaid and then went on to his interview with Mr Denman. Mr Quin listened in silence.

"In one sense, I was justified," continued Mr Satterthwaite. "She was deliberately got out of the way. But why? I can't see it."

"No?" said Mr Quin, and his voice was, as ever, provocative.

Mr Satterthwaite flushed.

"I daresay you think I might have questioned her more adroitly. I can assure you that I took her over the story again and again. It was not my fault that I did not get what we want."

"Are you sure," said Mr Quin, "that you did not get what you want?"

Mr Satterthwaite looked up at him in astonishment, and met that sad, mocking gaze he knew so well. The little man shook his head, slightly bewildered. There was a silence, and then Mr Quin said, with a total change of manner -

"You gave me a wonderful picture the other day of the people in this business. In a few words you made them stand out as clearly as though they were etched. I wish you would do something of that kind for the place - you left that in shadow."

Mr Satterthwaite was flattered.

"The place? Deering Hill? Well, it's a very ordinary sort of house nowadays. Red brick, you know, and bay windows. Quite hideous outside, but very comfortable inside. Not a very large house. About two acres of ground. They're all much the same, those houses round the links. Built for rich men to live in. The inside of the house is reminiscent of a hotel - the bedrooms are like hotel suites. Baths and hot and cold basins in all the bedrooms and a good many gilded electric-light fittings. All wonderfully comfortable, but not very country-like. You can tell that Deering Vale is only nineteen miles from London."

Mr Quin listened attentively.

"The train service is bad, I have heard," he remarked.

"Oh! I don't know about that," said Mr Satterthwaite, warming to his subject. "I was down there for a bit last summer. I found it quite convenient for town. Of course the trains only go every hour. 48 minutes past the hour from Waterloo - up to 10.48."

"And how long does it take to Deering Vale?"

"Just about three quarters of an hour. 28 minutes past the hour at Deering Vale."

"Of course," said Mr Quin with a gesture of vexation. "I should have remembered. Miss Dale saw someone off by the 6.28 that evening, didn't she?"

Mr Satterthwaite did not reply for a minute or two. His mind had gone back with a rush to his unsolved problem. Presently he said, "I wish you would tell me what you meant just now when you asked me if I was sure I had not got what I wanted?"

It sounded rather complicated, put that way, but Mr Quin made no pretence of not understanding.

"I just wondered if you weren't being a little too exacting. After all, you found out that Louisa Bullard was deliberately got out of the country. That being so, there must be a reason. And the reason must lie in what she said to you."

"Well," said Mr Satterthwaite argumentatively.

"What did she say? If she'd given evidence at the trial, what could she have said?"

"She might have told what she saw," said Mr Quin.

"What did she see?"

"A sign in the sky."

Mr Satterthwaite stared at him.

"Are you thinking of that nonsense? That superstitious notion of its being the hand of God?"

"Perhaps," said Mr Quin, "for all you and I know it may have been the hand of God, you know."

The other was clearly puzzled at the gravity of his manner.

"Nonsense," he said. "She said herself it was the smoke of the train."

"An up train or a down train, I wonder?" murmured Mr Quin.

"Hardly an up train. They go at ten minutes to the hour. It must have been a down train - the 6.28 - no, that won't do. She said the shot came immediately afterwards, and we know the shot was fired at twenty minutes past six. The train couldn't have been ten minutes early."

"Hardly, on that line," agreed Mr Quin.

Mr Satterthwaite was staring ahead of him.

"Perhaps a goods train," he murmured. "But surely, if -"

"There would have been no need to get her out of England. I agree," said Mr Quin.

Mr Satterthwaite gazed at him, fascinated.

"The 6.28," he said slowly. "But if so, if the shot was fired then, why did everyone say it was earlier?"

"Obvious," said Mr Quin. "The clocks must have been wrong."

"All of them?" said Mr Satterthwaite doubtfully. "That's a pretty tall coincidence, you know."

"I wasn't thinking of it as a coincidence," said the other. "I was thinking it was Friday."

"Friday?" said Mr Satterthwaite.

"You did tell me, you know, that Sir George always wound the clocks on a Friday afternoon," said Mr Quin apologetically.

"He put them back ten minutes," said Mr Satterthwaite, almost in a whisper, so awed was he by the discoveries he was making. "Then

he went out to bridge. I think he must have opened the note from his wife to Martin Wylde that morning - yes, decidedly he opened it. He left his bridge party at 6.30, found Martin's gun standing by the side door, and went in and shot her from behind. Then he went out again, threw the gun into the bushes where it was found later, and was apparently just coming out of the neighbour's gate when someone came running to fetch him. But the telephone - what about the telephone? Ah! yes, I see. He disconnected it so that a summons could not be sent to the police that way - they might have noted the time it was received. And Wylde's story works out now. The real time he left was five and twenty minutes past six. Walking slowly, he would reach home about a quarter to seven. Yes, I see it all. Louisa was the only danger with her endless talk about her superstitious fancies. Someone might realise the significance of the train and then - good-bye to that excellent alibi."

"Wonderful," commented Mr Quin.

Mr Satterthwaite turned to him, flushed with success.

"The only thing is - how to proceed now?"

"I should suggest Sylvia Dale," said Mr Quin.

Mr Satterthwaite looked doubtful.

"I mentioned to you," he said, "she seemed to me a little - er - stupid."

"She has a father and brothers who will take the necessary steps."

"That is true," said Mr Satterthwaite, relieved.

A very short time afterwards he was sitting with the girl telling her the story. She listened attentively. She put no questions to him but when he had done she rose.

"I must have a taxi - at once."

"My dear child, what are you going to do?"

"I am going to Sir George Barnaby."

"Impossible. Absolutely the wrong procedure. Allow me -"

He twittered on by her side. But he produced no impression. Sylvia Dale was intent on her own plans. She allowed him to go with her in the taxi, but to all his remonstrances she addressed a deaf ear. She left him in the taxi while she went into Sir George's city office.

It was half an hour later when she came out. She looked exhausted, her fair beauty drooping like a waterless flower. Mr Satterthwaite received her with concern.

"I've won," she murmured, as she leant back with half-closed eyes.

"What?" he was startled, "What did you do? What did you say?"

She sat up a little.

"I told him that Louisa Bullard had been to the police with her story. I told him that the police had made inquiries and that he had been seen going into his own grounds and out again a few minutes after half-past six. I told him that the game was up. He - he went to pieces. I told him that there was still time for him to get away, that the police weren't coming for another hour to arrest him. I told him that if he'd sign a confession that he'd killed Vivien I'd do nothing, but that if he didn't I'd scream and tell the whole building the truth. He was so panicky that he didn't know what he was doing. He signed the paper without realising what he was doing."

She thrust it into his hands.

"Take it - take it. You know what to do with it so that they'll set Martin free."

"He actually signed it," cried Mr Satterthwaite, amazed.

"He is a little stupid, you know," said Sylvia Dale.

"So am I," she added as an afterthought. "That's why I know how stupid people behave. We get rattled, you know, and then we do the wrong thing and are sorry afterwards."

She shivered and Mr Satterthwaite patted her hand.

"You need something to pull you together," he said. "Come, we are close to a very favourite resort of mine - the Arlecchino. Have you ever been there?"

She shook her head.

Mr Satterthwaite stopped the taxi and took the girl into the little restaurant. He made his way to the table in the recess, his heart beating hopefully. But the table was empty.

Sylvia Dale saw the disappointment in his face.

"What is it?" she asked.

"Nothing," said Mr Satterthwaite. "That is, I half expected to see a friend of mine here. It doesn't matter. Some day, I expect, I shall see him again..."

Chapter 5

THE SOUL OF THE CROUPIER

Mr Satterthwaite was enjoying the sunshine on the terrace at Monte Carlo.

Every year regularly on the second Sunday in January, Mr Satterthwaite left England for the Riviera. He was far more punctual than any swallow. In the month of April he returned to England, May and June he spent in London, and had never been known to miss Ascot. He left town after the Eton and Harrow match, paying a few

country house visits before repairing to Deauville or Le Touquet. Shooting parties occupied most of September and October, and he usually spent a couple of months in town to wind up the year. He knew everybody and it may safely be said that everybody knew him.

This morning he was frowning. The blue of the sea was admirable, the gardens were, as always, a delight, but the people disappointed him - he thought them an ill-dressed, shoddy crowd. Some, of course, were gamblers, doomed souls who could not keep away. Those Mr Satterthwaite tolerated. They were a necessary background. But he missed the usual leaven of the elite - his own people.

"It's the exchange," said Mr Satterthwaite gloomily. "All sort of people come here now who could never have afforded it before. And then, of course, I'm getting old... All the young people - the people coming on - they go to these Swiss places."

But there were others that he missed, the well-dressed Barons and Counts of foreign diplomacy, the Grand Dukes and the Royal Princes. The only Royal Prince he had seen so far was working a lift in one of the less well-known hotels. He missed, too, the beautiful and expensive ladies. There was still a few of them, but not nearly as many as there used to be.

Mr Satterthwaite was an earnest student of the drama called Life, but he liked his material to be highly coloured. He felt discouragement sweep over him. Values were changing - and he was too old to change.

It was at that moment that he observed the Countess Czarnova coming towards him.

Mr Satterthwaite had seen the Countess at Monte Carlo for many seasons now. The first time he had seen her she had been in the company of a Grand Duke. On the next occasion she was with an Austrian Baron. On successive years her friends had been of Hebraic extraction, sallow men with hooked noses, wearing rather flamboyant jewellery. For the last year or two she was much seen with very young men, almost boys.

She was walking with a very young man now. Mr Satterthwaite happened to know him, and he was sorry. Franklin Rudge was a young American, a typical product of one of the Middle West States, eager to register impression, crude, but loveable, a curious mixture of native shrewdness and idealism. He was in Monte Carlo with a party of other young Americans of both sexes, all much of the same type. It was their first glimpse of the Old World and they were outspoken in criticism and in appreciation.

On the whole they disliked the English people in the hotel, and the English people disliked them. Mr Satterthwaite, who prided himself on being a cosmopolitan, rather liked them. Their directness and vigour appealed to him, though their occasional solecisms made him shudder.

It occurred to him that the Countess Czarnova was a most unsuitable friend for young Franklin Rudge.

He took off his hat politely as they came abreast of him, and the Countess gave him a charming bow and smile.

She was a very tall woman, superbly made. Her hair was black, so were her eyes, and her eyelashes and eyebrows were more superbly black than any Nature had ever fashioned.

Mr Satterthwaite, who knew far more of feminine secrets than it is good for any man to know, rendered immediate homage to the art with which she was made up. Her complexion appeared to be flawless, of a uniform creamy white.

The very faint shadows under her eyes were most effective. Her mouth was neither crimson nor scarlet, but a subdued wine colour. She was dressed in a very daring creation of black and white and carried a parasol of the shade of pinky red which is most helpful to the complexion.

Franklin Rudge was looking happy and important.

"There goes a young fool," said Mr Satterthwaite to himself. "But I suppose it's no business of mine and anyway he wouldn't listen to me. Well, well, I've bought experience myself in my time."

But he still felt rather worried, because there was a very attractive little American girl in the party, and he was sure that she would not like Franklin Rudge's friendship with the Countess at all.

He was just about to retrace his steps in the opposite direction when he caught sight of the girl in question coming up one of the paths

towards him. She wore a well-cut tailor-made suit with a white muslin shirt waist, she had on good, sensible walking shoes, and carried a guide-book. There are some Americans who pass through Paris and emerge clothed as the Queen of Sheba, but Elizabeth Martin was not one of them. She was "doing Europe" in a stern, conscientious spirit. She had high ideas of culture and art and she was anxious to get as much as possible for her limited store of money.

It is doubtful if Mr Satterthwaite thought of her as either cultured or artistic. To him she merely appeared very young.

"Good morning, Mr Satterthwaite," said Elizabeth. "Have you seen Franklin - Mr Rudge - anywhere about?"

"I saw him just a few minutes ago."

"With his friend the Countess, I suppose," said the girl sharply.

"Er - with the Countess, yes," admitted Mr Satterthwaite.

"That Countess of his doesn't cut any ice with me -" said the girl in a rather high, shrill voice. "Franklin's just crazy about her. Why I can't think."

"She's got a very charming manner, I believe," said Mr Satterthwaite cautiously.

"Do you know her?"

"Slightly."

"I'm right down worried about Franklin," said Miss Martin. "That boy's got a lot of sense as a rule. You'd never think he'd fall for this sort of siren stuff. And he won't hear a thing, he gets madder than a hornet if anyone tries to say a word to him. Tell me, anyway - is she a real Countess?"

"I shouldn't like to say," said Mr Satterthwaite. "She may be."

"That's the real Ha Ha English manner," said Elizabeth with signs of displeasure. "All I can say is that in Sargon Springs - that's our home town, Mr Satterthwaite - that Countess would look a mighty queer bird."

Mr Satterthwaite thought it possible. He forebore to point out that they were not in Sargon Springs but in the principality of Monaco, where the Countess happened to synchronise with her environment a great deal better than Miss Martin did.

He made no answer and Elizabeth went on towards the Casino. Mr Satterthwaite sat on a seat in the sun, and was presently joined by Franklin Rudge.

Rudge was full of enthusiasm.

"I'm enjoying myself," he announced with naпve enthusiasm. "Yes, sir! This is what I call seeing life - rather a different kind of life from what we have in the States."

The elder man turned a thoughtful face to him.

"Life is lived very much the same everywhere," he said rather wearily. "It wears different clothes - that's all."

Franklin Rudge stared.

"I don't get you."

"No," said Mr Satterthwaite. "That's because you've got a long way to travel yet. But I apologise. No elderly man should permit himself to get into the habit of preaching."

"Oh! That's all right," Rudge laughed, displaying the beautiful teeth of all his countrymen. "I don't say, mind you, that I'm not disappointed in the Casino. I thought the gambling would be different - something much more feverish. It seems just rather dull and sordid to me."

"Gambling is life and death to the gambler, but it has no great spectacular value," said Mr Satterthwaite. "It is more exciting to read about than to see."

The young man nodded his agreement.

"You're by way of being rather a big bug socially, aren't you?" he asked with a diffident candour that made it impossible to take offence. "I mean, you know all the Duchesses and Earls and Countesses and things."

"A good many of them," said Mr Satterthwaite. "And also the Jews and the Portuguese and the Greeks and the Argentines."

"Eh?" said Mr Rudge.

"I was just explaining," said Mr Satterthwaite, "that I move in English society."

Franklin Rudge meditated for a moment or two.

"You know the Countess Czarnova, don't you?" he said at length.

"Slightly," said Mr Satterthwaite, making the same answer he had made to Elizabeth.

"Now there's a woman whom it's been very interesting to meet. One's inclined to think that the aristocracy of Europe is played out and effkte. That may be true of the men, but the women are different. Isn't it a pleasure to meet an exquisite creature like the Countess? Witty, charming, intelligent, generations of civilisation behind her, an aristocrat to her finger-tips!"

"Is she?" asked Mr Satterthwaite.

"Well, isn't she? You know what her family are?"

"No," said Mr Satterthwaite. "I'm afraid I know very little about her."

"She was a Radzynski," he explained Franklin Rudge. "One of the oldest families in Hungary. She's had the most extraordinary life. You know that great rope of pearls she wears?"

Mr Satterthwaite nodded.

"That was given her by the King of Bosnia. She smuggled some secret papers out of the kingdom for him."

"I heard," said Mr Satterthwaite, "that the pearls had been given her by the King of Bosnia."

The fact was indeed a matter of common gossip, it being reported that the lady had been a cher amie of His Majesty's in days gone by.

"Now I'll tell you something more."

Mr Satterthwaite listened, and the more he listened the more he admired the fertile imagination of the Countess Czarnova. No vulgar "siren stuff" (as Elizabeth Martin had put it) for her. The young man was shrewd enough in that way, clean living and idealistic. No, the Countess moved austerely through a labyrinth of diplomatic intrigues. She had enemies, detractors - naturally! It was a glimpse, so the young American was made to feel, into the life of the old regime with the Countess as the central figure, aloof, aristocratic, the friend of counsellors and princes, a figure to inspire romantic devotion.

"And she's had any amount to contend against," ended the young man warmly. "It's an extraordinary thing but she's never found a

woman who would be a real friend to her. Women have been against her all her life."

"Probably," said Mr Satterthwaite.

"Don't you call it a scandalous thing?" demanded Rudge hotly.

"N-no," said Mr Satterthwaite thoughtfully. "I don't know that I do. Women have got their own standards, you know. It's no good our mixing ourselves up in their affairs. They must run their own show."

"I don't agree with you," said Rudge earnestly. "It's one of the worst things in the world today, the unkindness of woman to woman. You know Elizabeth Martin? Now she agrees with me in theory absolutely. We've often discussed it together. She's only a kid, but her ideas are all right. But the moment it comes to a practical test - why, she's as bad as any of them. Got a real down on the Countess without knowing a darned thing about her, and won't listen when I try to tell her things. It's all wrong, Mr Satterthwaite. I believe in democracy - and - what's that but brotherhood between men and sisterhood between women?"

He paused earnestly. Mr Satterthwaite tried to think of any circumstances in which a sisterly feeling might arise between the Countess and Elizabeth Martin and failed.

"Now the Countess, on the other hand," went on Rudge, "admires Elizabeth immensely, and thinks her charming in every way. Now what does that show?"

"It shows," said Mr Satterthwaite dryly, "that the Countess has lived a considerable time longer than Miss Martin has."

Franklin Rudge went off unexpectedly at a tangent.

"Do you know how old she is? She told me. Rather sporting of her. I should have guessed her to be twenty-nine, but she told me of her own accord that she was thirty-five. She doesn't look it, does she?"

Mr Satterthwaite, whose private estimate of the lady's age was between forty-five and forty-nine, merely raised his eyebrows.

"I should caution you against believing all you are told at Monte Carlo," he murmured.

He had enough experience to know the futility of arguing with the lad. Franklin Rudge was at a pitch of white hot chivalry when he would have disbelieved any statement that was not backed with authoritative proof.

"Here is the Countess," said the boy, rising.

She came up to them with the languid grace that so became her. Presently they all three sat down together. She was very charming to Mr Satterthwaite, but in rather an aloof manner. She deferred to him prettily, asking his opinion, and treating him as an authority on the Riviera.

The whole thing was cleverly managed. Very few minutes had elapsed before Franklin Rudge found himself gracefully but

unmistakably dismissed, and the Countess and Mr Satterthwaite were left tкte-a-tкte.

She put down her parasol and began drawing patterns with it in the dust.

"You are interested in that nice American boy, Mr Satterthwaite, are you not?"

Her voice was low with a caressing note in it.

"He's a nice young fellow," said Mr Satterthwaite, non-committally.

"I find him sympathetic, yes," said the Countess reflectively. "I have told him much of my life."

"Indeed," said Mr Satterthwaite.

"Details such as I have told to few others," she continued dreamily. "I have had an extraordinary life, Mr Satterthwaite. Few would credit the amazing things that have happened to me."

Mr Satterthwaite was shrewd enough to penetrate her meaning. After all, the stories that she had told to Franklin Rudge might be the truth. It was extremely unlikely, and in the last degree improbable, but it was possible... No one could definitely say, "That is not so -"

He did not reply, and the Countess continued to look out dreamily across the bay.

And suddenly Mr Satterthwaite had a strange and new impression of her. He saw her no longer as a harpy, but as a desperate creature at bay, fighting tooth and nail. He stole a sideways glance at her. The parasol was down, he could see the little haggard lines at the corners of her eyes. In one temple a pulse was beating.

It flowed through him again and again - that increasing certitude. She was a creature desperate and driven. She would be merciless to him or to anyone who stood between her and Franklin Rudge. But he still felt he hadn't got the hang of the situation. Clearly she had plenty of money. She was always beautifully dressed, and her jewels were marvellous. There could be no real urgency of that kind. Was it love? Women of her age did, he well knew, fall in love with boys. It might be that. There was, he felt sure, something out of the common about the situation.

Her tкte-a-tкte with him was, he recognised, a throwing down of the gauntlet. She had singled him out as her chief enemy. He felt sure that she hoped to goad him into speaking slightingly of her to Franklin Rudge. Mr Satterthwaite smiled to himself. He was too old a bird for that. He knew when it was wise to hold one's tongue.

He watched her that night in the Cercle Privй, as she tried her fortunes at roulette.

Again and again she staked, only to see her stake swept away. She bore her losses well, with the stoical sang froid of the old habituй. She staked en plein once or twice, put the maximum on red, won a little on the middle dozen and then lost it again, finally she backed

manquй six times and lost every time. Then with a little graceful shrug of the shoulders she turned away.

She was looking unusually striking in a dress of gold tissue with an underlying note of green. The famous Bosnian pearls were looped round her neck and long pearl earrings hung from her ears.

Mr Satterthwaite heard two men near him appraise her.

"The Czarnova," said one, "she wears well, does she not? The Crown jewels of Bosnia look fine on her."

The other, a small Jewish-looking man, stared curiously after her.

"So those are the pearls of Bosnia, are they?" he asked. "En veritй. That is odd."

He chuckled softly to himself.

Mr Satterthwaite missed hearing more, for at the moment he turned his head and was overjoyed to recognise an old friend.

"My dear Mr Quin." He shook him warmly by the hand. "The last place I should ever have dreamed of seeing you."

Mr Quin smiled, his dark attractive face lighting up.

"It should not surprise you," he said. "It is Carnival time. I am often here in Carnival time."

"Really? Well, this is a great pleasure. Are you anxious to remain in the rooms? I find them rather warm."

"It will be pleasanter outside," agreed the other. "We will walk in the gardens."

The air outside was sharp, but not chill. Both men drew deep breaths.

"That is better," said Mr Satterthwaite.

"Much better," agreed Mr Quin. "And we can talk freely. I am sure that there is much that you want to tell me."

"There is indeed."

Speaking eagerly, Mr Satterthwaite unfolded his perplexities. As usual he took pride in his power of conveying atmosphere. The Countess, young Franklin, uncompromising Elizabeth - he sketched them all in with a deft touch.

"You have changed since I first knew you," said Mi. Quin, smiling, when the recital was over.

"In what way?"

"You were content then to look on at the drama that life offered. Now - you want to take part - to act."

"It is true," confessed Mr Satterthwaite. "But in this case I do not know what to do. It is all very perplexing. Perhaps -" he hesitated. "Perhaps you will help me?"

"With pleasure," said Mr Quin. "We will see what we can do."

Mr Satterthwaite had an odd sense of comfort and reliance.

The following day he introduced Franklin Rudge and Elizabeth Martin to his friend Mr Harley Quin. He was pleased to see that they got on together. The Countess was not mentioned, but at lunch time he heard news that aroused his attention.

"Mirabelle is arriving in Monte this evening," he confided excitedly to Mr Quin.

"The Parisian stage favourite?"

"Yes. I daresay you know - it's common property - she is the King of Bosnia's latest craze. He has showered jewels on her, I believe. They say she is the most exacting and extravagant woman in Paris."

"It should be interesting to see her and the Countess Czarnova meet tonight."

"Exactly what I thought."

Mirabelle was a tall, thin creature with a wonderful head of dyed fair hair. Her complexion was a pale mauve with orange lips. She was amazingly chic. She was dressed in something that looked like a

glorified bird of paradise, and she wore chains of jewels hanging down her bare back. A heavy bracelet set with immense diamonds clasped her left ankle.

She created a sensation when she appeared in the Casino.

"Your friend the Countess will have a difficulty in outdoing this," murmured Mr Quin in Mr Satterthwaite's ear.

The latter nodded. He was curious to see how the Countess comported herself.

She came late, and a low murmur ran round as she walked unconcernedly to one of the centre roulette tables.

She was dressed in white - a mere straight slip of marocain such as a debutante might have worn and her gleaming white neck and arms were unadorned. She wore not a single jewel.

"It is clever, that," said Mr Satterthwaite with instant approval. "She disdains rivalry and turns the tables on her adversary."

He himself walked over and stood by the table. From time to time he amused himself by "placing a stake." Sometimes he won, more often he lost.

There was a terrific run on the last dozen. The numbers 31 and 34 turned up again and again. Stakes flocked to the bottom of the cloth.

With a smile Mr Satterthwaite made his last stake for the evening, and placed the maximum on Number 5.

The Countess in her turn leant forward and placed the maximum on Number 6.

"Faites vos jeux," called the croupier hoarsely. "Rien n'est va plus. Plus rien."

The ball span, humming merrily. Mr Satterthwaite thought to himself - "This means something different to each of us. Agonies of hope and despair, boredom, idle amusement, life and death."

Click!

The croupier bent forward to see.

"Numero cinque, rouge, impair et manque!"

Mr Satterthwaite had won!

The croupier, having raked in the other stakes, pushed forward Mr Satterthwaite's winnings. He put out his hand to take them. The Countess did the same. The croupier looked from one to the other of them.

"A Madame," he said brusquely.

The Countess picked up the money. Mr Satterthwaite drew back. He remained a gentleman. The Countess looked him full in the face and

he returned her glance. One or two of the people round pointed out to the croupier that he had made a mistake, but the man shook his head impatiently. He had decided. That was the end. He raised his raucous cry, "Paites vos jeux, Messieurs et Mesdames."

Mr Satterthwaite rejoined Mr Quin. Beneath his impeccable demeanour, he was feeling extremely indignant. Mr Quin listened sympathetically.

"Too bad," he said, "but these things happen."

"We are to meet your friend Franklin Rudge later. I am giving a little supper party."

The three met at midnight, and Mr Quin explained his plan.

"It is what is called a "Hedges and Highways" party," he explained. "We choose our meeting place, then each one goes out and is bound in honour to invite the first person he meets."

Franklin Rudge was amused by the idea,

"Say, what happens if they won't accept?"

"You must use your utmost powers of persuasion."

"Good. And where's the meeting place?"

"A somewhat Bohemian cafй - where one can take strange guests. It is called Le Caveau."

He explained its whereabouts, and the three parted. Mr Satterthwaite was so fortunate as to run straight into Elizabeth Martin and he claimed her joyfully. They reached Le Caveau and descended into a kind of cellar where they found a table spread for supper and lit by old-fashioned candles in candlesticks.

"We are the first," said Mr Satterthwaite. "Ah! here comes Franklin -"

He stopped abruptly. With Franklin was the Countess. It was an awkward moment. Elizabeth displayed less graciousness than she might have done. The Countess, as a woman of the world, retained the honours.

Last of all came Mr Quin. With him was a small, dark man, neatly dressed, whose face seemed familiar to Mr Satterthwaite. A moment later he recognised him. It was the croupier who earlier in the evening had made such a lamentable mistake.

"Let me introduce you to the company, M. Pierre Vaucher," said Mr Quin.

The little man seemed confused. Mr Quin performed the necessary introductions easily and lightly. Supper was brought - an excellent supper. Wine came - very excellent wine. Some of the frigidity went out of the atmosphere.

The Countess was very silent, so was Elizabeth. Franklin Rudge became talkative. He told various stories - not humorous stories, but

serious ones. And quietly and assiduously Mr Quin passed round the wine.

"I'll tell you - and this is a true story - about a man who made good," said Franklin Rudge impressively.

For one coming from a Prohibition country he had shown no lack of appreciation of champagne.

He told his story - perhaps at somewhat unnecessary length. It was, like many true stories, greatly inferior to fiction.

As he uttered the last word, Pierre Vaucher, opposite him, seemed to wake up. He also had done justice to the champagne. He leaned forward across the table.

"I, too, will tell you a story," he said thickly. "But mine is the story of a man who did not make good. It is the story of a man who went, not up, but down the hill. And, like yours, it is a true story."

"Pray tell it to us, monsieur," said Mr Satterthwaite courteously.

Pierre Vaucher leant back in his chair and looked at the ceiling.

"It is in Paris that the story begins. There was a man there, a working jeweller. He was young and light-hearted and industrious in his profession. They said there was a future before him. A good marriage was already arranged for him, the bride not too bad-looking, the dowry most satisfactory. And then, what do you think? One morning he sees a girl. Such a miserable little wisp of a girl,

messieurs. Beautiful? Yes, perhaps, if she were not half starved. But anyway, for this young man, she has a magic that he cannot resist. She has been struggling to find work, she is virtuous - or at least that is what she tells him. I do not know if it is true."

The Countess's voice came suddenly out of the semi-darkness.

"Why should it not be true? There are many like that."

"Well, as I say, the young man believed her. And he married her - an act of folly! His family would have no more to say to him. He had outraged their feelings. He married - I will call her Jeanne - it was a good action. He told her so. He felt that she should be very grateful to him. He had sacrificed much for her sake."

"A charming beginning for the poor girl," observed the Countess sarcastically.

"He loved her, yes, but from the beginning she maddened him. She had moods - tantrums - she would be cold to him one day, passionate the next. At last he saw the truth. She had never loved him. She had married him so as to keep body and soul together. That truth hurt him, it hurt him horribly, but he tried his utmost to let nothing appear on the surface. And he still felt he deserved gratitude and obedience to his wishes. They quarrelled. She reproached him - Mon Dieu, what did she not reproach him with?"

"You can see the next step, can you not? The thing that was bound to come. She left him. For two years he was alone, working in his little

shop with no news of her. He had one friend - absinthe. The business did not prosper so well.

"And then one day he came into the shop to find her sitting there. She was beautifully dressed. She had rings on her hands. He stood considering her. His heart was beating - but beating! He was at a loss what to do. He would have liked to have beaten her, to have clasped her in his arms, to have thrown her down on the floor and trampled on her, to have thrown himself at her feet. He did none of those things. He took up his pincers and went on with his work.

"'Madame desires?' he asked formally.

"That upset her. She did not look for that, you see.

"'Pierre,' she said. 'I have come back.'

"He laid aside his pincers and looked at her.

"'You wish to be forgiven?' he said. 'You want me to take you back? You are sincerely repentant?'

"'Do you want me back?' she murmured. Oh! Very softly she said it.

"He knew she was laying a trap for him. He longed to seize her in his arms, but he was too clever for that. He pretended indifference.

"'I am a Christian man,' he said. 'I try to do what the Church directs.'

"'Ah!' he thought, 'I will humble her, humble her to her knees.'

"But Jeanne, that is what I will call her, flung back her head and laughed. Evil laughter it was. 'I mock myself at you, little Pierre,' she said. 'Look at these rich clothes, these rings and bracelets. I came to show myself to you. I thought I would make you take me in your arms and when you did so, then - then I would spit in your face and tell you how I hated you!'

"And on that she went out of the shop. Can you believe, messieurs, that a woman could be as evil as all that - to come back only to torment me?"

"No," said the Countess. "I would not believe it, and any man who was not a fool would not believe it either. But all men are blind fools."

Pierre Vaucher took no notice of her. He went on.

"And so that young man of whom I tell you sank lower and lower. He drank more absinthe. The little shop was sold over his head. He became of the dregs, of the gutter. Then came the war. Ah! It was good, the war. It took that man out of the gutter and taught him to be a brute beast no longer. It drilled him - and sobered him. He endured cold and pain and the fear of death - but he did not die and when the war ended, he was a man again.

"It was then, messieurs, that he came South. His lungs had been affected by the gas, they said he must find work in the South. I will not weary you with all the things he did. Suffice it to say that he ended up as a croupier, and there - there in the Casino one evening, he saw her again - the woman who had ruined his life. She did not

recognise him, but he recognised her. She appeared to be rich and to lack for nothing - but, messieurs, the eyes of a croupier are sharp. There came an evening when she placed her last stake in the world on the table. Ask me not how I know - I do know - one feels these things. Others might not believe. She still had rich clothes - why not pawn them, one would say? But to do that - pah! your credit is gone at once. Her jewels? Ah no! Was I not a jeweller in my time? Long ago the real jewels have gone. The pearls of a King are sold one by one, are replaced with false. And meantime one must eat and pay one's hotel bill. Yes, and the rich men - well, they have seen one about for many years. Bah! they say - she is over fifty. A younger chicken for my money."

A long shuddering sigh came out of the windows where the Countess leant back

"Yes. It was a great moment, that. Two nights I have watched her. Lose, lose, and lose again. And now the end. She put all on one number. Beside her, an English milord stakes the maximum also - on the next number. The ball rolls... The moment has come, she has lost...

"Her eyes meet mine. What do I do? I jeopardise my place in the Casino. I rob the English milord. 'A Madame' I say, and pay over the money."

"Ah!" There was a crash, as the Countess sprang to her feet and leant across the table, sweeping her glass on to the floor.

"Why?" she cried. "That's what I want to know, why did you do it?"

There was a long pause, a pause that seemed interminable, and still those two facing each other across the table looked and looked... It was like a duel.

A mean little smile crept across Pierre Vaucher's face. He raised his hands.

"Madame," he said, "there is such a thing as pity..."

"Ah!"

She sank down again.

"I see."

She was calm, smiling, herself again.

"An interesting story, M. Vaucher, is it not? Permit me to give you a light for your cigarette."

She deftly rolled up a spill, and lighted it at the candle and held it towards him. He leaned forward till the flame caught the tip of the cigarette he held between his lips. Then she rose unexpectedly to her feet. "And now I must leave you all. Please - I need no one to escort me."

Before one could realise it she was gone. Mr Satterthwaite would have hurried out after her, but he was arrested by a startled oath from the Frenchman.

"A thousand thunders?"

He was staring at the half-burned spill which the Countess had dropped on the table. He unrolled it.

"Mon Dieu!" he muttered. "A fifty thousand franc bank note. You understand? Her winnings tonight. All that she had in the world. And she lighted my cigarette with it! Because she was too proud to accept - pity. Ah! proud, she was always proud as the Devil. She is unique - wonderful."

He sprang up from his seat and darted out. Mr Satterthwaite and Mr Quin had also risen. The waiter approached Franklin Rudge.

"La note, monsieur," he observed unemotionally.

Mr Quin rescued it from him quickly.

"I feel kind of lonesome, Elizabeth," remarked Franklin Rudge. "These foreigners - they beat the band! I don't understand them. What's it all mean, anyhow?"

He looked across at her.

"Gee, it's good to look at anything so hundred per cent American as you." His voice took on the plaintive note of a small child. "These foreigners are so odd."

They thanked Mr Quin and went out into the night together. Mr Quin picked up his change and smiled across at Mr Satterthwaite, who was preening himself like a contented bird.

"Well," said the latter. "That's all gone off splendidly. Our pair of love birds will be all right now."

"Which ones?" asked Mr Quin.

"Oh!" said Mr Satterthwaite, taken aback.

"Oh! Yes, I suppose you are right, allowing for the Latin point of view and all that -"

He looked dubious.

Mr Quin smiled, and a stained glass panel behind him invested him for just a moment in a motley garment of coloured light.

Chapter 6

THE MAN FROM THE SEA

Mr Satterthwaite was feeling old. That might not have been surprising since in the estimation of many people he was old. Careless youths said to their partners - "Old Satterthwaite? Oh! he must be a hundred - or at any rate about eighty." And even the

kindest of girls said indulgently, "Oh! Satterthwaite. Yes, he's quite old. He must be sixty." Which was almost worse, since he was sixty-nine.

In his own view, however, he was not old. Sixty-nine was an interesting age - an age of infinite possibilities - an age when at last the experience of a lifetime was beginning to tell. But to feel old - that was different, a tired discouraged state of mind when one was inclined to ask oneself depressing questions. What was he after all? A little dried-up elderly man, with neither chick nor child, with no human belongings, only a valuable Art collection which seemed at the moment strangely unsatisfying. No one to care whether he lived or died...

At this point in his meditations Mr Satterthwaite pulled himself up short. What he was thinking was morbid and unprofitable. He knew well enough, who better, that the chances were that a wife would have hated him or alternatively that he would have hated her, that children would have been a constant source of worry and anxiety, and that demands upon his time and affection would have worried him considerably.

"To be safe and comfortable," said Mr Satterthwaite firmly - that was the thing.

The last thought reminded him of a letter he had received that morning. He drew it from his pocket and re-read it, savouring its contents pleasurably. To begin with, it was from a Duchess, and Mr Satterthwaite liked hearing from Duchesses. It is true that the letter began by demanding a large subscription for charity and but for that

would probably never have been written, but the terms in which it was couched were so agreeable that Mr Satterthwaite was able to gloss over the first fact.

So you've deserted the Riviera, wrote the Duchess. What is this island of yours like? Cheap? Cannotti put up his prices shamefully this year, and I shan't go to the Riviera again. I might try your island next year if you report favourably, though I should hate five days on a boat. Still anywhere you recommend is sure to be pretty comfortable - too much so. You'll get to be one of those people who do nothing but coddle themselves and think of their comfort. There's only one thing that will save you. Satterthwaite, and that is your inordinate interest in other people's affairs...

As Mr Satterthwaite folded the letter, a vision came up vividly before him of the Duchess. Her meanness, her unexpected and alarming kindness, her caustic tongue, her indomitable spirit.

Spirit! Everyone needed spirit. He drew out another letter with a German stamp upon it - written by a young singer in whom he had interested himself. It was a grateful affectionate letter.

'How can I thank you, dear Mr Satterthwaite? It seems too wonderful to think that in a few days I shall be singing Isolde...'

A pity that she had to make her debut as Isolde. A charming, hard-working child, Olga, with a beautiful voice but no temperament. He hummed to himself. "Nay order him! Pray understand it! I command it. I, Isolde." No, the child hadn't got it in her - the spirit - the indomitable will - all expressed in that final "Ich Isolde!"

Well, at any rate he had done something for somebody. This island depressed him - why, oh! why had he deserted the Riviera which he knew so well and where he was so well known? Nobody here took any interest in him. Nobody seemed to realise that here was the Mr Satterthwaite - the friend of Duchesses and Countesses and singers and writers. No one in the island was of any social importance or of any artistic importance either. Most people had been there seven, fourteen, or twenty-one years running and valued themselves and were valued accordingly.

With a deep sigh Mr Satterthwaite proceeded down from the Hotel to the small straggling harbour below. His way lay between an avenue of bougainvillaea - a vivid mass of flaunting scarlet, that made him feel older and greyer than ever.

"I'm getting old," he murmured. "I'm getting old and tired."

He was glad when he had passed the bougainvillaea and was walking down the white street with the blue sea at the end of it. A disreputable dog was standing in the middle of the road, yawning and stretching himself in the sun. Having prolonged his stretch to the utmost limits of ecstasy, he sat down and treated himself to a really good scratch. He then rose, shook himself, and looked round for any other good thing that life might have to offer.

There was a dump of rubbish by the side of the road and to this he went sniffing in pleasurable anticipation. True enough, his nose had not deceived him! A smell of such rich putrescence that surpassed even his anticipations! He sniffed with growing appreciation, then

suddenly abandoning himself, he lay on his back and rolled frenziedly on the delicious dump. Clearly the world this morning was a dog paradise!

Tiring at last, he regained his feet and strolled out once more into the middle of the road. And then, without the least warning, a ramshackle car careered wildly round the corner, caught him full square and passed on unheeding.

The dog rose to his feet, stood a minute regarding Mr Satterthwaite, a vague dumb reproach in his eyes, then fell over. Mr Satterthwaite went up to him and bent down. The dog was dead. He went on his way, wondering at the sadness and cruelty of life. What a queer dumb look of reproach had been in the dog's eyes. "Oh! world," they seemed to say. "Oh! wonderful world in which I have trusted. Why have you done this to me?"

Mr Satterthwaite went on, past the palm trees and the straggling white houses, past the black lava beach where the surf thundered and where once, long ago, a well-known English swimmer had been carried out to sea and drowned, past the rock pools where children and elderly ladies bobbed up and down and called it bathing, along the steep road that winds upwards to the top of the cliff. For there on the edge of the cliff was a house, appropriately named La Paz. A white house with faded green shutters tightly closed, a tangled beautiful garden, and a walk between cypress trees that led to a platkau on the edge of the cliff where you looked down - down - down - to the deep blue sea below.

It was to this spot that Mr Satterthwaite was bound. He had developed a great love for the garden of La Paz. He had never entered the villa. It seemed always to be empty. Manuel, the Spanish gardener, wished one good-morning with a flourish and gallantly presented ladies with a bouquet and gentlemen with a single flower as a button-hole, his dark face wreathed in smiles.

Sometimes Mr Satterthwaite made up stories in his own mind about the owner of the villa. His favourite was a Spanish dancer, once world-famed for her beauty, who hid herself here so that the world should never know that she was no longer beautiful.

He pictured her coming out of the house at dusk and walking through the garden. Sometimes he was tempted to ask Manuel for the truth, but he resisted the temptation. He preferred his fancies.

After exchanging a few words with Manuel and graciously accepting an orange rosebud, Mr Satterthwaite passed on down the cypress walk to the sea. It was rather wonderful sitting there - on the edge of nothing - with that sheer drop below one. It made him think of Tristan and Isolde, of the beginning of the third act with Tristan and Kurwenal - that lonely waiting and of Isolde rushing up from the sea and Tristan dying in her arms. (No, little Olga would never make an Isolde. Isolde of Cornwall, that Royal hater and Royal lover...) He shivered. He felt old, chilly, alone... What had he had out of life? Nothing - nothing. Not as much as that dog in the street...

It was an unexpected sound that roused him from his revкrie. Footsteps coming along the cypress walk were inaudible, the first he

knew of somebody's presence was the English monosyllable "Damn."

He looked round to find a young man staring at him in obvious surprise and disappointment. Mr Satterthwaite recognised him at once as an arrival of the day before who had more or less intrigued him. Mr Satterthwaite called him a young man because in comparison to most of the die-hards in the Hotel he was a young man, but he would certainly never see forty again and was probably drawing appreciably near to his half century. Yet in spite of that, the term young man fitted him - Mr Satterthwaite was usually right about such things - there was an impression of immaturity about him. As there is a touch of puppyhood about many a full grown dog so it was with the stranger.

Mr Satterthwaite thought, "This chap has really never grown up - not properly, that is."

And yet there was nothing Peter Pannish about him. He was sleek - almost plump, he had the air of one who has always done himself exceedingly well in the material sense and denied himself no pleasure or satisfaction. He had brown eyes - rather round - fair hair turning grey - a little moustache and rather florid face.

The thing that puzzled Mr Satterthwaite was what had brought him to the island. He could imagine him shooting things, hunting things, playing polo or golf or tennis, making love to pretty women. But on the island there was nothing to hunt or shoot, no games except Golf - Croquet, and the nearest approach to a pretty woman was represented by elderly Miss Baba Kindersley. There were, of course,

artists, to whom the beauty of the scenery made appeal, but Mr Satterthwaite was quite certain that the young man was not an artist. He was clearly marked with the stamp of the Philistine.

While he was resolving these things in his mind, the other spoke, realising somewhat belatedly that his single ejaculation so far might be open to criticism.

"I beg your pardon," he said with some embarrassment. "As a matter of fact, I was - well, startled. I didn't expect anyone to be here."

He smiled disarmingly. He had a charming smile - friendly - appealing.

"It is rather a lonely spot," agreed Mr Satterthwaite, as he moved politely a little further up the bench. The other accepted the mute invitation and sat down.

"I don't know about lonely," he said. "There always seems to be someone here."

There was a tinge of latent resentment in his voice. Mr Satterthwaite wondered why. He read the other as a friendly soul. Why this insistence on solitude? - A rendezvous, perhaps? No - not that. He looked again with carefully veiled scrutiny at his companion. Where had he seen that particular expression before quite lately? That look of dumb bewildered resentment.

"You've been up here before then?" said Mr Satterthwaite, more for the sake of saying something than for anything else.

"I was up here last night - after dinner."

"Really? I thought the gates were always locked."

There was a moment's pause and then, almost sullenly, the young man said -

"I climbed over the wall."

Mr Satterthwaite looked at him with real attention now.

He had a sleuth-like habit of mind and he was aware that his companion had only arrived on the preceding afternoon. He had had little time to discover the beauty of the villa by daylight and he had so far spoken to nobody. Yet after dark he had made straight for La Paz. Why? Almost involuntarily Mr Satterthwaite turned his head to look at the green-shuttered villa, but it was as ever serenely lifeless, close shuttered. No, the solution of the mystery was not there.

"And you actually found someone here then?"

The other nodded.

"Yes. Must have been from the other Hotel. He had on fancy dress."

"Fancy dress?"

"Yes. A kind of Harlequin rig."

"What?"

The query fairly burst from Mr Satterthwaite's lips. His companion turned to stare at him in surprise.

"They often do have fancy dress shows at the Hotels, I suppose?"

"Oh! Quite," said Mr Satterthwaite. "Quite, quite, quite."

He paused breathlessly, then added, "You must excuse my excitement. Do you happen to know anything about catalysis?"

The young man stared at him.

"Never heard of it. What is it?"

Mr Satterthwaite quoted gravely, "A chemical reaction depending for its success on the presence of a certain substance which itself remains unchanged."

"Oh," said the young man uncertainly.

"I have a certain friend - his name is Mr Quin, and he can best be described in the terms of catalysis. His presence is a sign that things are going to happen, because he is there strange revelations come to light, discoveries are made. And yet - he himself takes no part in the proceedings. I have a feeling that it was my friend you met here last night."

"He's a very sudden sort of chap then. He gave me quite a shock. One minute he wasn't there and the next minute he was! Almost as though he came up out of the sea."

Mr Satterthwaite looked along the little plateau and down the sheer drop below.

"That's nonsense, of course," said the other. "But it's the feeling he gave me. Of course, really, there isn't the foothold for a fly." He looked over the edge. "A straight clear drop. If you went over - well, that would be the end right enough."

"An ideal spot for a murder, in fact," said Mr Satterthwaite pleasantly.

The other stared at him, almost as though for the moment he did not follow. Then he said vaguely - "Oh! Yes - of course..."

He sat there, making little dabs at the ground with his stick and frowning. Suddenly Mr Satterthwaite got the resemblance he had been seeking. That dumb bewildered questioning. So had the dog looked who was run over. His eyes and this young man's eyes asked the same pathetic question with the same reproach. "Oh! World that I have trusted - what have you done to me?"

He saw other points of resemblance between the two, the same pleasure-loving easy-going existence, the same joyous abandon to the delights of life, the same absence of intellectual questioning. Enough for both to live in the moment - the world was a good place, a

place of carnal delights - sun, sea, sky - a discreet garbage heap. And then - what? A car had hit the dog. What had hit the man?

The subject of these cogitations broke in at this point, speaking, however, more to himself than to Mr Satterthwaite.

"One wonders," he said, "what it's all for?

Familiar words - words that usually brought a smile to Mr Satterthwaite's lips, with their unconscious betrayal of the innate egoism of humanity which insists on regarding every manifestation of life as directly designed for its delight or its torment. He did not answer and presently the stranger said with a slight, rather apologetic laugh -

"I've heard it said that every man should build a house, plant a tree and have a son." He paused and then added, "I believe I planted an acorn once..."

Mr Satterthwaite stirred slightly. His curiosity was aroused - that ever-present interest in the affairs of other people of which the Duchess had accused him was roused. It was not difficult. Mr Satterthwaite had a very feminine side to his nature, he was as good a listener as any woman, and he knew the right moment to put in a prompting word. Presently he was hearing the whole story.

Anthony Cosden, that was the stranger's name, and his life had been much as Mr Satterthwaite had imagined it. He was a bad hand at telling a story but his listener supplied the gaps easily enough. A very ordinary life - an average income, a little soldiering, a good deal

of sport whenever sport offered, plenty of friends, plenty of pleasant things to do, a sufficiency of women. The kind of life that practically inhabits thought of any description and substitutes sensation. To speak frankly, an animal's life. "But there are worse things than that," thought Mr Satterthwaite from the depths of his experience. "Oh! many worse things than that..." This world had seemed a very good place to Anthony Cosden. He had grumbled because everyone always grumbled but it had never been a serious grumble. And then - this.

He came to it at last - rather vaguely and incoherently. Hadn't felt quite the thing - nothing much. Saw his doctor, and the doctor had persuaded him to go to a Harley Street man. And then - the incredible truth. They'd tried to hedge about it - spoke of great care - a quiet life, but they hadn't been able to disguise that that was all eyewash - letting him down lightly. It boiled down to this - six months. That's what they gave him. Six months.

He turned those bewildered brown eyes on Mr Satterthwaite. It was, of course, rather a shock to a fellow. One didn't - one didn't somehow, know what to do.

Mr Satterthwaite nodded gravely and understandingly.

It was a bit difficult to take in all at once, Anthony Cosden went on. How to put in the time. Rather a rotten business waiting about to get pipped He didn't feel really ill - not yet. Though that might come later, so the specialist had said - in fact, it was bound to. It seemed such nonsense to be going to die when one didn't in the least want to. The

best thing, he had thought, would be to carry on as usual. But somehow that hadn't worked.

Here Mr Satterthwaite interrupted him. Wasn't there, he hinted delicately, any woman?

But apparently there wasn't. There were women, of course, but not that kind. His crowd was a very cheery crowd. They didn't, so he implied, like corpses. He didn't wish to make a kind of walking funeral of himself. It would have been embarrassing for everybody. So he had come abroad.

"You came to see these islands? But why?" Mr Satterthwaite was hunting for something, something intangible but delicate that eluded him and yet which he was sure was there. "You've been here before, perhaps?"

"Yes." he admitted it almost unwillingly. "Years ago when I was a youngster."

And suddenly, almost unconsciously so it seemed, he shot a quick glance backward over his shoulder in the direction of the villa.

"I remembered this place," he said, nodding at the sea.

"One step to eternity!"

"And that is why you came up here last night," finished Mr Satterthwaite calmly.

Anthony Cosden shot him a dismayed glance.

"Oh! I say - really -" he protested.

"Last night you found someone here. This afternoon you have found me. Your life has been saved - twice."

"You may put it that way if you like - but damn it all, it's my life. I've a right to do what I like with it."

"That is a clichй," said Mr Satterthwaite wearily.

"Of course I see your point," said Anthony Cosden generously. "Naturally you've got to say what you can. I'd try to dissuade a fellow myself, even though I knew deep down that he was right. And you know that I'm right. A clean quick end is better than a lingering one - causing trouble and expense and bother to all. In any case it's not as though I had anyone in the world belonging to me..."

"If you had -?" said Mr Satterthwaite sharply.

Cosden drew a deep breath.

"I don't know. Even then, I think, this way would be best But anyway - I haven't..."

He stopped abruptly. Mr Satterthwaite eyed him curiously. Incurably romantic, he suggested again that there was, somewhere, some woman. But Cosden negatived it. He oughtn't, he said, to complain. He had had, on the whole, a very good life. It was a pity it was going

to be over so soon, that was all. But at any rate he had had, he supposed, everything worth having. Except a son. He would have liked a son. He would like to know now that he had a son living after him. Still, he reiterated the fact, he had had a very good life -

It was at this point that Mr Satterthwaite lost patience. Nobody, he pointed out, who was still in the larval stage, could claim to know anything of life at all. Since the words larval stage clearly meant nothing at all to Cosden, he proceeded to make his meaning clearer.

"You have not begun to live yet. You are still at the beginning of life."

Cosden laughed.

"Why, my hair's grey. I'm forty -"

Mr Satterthwaite interrupted him.

"That has nothing to do with it. Life is a compound of physical and mental experiences. I, for instance, am sixty-nine, and I am really sixty-nine. I have known, either at first or second hand, nearly all the experiences life has to offer. You are like a man who talks of a full year and has seen nothing but snow and ice! The flowers of Spring, the languorous days of Summer, the falling leaves of Autumn - he knows nothing of them - not even that there are such things. And you are going to turn your back on even this opportunity of knowing them."

"You seem to forget," said Anthony Cosden dryly, "that, in any case, I have only six months."

"Time, like everything else, is relative," said Mr Satterthwaite. "That six months might be the longest and most varied experience of your whole life."

Cosden looked unconvinced.

"In my place," he said, "you would do the same."

Mr Satterthwaite shook his head.

"No," he said simply. "In the first place, I doubt if I should have the courage. It needs courage and I am not at all a brave individual And in the second place -"

"Well?"

"I always want to know what is going to happen tomorrow."

Cosden rose suddenly with a laugh.

"Well, sir, you've been very good in letting me talk to you. I hardly know why - anyway, there it is. I've said a lot too much. Forget it."

"And tomorrow, when an accident is reported, I am to leave it at that? To make no suggestion of suicide?"

"That's as you like. I'm glad you realise one thing - that you can't prevent me."

"My dear young man," said Mr Satterthwaite placidly, "I can hardly attach myself to you like the proverbial limpet. Sooner or later you would give me the slip and accomplish your purpose. But you are frustrated at any rate for this afternoon. You would hardly like to go to your death leaving me under the possible imputation of having pushed you over."

"That is true," said Cosden. "If you insist on remaining here -"

"I do," said Mr Satterthwaite firmly.

Cosden laughed good-humouredly.

"Then the plan must be deferred for the moment. In which case I will go back to the hotel See you later perhaps."

Mr Satterthwaite was left looking at the sea.

"And now," he said to himself softly, "what next? There must be a next. I wonder..."

He got up. For a while he stood at the edge of the platkau looking down on the dancing water beneath. But he found no inspiration there, and turning slowly he walked back along the path between the cypresses and into the quiet garden. He looked at the shuttered, peaceful house and he wondered, as he had often wondered before, who had lived there and what had taken place within those placid walk. On a sudden impulse he walked up some crumbling stone steps and laid a hand on one of the faded green shutters.

To his surprise it swung back at his touch. He hesitated a moment, then pushed it boldly open. The next minute he stepped back with a little exclamation of dismay. A woman stood in the window facing him. She wore black and had a black lace mantilla draped over her head.

Mr Satterthwaite floundered wildly in Italian interspersed with German - the nearest he could get in the hurry of the moment to Spanish - He was desolated and ashamed, he explained haltingly. The Signora must forgive. He thereupon retreated hastily, the woman not having spoken one word.

He was halfway across the courtyard when she spoke - two sharp words like a pistol crack.

"Come back!"

It was a barked-out command such as might have been addressed to a dog, yet so absolute was the authority it conveyed, that Mr Satterthwaite had swung round hurriedly and trotted back to the window almost automatically before it occurred to him to feel any resentment. He obeyed like a dog. The woman was still standing motionless at the window. She looked him up and down appraising him with perfect calmness.

"You are English," she said. "I thought so."

Mr Satterthwaite started off on a second apology.

"If I had known you were English," he said, "I could have expressed myself better just now. I offer my most sincere apologies for my rudeness in trying the shutter. I am afraid I can plead no excuse save curiosity. I had a great wish to see what the inside of this charming house was like."

She laughed suddenly, a deep, rich laugh.

"If you really want to see it," she said, "you had better come in."

She stood aside, and Mr Satterthwaite, feeling pleasurably excited, stepped into the room. It was dark, since the shutters of the other windows were closed, but he could see that it was scantily and rather shabbily furnished and that the dust lay thick everywhere.

"Not here," she said. "I do not use this room."

She led the way and he followed her, out of the room across a passage and into a room the other side. Here the windows gave on the sea and the sun streamed in. The furniture, like that of the other room, was poor in quality, but there were some worn rugs that had been good in their time, a large screen of Spanish leather and bowls of fresh flowers.

"You will have tea with me," said Mr Satterthwaite's hostess. She added reassuringly. "It is perfectly good tea and will be made with boiling water."

She went out of the door and called out something in Spanish, then she returned and sat down on a sofa opposite her guest. For the first time, Mr Satterthwaite was able to study her appearance.

The first effect she had upon him was to make him feel even more grey and shrivelled and elderly than usual by contrast with her own forceful personality. She was a tall woman, very sunburnt, dark and handsome though no longer young. When she was in the room the sun seemed to be shining twice as brightly as when she was out of it, and presently a curious feeling of warmth and aliveness began to steal over Mr Satterthwaite. It was as though he stretched out thin, shrivelled hands to a reassuring flame. He thought, "She's so much vitality herself that she's got a lot left over for other people."

He recalled the command in her voice when she had stopped him, and wished that his protegйe, Olga, could be imbued with a little of that force. He thought - "What an Isolde she'd make! And yet she probably hasn't got the ghost of a singing voice. Life is badly arranged." he was, all the same, a little afraid of her. He did not like domineering women.

She had clearly been considering him as she sat with her chin in her hands, making no pretence about it. At last she nodded as though she had made up her mind.

"I am glad you came," she said at last. "I needed someone very badly to talk to this afternoon. And you are used to that, aren't you?"

"I don't quite understand"

"I meant people tell you things. You knew what I meant! Why pretend?"

"Well - perhaps -"

She swept on, regardless of anything he had been going to say.

"One could say anything to you. That is because you are half a woman. You know what we feel - what we think - the queer, queer things we do."

Her voice died away. Tea was brought by a large, smiling Spanish girl. It was good tea - China - Mr Satterthwaite sipped it appreciatively.

"You live here?" he inquired conversationally.

"Yes"

"But not altogether. The house is usually shut up, is it not? At least so I have been told."

"I am here a good deal, more than anyone knows. I only use these rooms."

"You have had the house long?"

"It has belonged to me for twenty-two years - and I lived here for a year before that."

Mr Satterthwaite said rather inanely (or so he felt), "That is a very long time."

"The year? Or the twenty-two years?"

His interest stirred, Mr Satterthwaite said gravely - "That depends."

She nodded.

"Yes, it depends. They are two separate periods. They have nothing to do with each other. Which is long? Which is short? Even now I cannot say."

She was silent for a minute, brooding. Then she said with a little smile, "It is such a long time since I have talked with anyone - such a long time! I do not apologise. You came to my shutter. You wished to look through my window. And that is what you are always doing, is it not? Pushing aside the shutter and looking through the window into the truth of people's lives. If they will let you. And often if they will not let you! It would be difficult to hide anything from you. You would guess - and guess right."

Mr Satterthwaite had an odd impulse to be perfectly sincere.

"I am sixty-nine," he said. "Everything I know of life I know at second hand. Sometimes that is very bitter to me. And yet, because of it, I know a good deal."

She nodded thoughtfully.

"I know. Life is very strange. I cannot imagine what it must be like to be that - always a looker-on."

Her tone was wondering. Mr Satterthwaite smiled.

"No, you would not know. Your place is in the centre of the stage. You will always be the Prima Donna."

"What a curious thing to say."

"But I am right. Things have happened to you - will always happen to you. Sometimes, I think, there have been tragic things. Is that so?"

Her eyes narrowed. She looked across at him.

"If you are here long, somebody will tell you of the English swimmer who was drowned at the foot of this cliff. They will tell you how young and strong he was, how handsome, and they will tell you that his young wife looked down from the top of the cliff and saw him drowning."

"Yes, I have already heard that story."

"That man was my husband. This was his villa. He brought me out here with him when I was eighteen, and a year later he died - driven by the surf on the black rocks, cut and bruised and mutilated, battered to death."

Mr Satterthwaite gave a shocked exclamation. She leant forward, her burning eyes focused on his face.

"You spoke of a tragedy. Can you imagine a greater tragedy than that? For a young wife, only a year married, to stand helpless while the man she loved fought for his life - and lost it - horribly."

"Terrible," said Mr Satterthwaite. He spoke with real emotion. "Terrible. I agree with you. Nothing in life could be so dreadful." Suddenly she laughed. Her head went back.

"You are wrong," she said. "There is something more terrible. And that is for a young wife to stand there and hope and long for her husband to drown..."

"But good God," cried Mr Satterthwaite, "you don't mean -?"

"Yes, I do. That's what it was really. I knelt there - knelt down on the cliff and prayed. The Spanish servants thought I was praying for his life to be saved. I wasn't. I was praying that I might wish him to be spared. I was saying one thing over and over again, "God, help me not to wish him dead. God, help me not to wish him dead." But it wasn't any good. All the time I hoped - hoped - and my hope came true."

She was silent for a minute or two and then she said very gently in quite a different voice, "That is a terrible thing, isn't it? It's the sort of thing one can't forget. I was terribly happy when I knew he was really dead and couldn't come back to torture me any more."

"My child," said Mr Satterthwaite, shocked.

"I know. I was too young to have that happen to me. Those things should happen to one when one is older - when one is more prepared for - for beastliness. Nobody knew, you know, what he was really like. I thought he was wonderful when I first met him and was so happy and proud when he asked me to marry him. But things went wrong almost at once. He was angry with me - nothing I could do pleased him - and yet I tried so hard. And then he began to like hurting me. And above all to terrify me. That's what he enjoyed most. He thought out all sorts of things... dreadful things. I won't tell you. I suppose, really, he must have been a little mad. I was alone here, in his power, and cruelty began to be his hobby."

Her eyes widened and darkened.

"The worst was my baby. I was going to have a baby. Because of some of the things he did to me - it was born dead. My little baby. I nearly died, too - but I didn't I wish I had."

Mr Satterthwaite made an inarticulate sound.

"And then I was delivered - in the way I've told you. Some girls who were staying at the hotel dared him. That's how it happened. All the Spaniards told him it was madness to risk the sea just there. But he was very vain - he wanted to show off. And I - I saw him drown - and was glad. God oughtn't to let such things happen."

Mr Satterthwaite stretched out his little dry hand and took hers. She squeezed it hard as a child might have done. The maturity had fallen away from her face. He saw her without difficulty as she had been at nineteen.

"At first it seemed too good to be true. The house was mine and I could live in it. And no one could hurt me any more! I was an orphan, you know, I had no near relations, no one to care what became of me. That simplified things. I lived on here - in this villa - and it seemed like Heaven. Yes, like Heaven. I've never been so happy since, and never shall again. Just to wake up and know that everything was all right - no pain, no terror, no wondering what he was going to do to me next. Yes, it was Heaven."

She paused a long time, and Mr Satterthwaite said at last, "And then?"

"I suppose human beings aren't ever satisfied. At first, just being free was enough. But after a while I began to get - well, lonely, I suppose. I began to think about my baby that died. If only I had had my baby! I wanted it as a baby, and also as a plaything. I wanted dreadfully something or someone to play with. It sounds silly and childish, but there it was."

"I understand," said Mr Satterthwaite gravely.

"It's difficult to explain the next bit. It just - well, happened, you see. There was a young Englishman staying at the hotel. He strayed in the garden by mistake. I was wearing Spanish dress and he took me for a Spanish girl. I thought it would be rather fun to pretend I was one, so I played up. His Spanish was very bad but he could just manage a little. I told him the villa belonged to an English lady who was away. I said she had taught me a little English and I pretended to speak broken English. It was such fun - such fun - even now I can remember

what fun it was. He began to make love to me. We agreed to pretend that the villa was our home, that we were just married and coming to live there. I suggested that we should try one of the shutters - the one you tried this evening. It was open and inside the room was dusty and uncared for. We crept in. It was exciting and wonderful. We pretended it was our own house."

She broke off suddenly, looked appealingly at Mr Satterthwaite.

"It all seemed lovely - like a fairy tale. And the lovely thing about it, to me, was that it wasn't true. It wasn't real"

Mr Satterthwaite nodded. He saw her, perhaps more clearly than she saw herself - that frightened, lonely child entranced with her make believe that was so safe because it wasn't real.

"He was, I suppose, a very ordinary young man. Out for adventure, but quite sweet about it. We went on pretending."

She stopped, looked at Mr Satterthwaite and said again.

"You understand? We went on pretending..."

She went on again in a minute.

"He came up again the next morning to the villa. I saw him from my bedroom through the shutter. Of course he didn't dream I was inside. He still thought I was a little Spanish peasant girl. He stood there looking about him. He'd asked me to meet him. I'd said I would but I never meant to.

"He just stood there looking worried. I think he was worried about me. It was nice of him to be worried about me. He was nice..."

She paused again.

"The next day he left. I've never seen him again.

"My baby was born nine months later. I was wonderfully happy all the time. To be able to have a baby so peacefully, with no one to hurt you or make you miserable. I wished I'd remembered to ask my English boy his Christian name. I would have called the baby after him. It seemed unkind not to. It seemed rather unfair. He'd given me the thing I wanted most in the world, and he would never even know about it! But of course I told myself that he wouldn't look at it that way - that to know would probably only worry and annoy him. I had been just a passing amusement for him, that was all."

"And the baby?" asked Mr Satterthwaite.

"He was splendid. I called him John. Splendid. I wish you could see him now. He's twenty. He's going to be a mining engineer. He's been the best and dearest son in the world to me. I told him his father had died before he was born."

Mr Satterthwaite stared at her. A curious story. And somehow, a story that was not completely told. There was, he felt sure, something else.

"Twenty years is a long time," he said thoughtfully. "You've never contemplated marrying again?"

She shook her head. A slow, burning blush spread over her tanned cheeks.

"The child was enough for you - always?"

She looked at him. Her eyes were softer than he had yet seen them.

"Such queer things happen!" she murmured. "Such queer things... You wouldn't believe them - no, I'm wrong, you might, perhaps. I didn't love John's father, not at the time. I don't think I even knew what love was. I assumed, as a matter of course, that the child would be like me. But he wasn't. He mightn't have been my child at all. He was like his father - he was like no one but his father. I learnt to know that man - through his child. Through the child, I learnt to love him. I love him now. I always shall love him. You may say that it's imagination, that I've built up an ideal, but it isn't so. I love the man, the real, human man. I'd know him if I saw him tomorrow - even though it's over twenty years since we met. Loving him has made me into a woman. I love him as a woman loves a man. For twenty years I've lived loving him. I shall die loving him."

She stopped abruptly - then challenged her listener.

"Do you think I'm mad - to say these strange things?"

"Oh! my dear," said Mr Satterthwaite. He took her hand again.

"You do understand?"

"I think I do. But there's something more, isn't there? Something that you haven't yet told me?"

Her brow clouded over.

"Yes, there's something. It was clever of you to guess. I knew at once you weren't the sort one can hide things from. But I don't want to tell you - and the reason I don't want to tell you is because it's best for you not to know."

He looked at her. Her eyes met his bravely and defiantly.

He said to himself, "This is the test. All the dues are in my hand. I ought to be able to know. If I reason rightly I shall know."

There was a pause, then he said slowly, "Something's gone wrong." He saw her eyelids give the faintest quiver and knew himself to be on the right track.

"Something's gone wrong - suddenly - after all these years." He felt himself groping - groping - in the dark recesses of her mind where she was trying to hide her secret from him.

"The boy - it's got to do with him. You wouldn't mind about anything else."

He heard the very faint gasp she gave and knew he had probed correctly. A cruel business but necessary. It was her will against his.

She had got a dominant, ruthless will, but he too had a will hidden beneath his meek manners. And he had behind him the Heaven-sent assurance of a man who is doing his proper job. He felt a passing contemptuous pity for men whose business it was to track down such crudities as crime. This detective business of the mind, this assembling of clues, this delving for the truth, this wild joy as one drew nearer to the goal... Her very passion to keep the truth from him helped her. He felt her stiffen defiantly as he drew nearer and nearer.

"It is better for me not to know, you say. Better for me? But you are not a very considerate woman. You would not shrink from putting a stranger to a little temporary inconvenience. It is more than that, then? If you tell me you make me an accomplice before the fact. That sounds like crime. Fantastic! I could not associate crime with you. Or only one sort of crime. A crime against yourself."

Her lids drooped in spite of herself, veiled her eyes. He leaned forward and caught her wrist.

"It is that, then! You are thinking of taking your life."

She gave a low cry.

"How did you know? How did you know?"

"But why? You are not tired of life. I never saw a woman less tired of it - more radiantly alive."

She got up, went to the window, pushing back a strand of her dark hair as she did so.

"Since you have guessed so much I might as well tell you the truth. I should not have let you in this evening. I might have known that you would see too much. You are that kind of man. You were right about the cause. It's the boy. He knows nothing. But last time he was home, he spoke tragically of a friend of his, and I discovered something. If he finds out that he is illegitimate it will break his heart. He is proud - horribly proud! There is a girl. Oh! I won't go into details. But he is coming very soon - and he wants to know all about his father - he wants details. The girl's parents, naturally, want to know. When he discovers the truth, he will break with her, exile himself, ruin his life. Oh! I know the things you would say. He is young, foolish, wrong-headed to take it like that! All true, perhaps. But does it matter what people ought to be? They are what they are. It will break his heart... But if, before he comes, there has been an accident, everything will be swallowed up in grief for me. He will look through my papers, find nothing, and be annoyed that I told him so little. But he will not suspect the truth. It is the best way. One must pay for happiness, and I have had so much - oh! so much happiness. And in reality the price will be easy, too. A little courage - to take the leap - perhaps a moment or so of anguish."

"But, my dear child -"

"Don't argue with me." She flared round on him. "I won't listen to conventional arguments. My life is my own. Up to now, it has been needed - for John. But he needs it no longer. He wants a mate - a companion - he will turn to her all the more willingly because I am no

longer there. My life is useless, but my death will be of use. And I have the right to do what I like with my own life."

"Are you sure?"

The sternness of his tone surprised her. She stammered slightly.

"If it is no good to anyone - and I am the best judge of that -"

He interrupted her again.

"Not necessarily."

"What do you mean?"

"Listen. I will put a case to you. A man comes to a certain place - to commit suicide, shall we say? But by chance, he finds another man there, so he fails in his purpose and goes away - to live. The second man has saved the first man's life, not by being necessary to him or prominent in his life, but just by the mere physical fact of having been in a certain place at a certain moment. You take your life today and perhaps, some five, six, seven years hence, someone will go to death or disaster simply for lack of your presence in a given spot or place. It may be a runaway horse coming down a street that swerved aside at sight of you and so fails to trample a child that is playing in the gutter. That child may live to grow up and be a great musician, or discover a cure for cancer. Or it may be less melodramatic than that. He may just grow up to ordinary everyday happiness..."

She stared at him.

"You are a strange man. These things you say - I have never thought of them..."

"You say your life is your own," went on Mr Satterthwaite. "But can you dare to ignore the chance that you are taking part in a gigantic drama under the orders of a divine Producer? Your cue may not come till the end of the play - it may be totally unimportant, a mere walking-on part, but upon it may hang the issues of the play if you do not give the cue to another player. The whole edifice may crumple. You as you, may not matter to anyone in the world, but you as a person in a particular place may matter unimaginably."

She sat down, still staring.

"What do you want me to do?" she said simply.

It was Mr Satterthwaite's moment of triumph. He issued orders.

"I want you at least to promise me one thing - to do nothing rash for twenty-four hours."

She was silent for a moment or two and then she said, "I promise."

"There is one other thing - a favour."

"Yes?"

"Leave the shutter of the room I came in by unfastened, and keep vigil there tonight."

She looked at him curiously, but nodded assent.

"And now," said Mr Satterthwaite, slightly conscious of anti-climax, "I really must be going. God bless you, my dear."

He made a rather embarrassed exit. The stalwart Spanish girl met him in the passage and opened a side door for him, staring curiously at him the while.

It was just growing dark as he reached the hotel. There was a solitary figure sitting on the terrace. Mr Satterthwaite made straight for it. He was excited and his heart was beating quite fast. He felt that tremendous issues lay in his hands. One false move -

But he tried to conceal his agitation and to speak naturally and casually to Anthony Cosden.

"A warm evening," he observed. "I quite lost count of time sitting up there on the cliff."

"Have you been up there all this time?"

Mr Satterthwaite nodded. The swing door into the hotel opened to let someone through, and a beam of light fell suddenly on the other's face, illuminating its look of dull suffering, of uncomprehending dumb endurance.

Mr Satterthwaite thought to himself, "It's worse for him than it would be for me. Imagination, conjecture, speculation - they can do a lot for

you. You can, as it were, ring the changes upon pain. The uncomprehending blind suffering of an animal - that's terrible..."

Cosden spoke suddenly in a harsh voice. "I'm going for a stroll after dinner. You - you understand? The third time's lucky. For God's sake don't interfere. I know your interference will be well-meaning and all that - but take it from me, it's useless."

Mr Satterthwaite drew himself up.

"I never interfere," he said, thereby giving the lie to the whole purpose and object of his existence.

"I know what you think -" went on Cosden, but he was interrupted.

"You must excuse me, but there I beg to differ from you," said Mr Satterthwaite. "Nobody knows what another person is thinking. They may imagine they do, but they are nearly always wrong."

"Well, perhaps that's so." Cosden was doubtful, slightly taken aback.

"Thought is yours only," said his companion. "Nobody can alter or influence the use you mean to make of it. Let us talk of a less painful subject. That old villa, for instance. It has a curious charm, withdrawn, sheltered from the world, shielding heaven knows what mystery. It tempted me to do a doubtful action. I tried one of the shutters."

"You did?" Cosden turned his head sharply. "But it was fastened, of course?"

"No," said Mr Satterthwaite. "It was open." He added gently, "The third shutter from the end."

"Why," Cosden burst out, "that was the one -"

He broke off suddenly, but Mr Satterthwaite had seen the light that had sprung up in his eyes. He rose - satisfied.

Some slight tinge of anxiety still remained with him. Using his favourite metaphor of a drama, he hoped that he had spoken his few lines correctly. For they were very important lines.

But thinking it over, his artistic judgment was satisfied. On his way up to the cliff, Cosden would try that shutter. It was not in human nature to resist. A memory of twenty odd years ago had brought him to this spot, the same memory would take him to the shutter. And afterwards?

"I shall know in the morning," said Mr Satterthwaite, and proceeded to change methodically for his evening meal.

It was somewhere round ten o'clock that Mr Satterthwaite set foot once more in the garden of La Paz. Manuel bade him a smiling "Good morning," and handed him a single rosebud which Mr Satterthwaite put carefully into his buttonhole. Then he went on to the house. He stood there for some minutes looking up at the peaceful white walls,

the trailing orange creeper, and the faded green shutters. So silent, so peaceful. Had the whole thing been a dream?

But at that moment one of the windows opened and the lady who occupied Mr Satterthwaite's thoughts came out. She came straight to him with a buoyant swaying walk, like someone carried on a great wave of exultation. Her eyes were shining, her colour high. She looked like a figure of joy on a frieze. There was no hesitation about her, no doubts or tremors. Straight to Mr Satterthwaite she came, put her hands on his shoulders and kissed him - not once but many times. Large, dark, red roses, very velvety - that is how he thought of it afterwards. Sunshine, summer, birds singing - that was the atmosphere into which he felt himself caught up. Warmth, joy and tremendous vigour.

"I'm so happy," she said. "You darling! How did you know? How could you know? You're like the good magician in the fairy tales."

She paused, a sort of breathlessness of happiness upon her.

"We're going over today - to the Consul - to get married. When John comes, his father will be there. We'll tell him there was some misunderstanding in the past. Oh! He won't ask questions. Oh! I'm so happy - so happy - so happy."

Happiness did indeed surge from her like a tide. It lapped round Mr Satterthwaite in a warm exhilarating flood.

"It's so wonderful to Anthony to find he has a son. I never dreamt he'd mind or care." She looked confidently into Mr Satterthwaite's eyes. "Isn't it strange how things come right and end all beautifully?"

He had his clearest vision of her yet. A child - still a child - with her love of make believe - her fairy tales that ended beautifully with two people "living happily ever afterwards."

He said gently, "If you bring this man of yours happiness in these last months, you will indeed have done a very beautiful thing."

Her eyes opened wide - surprised.

"Oh!" she said. "You don't think I'd let him die, do you? After all these years - when he's come to me. I've known lots of people whom doctors have given up and who are alive today. Die? Of course he's not going to die!"

He looked at her - her strength, her beauty, her vitality - her indomitable courage and will. He, too, had known doctors to be mistaken... The personal factor - you never knew how much and how little it counted.

She said again, with scorn and amusement in her voice -

"You don't think I'd let him die, do you?"

"No," said Mr Satterthwaite at last very gently. "Somehow, my dear, I don't think you will..."

Then at last he walked down the cypress path to the bench overlooking the sea and found there the person he was expecting to see. Mr Quin rose and greeted him - the same as ever, dark, saturnine, smiling and sad.

"You expected me?" he asked.

And Mr Satterthwaite answered, "Yes, I expected you."

They sat together on the bench.

"I have an idea that you have been playing Providence once more, to judge by your expression," said Mr Quin presently.

Mr Satterthwaite looked at him reproachfully.

"As if you didn't know all about it."

"You always accuse me of omniscience," said Mr Quin, smiling.

"If you know nothing, why were you here the night before last - waiting?" countered Mr Satterthwaite.

"Oh, that -?"

"Yes, that."

"I had a - commission to perform."

"For whom?"

"You have sometimes fancifully named me an advocate for the dead."

"The dead?" said Mr Satterthwaite, a little puzzled. "I don't understand."

Mr Quin pointed a long, lean finger down at the blue depths below.

"A man was drowned down there twenty-two years ago."

"I know - but I don't see -"

"Supposing that, after all, that man loved his young wife. Love can make devils of men as well as angels. She had a girlish adoration for him, but he could never touch the womanhood in her - and that drove him mad. He tortured her because he loved her. Such things happen. You know that as well as I do."

"Yes," admitted Mr Satterthwaite, "I have seen such things - but rarely - very rarely..."

"And you have also seen, more commonly, that there is such a thing as remorse - the desire to make amends - at all costs to make amends."

"Yes, but death came too soon..."

"Death!" There was contempt in Mr Quin's voice. "You believe in a life after death, do you not? And who are you to say that the same

wishes, the same desires, may not operate in that other life? If the desire is strong enough - a messenger may be found."

His voice tailed away.

Mr Satterthwaite got up, trembling a little.

"I must get back to the hotel," he said. "If you are going that way."

But Mr Quin shook his head.

"No," he said. "I shall go back the way I came."

When Mr Satterthwaite looked back over his shoulder, he saw his friend walking towards the edge of the cliff.

Chapter 7

THE VOICE IN THE DARK

"I am a little worried about Margery," said Lady Stranleigh.

"My girl, you know," she added.

She sighed pensively.

"It makes one feel terribly old to have a grown-up daughter."

Mr Satterthwaite, who was the recipient of these confidences, rose to the occasion gallantly.

"No one could believe it possible," he declared with a little bow.

"Flatterer," said Lady Stranleigh, but she said it vaguely and it was clear that her mind was elsewhere.

Mr Satterthwaite looked at the slender white-clad figure in some admiration. The Cannes sunshine was searching, but Lady Stranleigh came through the test very well. At a distance the youthful effect was really extraordinary. One almost wondered if she were grown-up or not. Mr Satterthwaite, who knew everything, knew that it was perfectly possible for Lady Stranleigh to have grown-up grandchildren. She represented the extreme triumph of art over nature. Her figure was marvellous, her complexion was marvellous. She had enriched many beauty parlours and certainly the results were astounding.

Lady Stranleigh lit a cigarette, crossed her beautiful legs encased in the finest of nude silk stockings and murmured, "Yes, I really am rather worried about Margery."

"Dear me," said Mr Satterthwaite, "what is the trouble?"

Lady Stanleigh turned her beautiful blue eyes upon him.

"You have never met her, have you? She is Charles' daughter," she added helpfully.

If entries in "Who's Who" were strictly truthful, the entries concerning Lady Stranleigh might have ended as follows - hobbies - getting married... She had floated through life shedding husbands as she went. She had lost three by divorce and one by death.

"If she had been Rudolph's child I could have understood it," mused Lady Stranleigh. "You remember Rudolf? He was always temperamental. Six months after we married I had to apply for those queer things - what do they call them? Conjugal what nots, you know what I mean. Thank goodness it is all much simpler nowadays. I remember I had to write him the silliest kind of letter - my lawyer practically dictated it to me. Asking him to come back, you know, and that I would do all I could, etc, etc, but you never could count on Rudolf, he was so temperamental. He came rushing home at once, which was quite the wrong thing to do, and not all what the lawyers meant."

She sighed.

"About Margery?" suggested Mr Satterthwaite, tactfully leading her back to the subject under discussion.

"Of course. I was just going to tell you, wasn't I? Margery has been seeing things, or hearing them. Ghosts, you know, and all that. I should never have thought that Margery could be so imaginative. She is a dear good girl, always has been, but just a shade - dull."

"Impossible," murmured Mr Satterthwaite with a confused idea of being complimentary.

"In fact, very dull," said Lady Stranleigh. "Doesn't care for dancing, or cocktails or any of the things a young girl ought to care about. She much prefers staying at home to hunt instead of coming out here with me."

"Dear, dear," said Mr Satterthwaite, "she wouldn't come out with you, you say?"

"Well, I didn't exactly press her. Daughters have a depressing effect upon one, I find."

Mr Satterthwaite tried to think of Lady Stranleigh accompanied by a serious-minded daughter and failed.

"I can't help wondering if Margery is going off her head," continued Margery's mother in a cheerful voice. "hearing voices is a very bad sign, so they tell me. It is not as though Abbot's Mede were haunted. The old building was burnt to the ground in 1836, and they put up a kind of early Victorian chʙteau which simply cannot be haunted. It is much too ugly and commonplace."

Mr Satterthwaite coughed. He was wondering why he was being told all this.

"I thought perhaps," said Lady Stranleigh, smiling brilliantly upon him, "that you might be able to help me."

"I?"

"Yes. You are going back to England tomorrow, aren't you?"

"I am. Yes, that is so," admitted Mr Satterthwaite cautiously.

"And you know all these psychical research people. Of course you do, you know everybody."

Mr Satterthwaite smiled a little. It was one of his weaknesses to know everybody.

"So what can be simpler?" continued Lady Stranleigh. "I never get on with that sort of person. You know - earnest men with beards and usually spectacles. They bore me terribly and I am quite at my worst with them."

Mr Satterthwaite was rather taken aback. Lady Stranleigh continued to smile at him brilliantly.

"So that is all settled, isn't it?" she said brightly. "You will go down to Abbot's Mede and see Margery, and make all the arrangements. I shall be terribly grateful to you. Of course if Margery is really going off her head, I will come home. Ah! here is Bimbo."

Her smile from being brilliant became dazzling.

A young man in white tennis flannels was approaching them. He was about twenty-five years of age and extremely good-looking.

The young man said simply, "I have been looking for you everywhere, Babs."

"What has the tennis been like?"

"Septic."

Lady Stranleigh rose. She turned her head over her shoulder and murmured in dulcet tones to Mr Satterthwaite, "It is simply marvellous of you to help me. I shall never forget it."

Mr Satterthwaite looked after the retreating couple.

"I wonder," he mused to himself, "if Bimbo is going to be No. 5."

II

The conductor of the Train de Luxe was pointing out to Mr Satterthwaite where an accident on the line had occurred a few years previously. As he finished his spirited narrative, the other looked up and saw a well-known face smiling at him over the conductor's shoulder.

"My dear Mr Quin," said Mr Satterthwaite.

His little withered face broke into smiles.

"What a coincidence! That we should both be returning to England on the same train. You are going there, I suppose."

"Yes," said Mr Quin. "I have business there of rather an important nature. Are you taking the first service of dinner?"

"I always do so. Of course, it is an absurd time - half-past six, but one runs less risk with the cooking."

Mr Quin nodded comprehendingly.

"I also," he said. "We might perhaps arrange to sit together."

Half-past six found Mr Quin and Mr Satterthwaite established opposite each other at a small table in the dining-car. Mr Satterthwaite gave due attention to the wine list and then turned to his companion.

"I have not seen you since - ah, yes not since Corsica. You left very suddenly that day."

Mr Quin shrugged his shoulders.

"Not more so than usual. I come and go, you know. I come and go."

The words seemed to awake some echo of remembrance in Mr Satterthwaite's mind. A little shiver passed down his spine - not a disagreeable sensation, quite the contrary. He was conscious of a pleasurable sense of anticipation.

Mr Quin was holding up a bottle of red wine, examining the label on it. The bottle was between him and the light but for a minute or two a red glow enveloped his person.

Mr Satterthwaite felt again that sudden stir of excitement.

"I too have a kind of mission in England," he remarked, smiling broadly at the remembrance. "You know Lady Stranleigh perhaps?"

Mr Quin shook his head.

"It is an old title," said Mr Satterthwaite, "a very old title. One of the few that can descend in the female line. She is a Baroness in her own right. Rather a romantic history really."

Mr Quin settled himself more comfortably in his chair. A waiter, flying down the swinging car, deposited cups of soup before them as if by a miracle. Mr Quin sipped it cautiously.

"You are about to give me one of those wonderful descriptive portraits of yours," he murmured, "that is so, is it not?"

Mr Satterthwaite beamed on him.

"She is really a marvellous woman," he said. "Sixty, you know - yes, I should say at least sixty. I knew them as girls, she and her sister. Beatrice, that was the name of the elder one. Beatrice and Barbara. I remember them as the Barron girls. Both good-looking and in those days very hard up. But that was a great many years ago - why, dear me, I was a young man myself then." Mr Satterthwaite sighed. "There

were several lives then between them and the title. Old Lord Stranleigh was a first cousin once removed. I think Lady Stranleigh's life has been quite a romantic affair. Three unexpected deaths - two of the old man's brothers and a nephew. Then there was the Uralia. You remember the wreck of the Uralia? She went down off the coast of New Zealand. The Barron girls were on board. Beatrice was drowned. This one, Barbara, was amongst the few survivors. Six months later, old Stranleigh died and she succeeded to the title and came into a considerable fortune. Since then she has lived for one thing only - herself! She has always been the same, beautiful, unscrupulous, completely callous, interested solely in herself. She has had four husbands, and I have no doubt could get a fifth in a minute."

He went on the describe the mission with which he had been entrusted by Lady Stranleigh.

"I thought of running down to Abbot's Mede to see the young lady," he explained. "I - I feel that something ought to be done about the matter. It is impossible to think of Lady Stranleigh as an ordinary mother..." he stopped, looking across the table at Mr Quin.

"I wish you would come with me," he said wistfully. "Would it not be possible?"

"I'm afraid not," said Mr Quin. "But let me see, Abbot's Mede is in Wiltshire, is it not?"

Mr Satterthwaite nodded,

"I thought as much. As it happens, I shall be staying not far from Abbot's Mede, at a place you and I both know," he smiled. "You remember that little inn, "The 'Bells and Motley'?"

"Of course," cried Mr Satterthwaite. "You will be there?"

Mr Quin nodded. "For a week or ten days. Possibly longer. If you will come and look me up one day, I shall be delighted to see you."

And somehow or other Mr Satterthwaite felt strangely comforted by the assurance.

III

"My dear Miss - er - Margery," said Mr Satterthwaite, "I assure you that I should not dream of laughing at you."

Margery Gale frowned a little. They were sitting in the large comfortable hall of Abbot's Mede. Margery Gale was a big squarely built girl. She bore no resemblance to her mother, but took entirely after her father's side of the family, a line of hard-riding country squires. She looked fresh and wholesome and the picture of sanity. Nevertheless, Mr Satterthwaite was reflecting to himself that the Barrons as a family were all inclined to mental instability. Margery might have inherited her physical appearance from her father and at the same time have inherited some mental kink from her mother's side of the family.

"I wish," said Margery, "that I could get rid of that Casson woman. I don't believe in spiritualism, and I don't like it. She is one of these silly women that run a craze to death. She is always bothering me to have a medium down here."

Mr Satterthwaite coughed, fidgeted a little in his chair and then said in a judicial manner, "Let me be quite sure that I have all the facts. The first of the - er - phenomena occurred two months ago, I understand?"

"About that," agreed the girl. "Sometimes it was a whisper and sometimes it was quite a clear voice but it always said much the same thing."

"Which was?"

"Give back what is not yours. Give back what you have stolen. On each occasion I switched on the light, but the room was quite empty and there was no one there. In the end I got so nervous that I got Clayton, mother's maid, to sleep on the sofa in my room."

"And the voice came just the same?"

"Yes - and this is what frightens me - Clayton did not hear it."

Mr Satterthwaite reflected for a minute or two. "Did it come loudly or softly that evening?"

"It was almost a whisper," admitted Margery. "If Clayton was sound asleep I suppose she would not really have heard it. She wanted me to see a doctor." The girl laughed bitterly.

"But since last night even Clayton believes," she continued.

"What happened last night?"

"I am just going to tell you. I have told no one as yet. I had been out hunting yesterday and we had had a long run. I was dead tired, and slept very heavily. I dreamt - a horrible dream - that I had fallen over some iron railings and that one of the spikes was entering slowly into my throat. I woke to find that it was true - there was some sharp point pressing into the side of my neck, and at the same time a voice was murmuring softly, "You have stolen what is mine. This is death!

"I screamed," continued Margery, "and clutched at the air, but there was nothing there. Clayton heard me scream from the room next door where she was sleeping. She came rushing in, and she distinctly felt something brushing past her in the darkness, but she says that whatever that something was, it was not anything human."

Mr Satterthwaite stared at her. The girl was obviously very shaken and upset. He noticed on the left side of her throat a small square of sticking plaster. She caught the direction of his gaze and nodded.

"Yes," she said, "it was not imagination, you see."

Mr Satterthwaite put a question almost apologetically, it sounded so melodramatic.

"You don't know of anyone - er - who has a grudge against you?" he asked.

"Of course not," said Margery. "What an idea!"

Mr Satterthwaite started on another line of attack.

"What visitors have you had during the last two months?"

"You don't mean just people for weekends, I suppose? Marcia Keane has been with me all along. She is my best friend, and just as keen on horses as I am. Then my cousin Roley Vavasour has been here a good deal."

Mr Satterthwaite nodded. He suggested that he should see Clayton, the maid.

"She has been with you a long time, I suppose?" he asked.

"Donkey's years," said Margery. "She was Mother's and Aunt Beatrice's maid when they were girls. That is why Mother has kept her on, I suppose, although she has got a French maid for herself. Clayton does sewing and pottering little odd jobs."

She took him upstairs and presently Clayton came to them. She was a tall, thin, old woman, with grey hair neatly parted, and she looked the acme of respectability.

"No, sir," she said in answer to Mr Satterthwaite's inquiries. "I have never heard anything of the house being haunted. To tell you the truth, sir, I thought it was all Miss Margery's imagination until last night. But I actually felt something - brushing by me in the darkness. And I can tell you this, sir, it was not anything human. And then there is that wound in Miss Margery's neck. She didn't do that herself, poor lamb."

But her words were suggestive to Mr Satterthwaite. Was it possible that Margery could have inflicted that wound herself? He had heard of strange cases where girls apparently just as sane and well-balanced as Margery had done the most amazing things.

"It will soon heal up," said Clayton. "It's not like this scar of mine."

She pointed to a mark on her own forehead.

"That was done forty years ago, sir- I still bear the mark of it."

"It was the time the Uralia went down," put in Margery. "Clayton was hit on the head by a spar, weren't you, Clayton?"

"Yes, Miss."

"What do you think yourself, Clayton," asked Mr Satterthwaite, "what do you think was the meaning of this attack on Miss Margery?"

"I really should not like to say, sir." Mr Satterthwaite read this correctly as the reserve of the well-trained servant.

"What do you really think, Clayton?" he said persuasively.

"I think, sir, that something very wicked must have been done in this house, and that until that is wiped out there won't be any peace."

The woman spoke gravely, and her faded blue eyes met his steadily.

Mr Satterthwaite went downstairs rather disappointed. Clayton evidently held the orthodox view, a deliberate "haunting" as a consequence of some evil deed in the past. Mr Satterthwaite himself was not so easily satisfied. The phenomena had only taken place in the last two months. Had only taken place since Marcia Keane and Roley Vavasour had been there. He must find out something about these two. It was possible that the whole thing was a practical joke. But he shook his head, dissatisfied with that solution. The thing was more sinister than that. The post had just come in and Margery was opening and reading her letters. Suddenly she gave an exclamation.

"Mother is too absurd," she said. "Do read this." She handed the letter to Mr Satterthwaite.

It was an epistle typical of Lady Stranleigh.

"Darling Margery (she wrote),

"I am so glad you have that nice little Mr Satterthwaite there. He is awfully clever and knows all the big-wig spook people. You must have them all down and investigate things thoroughly. I am sure you will have a perfectly marvellous time, and I only wish I could be

there, but I have really been quite ill the last few days. The hotels are so careless about the food they give one. The doctor says it is some kind of food poisoning. I was really very ill.

"Sweet of you to send me the chocolates, darling, but surely just a wee bit silly, wasn't it? I mean, there's such wonderful confectionery out here.

"Bye-bye, darling, and have a lovely time laying the family ghosts. Bimbo says my tennis is coming on marvellously. Oceans of love.

"Yours,

"Barbara."

"Mother always wants me to call her Barbara," said Margery. "Simply silly, I think."

Mr Satterthwaite smiled a little. He realised that the stolid conservatism of her daughter must on occasions be very trying to Lady Stranleigh. The contents of her letter struck him in a way in which obviously they did not strike Margery.

"Did you send your mother a box of chocolates?" he asked.

Margery shook her head. "No, I didn't, It must have been someone else."

Mr Satterthwaite looked grave. Two things struck him as of significance. Lady Stranleigh had received a gift of a box of chocolates and she was suffering from a severe attack of poisoning. Apparently she had not connected these two things. Was there a connection? He himself was inclined to think there was.

A tall dark girl lounged out of the morning-room and joined them.

She was introduced to Mr Satterthwaite as Marcia Keane. She smiled on the little man in an easy good-humoured fashion.

"Have you come down to hunt Margery's pet ghost?" she asked in a drawling voice. "We all rot her about that ghost. Hello, here's Roley."

A car had just drawn up at the front door. Out of it tumbled a tall young man with fair hair and an eager boyish manner.

"Hello, Margery," he cried, "hello, Marcia! I have brought down reinforcements." He turned to the two women who were just entering the hall. Mr Satterthwaite recognised in the first one of the two the Mrs Casson of whom Margery had spoken just now.

"You must forgive me, Margery, dear," she drawled, smiling broadly. "Mr Vavasour told us that it would be quite all right. It was really his idea that I should bring down Mrs Lloyd with me."

She indicated her companion with a slight gesture of the hand.

"This is Mrs Lloyd," she said in a tone of triumph. "Simply the most wonderful medium that ever existed."

Mrs Lloyd uttered no modest protest, she bowed and remained with her hands crossed in front of her. She was a highly-coloured young woman of commonplace appearance. Her clothes were unfashionable but rather ornate. She wore a chain of moonstones and several rings.

Margery Gale, as Mr Satterthwaite could see, was not too pleased at this intrusion. She threw an angry look at Roley Vavasour, who seemed quite unconscious of the offence he had caused.

"Lunch is ready, I think," said Margery.

"Good," said Mrs Casson.

"We will hold a sйance immediately afterwards. Have you got some fruit for Mrs Lloyd? She never eats a solid meal before a sйance."

They all went into the dining-room. The medium ate two bananas and an apple, and replied cautiously and briefly to the various polite remarks which Margery addressed to her from time to time. Just before they rose from the table, she flung back her head suddenly and sniffed the air.

"There is something very wrong in this house. I feel it."

"Isn't she wonderful?" said Mrs Casson in a low delighted voice.

"Oh! undoubtedly," said Mr Satterthwaite dryly.

The sйance was held in the library. The hostess was, as Mr Satterthwaite could see, very unwilling, only the obvious delight of her guests in the proceedings reconciled her to the ordeal

The arrangements were made with a good deal of care by Mrs Casson, who was evidently well up in those matters, the chairs were set round in a circle, the curtains were drawn, and presently the medium announced herself ready to begin.

"Six people," she said, looking round the room." That is bad. We must have an uneven number. Seven is ideal. I get my best results out of a circle of seven."

"One of the servants," suggested Roley. He rose. "I will rout out the butler."

"Let's have Clayton," said Margery. Mr Satterthwaite saw a look of annoyance pass over Roley Vavasour's good-looking face.

"But why Clayton?" he demanded.

"You don't like Clayton," said Margery slowly. Roley shrugged his shoulders.

"Clayton doesn't like me," he said whimsically. "In fact she hates me like poison." He waited a minute or two, but Margery did not give way.

"All right," he said, "have her down."

The circle was formed.

There was a period of silence broken by the usual coughs and fidgetings. Presently a succession of raps were heard and then the voice of the medium's control, a Red Indian called Cherokee.

"Indian Brave says you Good evening ladies and gentlemen. Someone here very anxious speak. Someone here very anxious give message to young lady. I go now. The spirit say what she come to say."

A pause and then a new voice, that of a woman, said softly, "Is Margery here?"

Roley Vavasour took it upon himself to answer.

"Yes," he said, "she is. Who is that speaking?"

"I am Beatrice."

"Beatrice? Who is Beatrice?"

To everyone's annoyance the voice of the Red Indian Cherokee was heard once more.

"I have message for all of you people. Life here very bright and beautiful. We all work very hard. Help those who have not yet passed over."

Again a silence and then the woman's voice was heard once more.

"This is Beatrice speaking."

"Beatrice who?"

"Beatrice Barren."

Mr Satterthwaite leant forward. He was very excited, "Beatrice Barton who was drowned in the Uralia?"

"Yes, that is right. I remember the Uralia. I have a message - for this house - Give back what is not yours."

"I don't understand," said Margery helplessly. "I - oh, are you really Aunt Beatrice?"

"Yes, I am your aunt."

"Of course she is," said Mrs Casson reproachfully. "How can you be so suspicious? The spirits don't like it."

And suddenly Mr Satterthwaite thought of a very simple test. His voice quivered as he spoke.

"Do you remember Mr Bottacetti?" he asked.

Immediately there came a ripple of laughter.

"Poor, old Boatsupsetty. Of course."

Mr Satterthwaite was dumbfounded. The test had succeeded. It was an incident of over forty years ago which had happened when he and the Barren girls had found themselves at the same seaside resort. A young Italian acquaintance of theirs had gone out in a boat and capsized, and Beatrice Barren had jestingly named him Boatsupsetty. It seemed impossible that anyone in the room could know of this incident except himself. The medium stirred and groaned.

"She is coming out," said Mrs Casson. "That is all we will get out of her today, I am afraid."

The daylight shone once more on the room full of people, two of whom at least were badly scared.

Mr Satterthwaite saw by Margery's white face that she was deeply perturbed. When they had got rid of Mrs Casson and the medium, he sought a private interview with his hostess. "I want to ask you one or two questions, Miss Margery. If you and your mother were to die who succeeds to the title and estates?"

"Roley Vavasour, I suppose. His mother was Mother's first cousin."

Mr Satterthwaite nodded.

"He seems to have been here a lot this winter," he said gently. "You will forgive me asking - but is he - fond of you?"

"He asked me to marry him three weeks ago," said Margery quietly. "I said no."

"Please forgive me, but are you engaged to anyone else?" He saw the colour sweep over her face.

"I am," she said emphatically. "I am going to marry Noel Barton. Mother laughs and says it is absurd. She seems to think it is ridiculous to be engaged to a curate. Why, I should like to know! There are curates and curates! You should see Noel on a horse."

"Oh, quite so," said Mr Satterthwaite. "Oh, undoubtedly."

A footman entered with a telegram on a salver. Margery tore it open.

"Mother is arriving home tomorrow," she said. "Bother. I wish to goodness she would stay away."

Mr Satterthwaite made no comment on this filial sentiment. Perhaps he thought it justified.

"In that case," he murmured, "I think I am returning to London."

IV

Mr Satterthwaite was not quite pleased with himself. He felt that he had left this particular problem in an unfinished state. True that, on Lady Stranleigh's return, his responsibility was ended, yet he felt assured that he had not heard the last of the Abbot's Mede mystery.

But the next development when it came was so serious in its character that it found him totally unprepared. He learnt of it in the pages of his morning paper. "Baroness Dies in her Bath," as the Daily Megaphone had it. The other papers were more restrained and delicate in their language, but the fact was the same. Lady Stranleigh had been found dead in her bath and her death was due to drowning. She had, it was assumed, lost consciousness, and whilst in that state her head had slipped below the water.

But Mr Satterthwaite was not satisfied with that explanation. Calling for his valet, he made his toilet with less than his usual care, and ten minutes later his big Rolls-Royce was carrying him out of London as fast as it could travel.

But strangely enough it was not for Abbot's Mede he was bound, but for a small inn some fifteen miles distant which bore the rather unusual name of "The Bells and Motley." It was with great relief that he heard that Mr Harley Quin was still staying there. In another minute he was face to face with his friend.

Mr Satterthwaite clasped him by the hand and began to speak at once in an agitated manner.

"I am terribly upset. You must help me. Already I have a dreadful feeling that it may be too late - that that nice girl may be the next to go, for she is a nice girl, nice through and through."

"If you will tell me," said Mr Quin, smiling, "what it is all about?"

Mr Satterthwaite looked at him reproachfully.

"You know. I am perfectly certain that you know. But I will tell you."

He poured out the story of his stay at Abbot's Mede and, as always with Mr Quin, he found himself taking pleasure in his narrative. He was eloquent and subtle and meticulous as to detail.

"So you see," he ended, "there must be an explanation."

He looked hopefully at Mr Quin as a dog looks at his master.

"But it is you who must solve the problem, not I," said Mr Quin. "I do not know these people. You do."

"I knew the Barron girls forty years ago," said Mr Satterthwaite with pride.

Mr Quin nodded and looked sympathetic, so much so that the other went on dreamily.

"That time at Brighton now, Botticetti-Boatsupsetty, quite a silly joke but how we laughed. Dear, dear, I was young then. Did a lot of foolish things. I remember the maid they had with them. Alice, her name was, a little bit of a thing - very ingenuous. I kissed her in the passage of the hotel, I remember, and one of the girls nearly caught me doing it. Dear, dear, how long ago that all was."

He shook his head again and sighed. Then he looked at Mr Quin.

"So you can't help me?" he said wistfully. "On other occasions -"

"On other occasions you have proved successful owing entirely to your own efforts," said Mr Quin gravely. "I think it will be the same this time. If I were you, I should go to Abbot's Mede now."

"Quite so, quite so," said Mr Satterthwaite, "as a matter of fact that is what I thought of doing. I can't persuade you to come with me?"

Mr Quin shook his head.

"No," he said, "my work here is done. I am leaving almost immediately."

At Abbot's Mede, Mr Satterthwaite was taken at once to Margery Gale. She was sitting dry-eyed at a desk in the morning-room on which was strewn various papers. Something in her greeting touched him. She seemed so very pleased to see him.

"Roley and Marcia have just left. Mr Satterthwaite, it is not as the doctors think. I am convinced, absolutely convinced, that Mother was pushed under the water and held there. She was murdered, and whoever murdered her wants to murder me too. I am sure of that. That is why -" she indicated the document in front of her.

"I have been making my will," she explained. "A lot of the money and some of the property does not go with the title, and there is my father's money as well. I am leaving everything I can to Noel. I know he will make a good use of it and I do not trust Roley, he has always been out for what he can get. Will you sign it as a witness?"

"My dear young lady," said Mr Satterthwaite, "you should sign a will in the presence of two witnesses and they should then sign themselves at the same time." Margery brushed aside this legal pronouncement.

"I don't see that it matters in the least," she declared. "Clayton saw me sign and then she signed her name. I was going to ring for the butler, but you will do instead."

Mr Satterthwaite uttered no fresh protest, he unscrewed his fountain pen and then, as he was about to append his signature, he paused suddenly. The name, written just above his own, recalled a flow of memories. Alice Clayton.

Something seemed to be struggling very hard to get through to him. Alice Clayton, there was some significance about that. Something to do with Mr Quin was mixed up with it. Something he had said to Mr Quin only a very short time ago.

Ah, he had it now. Alice Clayton, that was her name. The little bit of a thing. People changed - yes, but not like that. And the Alice Clayton he knew had had brown eyes. The room seemed whirling round him. He felt for a chair and presently, as though from a great distance, he heard Margery's voice speaking to him anxiously. "Are you ill? Oh, what is it? I am sure you are ill." He was himself again. He took her hand.

"My dear, I see it all now. You must prepare yourself for a great shock. The woman upstairs whom you call Clayton is not Clayton at all. The real Alice Clayton was drowned on the Uralia."

Margery was staring at him.

"Who - who is she then?"

"I am not mistaken, I cannot be mistaken. The woman you call Clayton is your mother's sister, Beatrice Barren. You remember telling me that she was struck on the head by a spar? I should imagine that that blow destroyed her memory, and that being the case, your mother saw the chance -"

"Of pinching the title, you mean?" asked Margery bitterly. "Yes, she would do that. It seems dreadful to say that now she is dead, but she was like that."

"Beatrice was the elder sister," said Mr Satterthwaite. "By your uncle's death she would inherit everything and your mother would get nothing. Your mother claimed the wounded girl as her maid, not as her sister. The girl recovered from the blow and believed, of course, what was told her, that she was Alice Clayton, your mother's maid. I should imagine that just lately her memory had begun to return, but that the blow on the head, given all these years ago, has at last caused mischief on the brain."

Margery was looking at him with eyes of horror.

"She killed Mother and she wanted to kill me," she breathed.

"It seems so," said Mr Satterthwaite. "In her brain there was just one muddled idea - that her inheritance had been stolen and was being kept from her by you and your mother."

"But - but Clayton is so old."

Mr Satterthwaite was silent for a minute as a vision rose up before him - the faded old woman with grey hair, and the radiant golden-haired creature sitting in the sunshine at Cannes. Sisters! Could it really be so? He remembered the Barren girls and their likeness to each other. Just because two lives had developed on different tracks...

He shook his head sharply, obsessed by the wonder and pity of life...

He turned to Margery and said gently, "We had better go upstairs and see her."

They found Clayton sitting in the little workroom where she sewed. She did not turn her head as they came in for a reason that Mr Satterthwaite soon found out.

"Heart failure," he murmured, as he touched the cold rigid shoulder. "Perhaps it is best that way."

Chapter 8

THE FACE OF HELEN

Mr Satterthwaite was at the Opera and sat alone in his big box on the first floor. Outside the door was a printed card bearing his name. An appreciator and a connoisseur of all the arts, Mr Satterthwaite was especially fond of good music, and was a regular subscriber to Covent Garden every year, reserving a box for Tuesdays and Fridays throughout the season.

But it was not often that he sat in it alone. He was a gregarious little gentleman, and he liked filling his box with the elite of the great world to which he belonged, and also with the aristocracy of the artistic world in which he was equally at home. He was alone tonight because a Countess had disappointed him. The Countess, besides being a beautiful and celebrated woman, was also a good mother. Her children had been attacked by that common and distressing disease, the mumps, and the Countess remained at home in tearful confabulation with exquisitely starched nurses. Her husband, who had supplied her with the aforementioned children and a title, but who was otherwise a complete nonentity, had seized at the chance to escape. Nothing bored him more than music.

So Mr Satterthwaite sat alone. Cavalier Rusticate and Pagliacci were being given that night, and since the first had never appealed to him, he arrived just after the curtain went down, on Santuzza's death agony, in time to glance round the house with practised eyes, before

everyone streamed out, bent on paying visits or fighting for coffee or lemonade. Mr Satterthwaite adjusted his opera glasses, looked round the house, marked down his prey and sallied forth with a well mapped out plan of campaign ahead of him. A plan, however, which he did not put into execution, for just outside his box he cannoned into a tall dark man, and recognised him with a pleasurable thrill of excitement.

"Mr Quin," cried Mr Satterthwaite.

He seized his friend warmly by the hand, clutching him as though he feared any minute to see him vanish into thin air.

"You must share my box," said Mr Satterthwaite determinedly. "You are not with a party?"

"No, I am sitting by myself in the stalls," responded Mr Quin with a smile.

"Then, that is settled," said Mr Satterthwaite with a sigh of relief.

His manner was almost comic, had there been anyone to observe it.

"You are very kind," said Mr Quin.

"Not at all. It is a pleasure. I didn't know you were fond of music?"

"There are reasons why I am attracted to - Pagliacci."

"Ah! Of course," said Mr Satterthwaite, nodding sapiently, though, if put to it, he would have found it hard to explain just why he had used that expression. "Of course, you would be."

They went back to the box at the first summons of the bell, and leaning over the front of it, they watched the people returning to the stalls.

"That's a beautiful head," observed Mr Satterthwaite suddenly.

He indicated with his glasses a spot immediately beneath them in the stalls circle. A girl sat there whose face they could not see - only the pure gold of her hair that fitted with the closeness of a cap till it merged into the white neck.

"A Greek head," said Mr Satterthwaite reverently. "Pure Greek." He sighed happily. "It's a remarkable thing when you come to think of it - how very few people have hair that fits them. It's more noticeable now that everyone is shingled."

"You are so observant," said Mr Quin.

"I see things," admitted Mr Satterthwaite. "I do see things. For instance, I picked out that head at once. We must have a look at her face sooner or later. But it won't match, I'm sure. That would be a chance in a thousand."

Almost as the words left his lips, the lights flickered and went down, the sharp rap of the conductor's baton was heard, and the opera began. A new tenor, said to be a second Caruso, was singing that

night. He had been referred to by the newspapers as a Jugoslav, a Czech, an Albanian, a Magyar, and a Bulgarian, with a beautiful impartiality. He had given an extraordinary concert at the Albert Hall, a programme of the folk songs of his native hills, with a specially tuned orchestra. They were in strange half-tones and the would-be musical had pronounced them "too marvellous." Real musicians had reserved judgment, realising that the ear had to be specially trained and attuned before any criticism was possible. It was quite a relief to some people to find this evening that Yoaschbim could sing in ordinary Italian with all the traditional sobs and quivers.

The curtain went down on the first act and applause burst out vociferously. Mr Satterthwaite turned to Mr Quin. He realised that the latter was waiting for him to pronounce judgment, and plumed himself a little. After all, he knew. As a critic he was well-nigh infallible. Very slowly he nodded his head. "It is the real thing," he said.

"You think so?"

"As fine a voice as Caruso's. People will not recognise that it is so at first, for his technique is not yet perfect. There are ragged edges, a lack of certainty in the attack. But the voice is there - magnificent."

"I went to his concert at the Albert Hall," said Mr Quin.

"Did you? I could not go."

"He made a wonderful hit with a Shepherd's Song."

"I read about it," said Mr Satterthwaite. "The refrain ends each time with a high note - a kind of cry. A note midway between A and B flat. Very curious."

Yoaschbim had taken three calls, bowing and smiling. The lights went up and the people began to file out. Mr Satterthwaite leant over to watch the girl with the golden head. She rose, adjusted her scarf, and turned.

Mr Satterthwaite caught his breath. There were, he knew, such faces in the world - faces that made history.

The girl moved to the gangway, her companion, a young man, beside her. And Mr Satterthwaite noticed how every man in the vicinity looked - and continued to look covertly.

"Beauty!" said Mr Satterthwaite to himself. "There is such a thing. Not charm, nor attraction, nor magnetism, nor any of the things we talk about so glibly - just sheer beauty. The shape of a face, the line of an eyebrow, the curve of a jaw. He quoted softly under his breath, "The face that launched a thousand ships." And for the first time he realised the meaning of those words.

He glanced across at Mr Quin, who was watching him in what seemed such perfect comprehension that Mr Satterthwaite felt there was no need for words.

"I've always wondered," he said simply, "what such women were really like."

"You mean?"

"The Helens, the Cleopatras, the Mary Stuarts."

Mr Quin nodded thoughtfully.

"If we go out," he suggested, "we may see."

They went out together, and their quest was successful. The pair they were in search of were seated on a lounge half-way up the staircase. For the first time, Mr Satterthwaite noted the girl's companion, a dark young man, not handsome, but with a suggestion of restless fire about him. A face full of strange angles - jutting cheek-bones, a forceful, slightly crooked jaw, deep-set eyes that were curiously light under the dark, overhanging brows.

"An interesting face," said Mr Satterthwaite to himself. "A real face. It means something."

The young man was leaning forward talking earnestly. The girl was listening. Neither of them belonged to Mr Satterthwaite's world. He took them to be of the "Arty" class. The girl wore a rather shapeless garment of cheap green silk. Her shoes were of soiled, white satin. The young man wore his evening clothes with an air of being uncomfortable in them.

The two men passed and re-passed several times. The fourth time they did so, the couple had been joined by a third - a fair young man with a suggestion of the clerk about him. With his coming a certain tension had set in. The newcomer was fidgetting with his tie and

seemed ill at ease, the girl's beautiful face was turned gravely up towards him, and her companion was scowling furiously.

"The usual story," said Mr Quin very softly, as they passed.

"Yes," said Mr Satterthwaite with a sigh. "It's inevitable, I suppose. The snarling of two dogs over a bone. It always has been, it always will be. And yet, one could wish for something different. Beauty -" he stopped. Beauty, to Mr Satterthwaite, meant something very wonderful. He found it difficult to speak of it. He looked at Mr Quin, who nodded his head gravely in understanding.

They went back to their seats for the second act.

At the close of the performance, Mr Satterthwaite turned eagerly to his friend.

"It is a wet night. My car is here. You must allow me to drive you - er - somewhere."

The last word was Mr Satterthwaite's delicacy coming into play. "To drive you home" would, he felt, have savoured of curiosity. Mr Quin had always been singularly reticent. It was extraordinary how little Mr Satterthwaite knew about him.

"But perhaps," continued the little man, "you have your own car waiting?"

"No," said Mr Quin, "I have no car waiting."

"Then -"

But Mr Quin shook his head.

"You are most kind," he said, "but I prefer to go my own way. Besides," he said with a rather curious smile, "if anything should happen, it will be for you to act. Goodnight, and thank you. Once again we have seen the drama together."

He had gone so quickly that Mr Satterthwaite had no time to protest, but he was left with a faint uneasiness stirring in his mind. To what drama did Mr Quin refer? Pagliacci or another?

Masters, Mr Satterthwaite's chauffeur, was in the habit of waiting in a side street. His master disliked the long delay while the cars drew up in turn before the Opera house. Now, as on previous occasions, he walked rapidly round the corner and along the street towards where he knew he should find Masters awaiting him. Just in front of him were a girl and a man, and even as he recognised them, another man joined them.

It all broke out in a minute. A man's voice, angrily uplifted. Another man's voice in injured protest. And then the scuffle. Blows, angry breathing, more blows, the form of a policeman appearing majestically from nowhere - and in another minute Mr Satterthwaite was beside the girl where she shrank back against the wall.

"Allow me," he said. "You must not stay here."

He took her by the arm and marshalled her swiftly down the street. Once she looked back.

"Oughtn't I -?" she began uncertainly.

Mr Satterthwaite shook his head.

"It would be very unpleasant for you to be mixed up in it. You would probably be asked to go along to the police station with them. I am sure neither of your friends would wish that."

He stopped.

"This is my car. If you will allow me to do so, I shall have much pleasure in driving you home."

The girl looked at him searchingly. The staid respectability of Mr Satterthwaite impressed her favourably. She bent her head.

"Thank you," she said, and got into the car, the door of which Masters was holding open.

In reply to a question from Mr Satterthwaite, she gave an address in Chelsea, and he got in beside her.

The girl was upset and not in the mood for talking, and Mr Satterthwaite was too tactful to intrude upon her thoughts. Presently, however, she turned to him and spoke of her own accord.

"I wish," she said pettishly, "people wouldn't be so silly."

"It is a nuisance," agreed Mr Satterthwaite.

His matter-of-fact manner put her at her ease, and she went on as though feeling the need of confiding in someone.

"It wasn't as though - I mean, well, it was like this Mr Eastney and I have been friends for a long time - ever since I came to London. He's taken no end of trouble about my voice, and got me some very good introductions, and he's been more kind to me than I can say. He's absolutely music mad. It was very good of him to take me tonight. I'm sure he can't really afford it. And then Mr Burns came up and spoke to us - quite nicely, I'm sure, and Phil (Mr Eastney) got sulky about it. I don't know why he should. It's a free country, I'm sure. And Mr Burns is always pleasant, and good-tempered. Then just as we were walking to the Tube, he came up and joined us, and he hadn't so much as said two words before Philip flew out at him like a madman. And - Oh! I don't like it."

"Don't you?" asked Mr Satterthwaite very softly.

She blushed, but very little. There was none of the conscious siren about her. A certain measure of pleasurable excitement in being fought for there must be - that was only nature, but Mr Satterthwaite decided that a worried perplexity lay uppermost, and he had the clue to it in another moment when she observed inconsequently, "I do hope he hasn't hurt him."

"Now which is 'him'?" thought Mr Satterthwaite, smiling to himself in the darkness. He backed his own judgment and said, "You hope Mr - er - Eastney hasn't hurt Mr Burns?"

She nodded.

"Yes, that's what I said. It seems so dreadful. I wish I knew."

The car was drawing up.

"Are you on the telephone?" he asked.

"Yes."

"If you like, I will find out exactly what has happened, and then telephone to you."

The girl's face brightened.

"Oh, that would be very kind of you. Are you sure it's not too much bother?"

"Not in the least."

She thanked him again and gave him her telephone number, adding with a touch of shyness, "My name is Gillian West."

As he was driven through the night, bound on his errand, a curious smile came to Mr Satterthwaite's lips.

He thought, "So that is all it is... The shape of a face, the curve of a jaw!"

But he fulfilled his promise.

II

The following Sunday afternoon Mr Satterthwaite went to Kew Gardens to admire the rhododendrons. Very long ago (incredibly long ago, it seemed to Mr Satterthwaite) he had driven down to Kew Gardens with a certain young lady to see the bluebells. Mr Satterthwaite had arranged very carefully beforehand in his own mind exactly what he was going to say, and the precise words he would use in asking the young lady for her hand in marriage. He was just conning them over in his mind, and responding to her raptures about the bluebells a little absent-mindedly, when the shock came. The young lady stopped exclaiming at the bluebells and suddenly confided in Mr Satterthwaite (as a true friend) her love for another. Mr Satterthwaite put away the little set speech he had prepared, and hastily rummaged for sympathy and friendship in the bottom drawer of his mind.

Such was Mr Satterthwaite's romance - a rather tepid early Victorian one, but it had left him with a romantic attachment to Kew Gardens, and he would often go there to see the bluebells, or, if he had been abroad later than usual, the rhododendrons, and would sigh to himself, and feel rather sentimental, and really enjoy himself very much indeed in an old-fashioned, romantic way.

This particular afternoon he was strolling back past the tea houses when he recognised a couple sitting at one of the small tables on the grass. They were Gillian West and the fair young man, and at that same moment they recognised him. He saw the girl flush and speak eagerly to her companion. In another minute he was shaking hands with them both in his correct, rather prim fashion, and had accepted the shy invitation proffered him to have tea with them. "I can't tell you, sir," said Mr Burns, "how grateful I am to you for looking after Gillian the other night. She told me all about it."

"Yes, indeed," said the girl. "It was ever so kind of you."

Mr Satterthwaite felt pleased and interested in the pair.

Their naïvete and sincerity touched him. Also, it was to him a peep into a world with which he was not well acquainted.

These people were of a class unknown to him.

In his little dried-up way, Mr Satterthwaite could be very sympathetic. Very soon he was hearing all about his new friends. He noted that Mr Burns had become Charlie, and he was not unprepared for the statement that the two were engaged.

"As a matter of fact," said Mr Burns with refreshing candour, "it just happened this afternoon, didn't it, Gil?"

Burns was a clerk in a shipping firm. He was making a fair salary, had a little money of his own, and the two proposed to be married quite soon.

Mr Satterthwaite listened, and nodded, and congratulated.

"An ordinary young man," he thought to himself, "a very ordinary young man. Nice, straightforward young chap, plenty to say for himself, good opinion of himself without being conceited, nice-looking without being unduly handsome. Nothing remarkable about him and will never set the Thames on fire. And the girl loves him..."

Aloud he said, "And Mr Eastney -"

He purposely broke off, but he had said enough to produce an effect for which he was not unprepared. Charlie Burns's face darkened, and Gillian looked troubled. More than troubled, he thought. She looked afraid.

"I don't like it," she said in a low voice. Her words were addressed to Mr Satterthwaite, as though she knew by instinct that he would understand a feeling incomprehensible to her lover. "You see - he's done a lot for me. He's encouraged me to take up singing, and - and helped me with it. But I've known all the time that my voice wasn't really good - not first-class. Of course, I've had engagements -"

She stopped.

"You've had a bit of trouble too," said Burns. "A girl wants someone to look after her. Gillian's had a lot of unpleasantness, Mr Satterthwaite. Altogether she's had a lot of unpleasantness. She's a good-looker, as you can see, and - well, that often leads to trouble for a girl."

Between them, Mr Satterthwaite became enlightened as to various happenings which were vaguely classed by Burns under the heading of unpleasantness. A young man who had shot himself, the extraordinary conduct of a Bank Manager (who was a married man!) a violent stranger (who must have been balmy!) the wild behaviour of an elderly artist. A trail of violence and tragedy that Gillian West had left in her wake, recited in the commonplace tones of Charles Burns.

"And it's my opinion," he ended, "that this fellow Eastney is a bit cracked. Gillian would have had trouble with him if I hadn't turned up to look after her."

His laugh sounded a little fatuous to Mr Satterthwaite, and no responsive smile came to the girl's face. She was looking earnestly at Mr Satterthwaite.

"Phil's all right," she said slowly. "He cares for me, I know, and I care for him like a friend - but - but not anything more. I don't know how he'll take the news about Charlie, I'm sure. He - I'm so afraid he'll be - "

She stopped, inarticulate in face of the dangers she vaguely sensed.

"If I can help you in any way," said Mr Satterthwaite warmly, "pray command me."

He fancied Charlie Burns looked vaguely resentful, but Gillian said at once, "Thank you."

Mr Satterthwaite left his new friends after having promised to take tea with Gillian on the following Thursday.

When Thursday came, Mr Satterthwaite felt a little thrill of pleasurable anticipation. He thought, "I'm an old man - but not too old to be thrilled by a face. A face..." Then he shook his head with a sense of foreboding.

Gillian was alone. Charlie Burns was to come in later. She looked much happier, Mr Satterthwaite thought, as though a load had been lifted from her mind. Indeed, she frankly admitted as much.

"I dreaded telling Phil about Charles. It was silly of me. I ought to have known Phil better. He was upset, of course, but no one could have been sweeter. Really sweet he was. Look what he sent me this morning - a wedding present. Isn't it magnificent?"

It was indeed rather magnificent for a young man in Philip Eastney's circumstances. A four-valve wireless set, of the latest type.

"We both love music so much, you see," explained the girl. "Phil said that when I was listening to a concert on this, I should always think of him a little. And I'm sure I shall. Because we have been such friends."

"You must be proud of your friend," said Mr Satterthwaite gently. "He seems to have taken the blow like a true sportsman."

Gillian nodded. He saw the quick tears come into her eyes.

"He asked me to do one thing for him. Tonight is the anniversary of the day we first met. He asked me if I would stay at home quietly this evening and listen to the wireless programme - not to go out with Charlie anywhere. I said, of course I would, and that I was very touched, and that I would think of him with a lot of gratitude and affection."

Mr Satterthwaite nodded, but he was puzzled. He was seldom at fault in his delineation of character, and he would have judged Philip Eastney quite incapable of such a sentimental request. The young man must be of a more banal order than he supposed. Gillian evidently thought the idea quite in keeping with her rejected lover's character. Mr Satterthwaite was a little - just a little - disappointed. He was sentimental himself, and knew it, but he expected better things of the rest of the world. Besides, sentiment belonged to his age. It had no part to play in the modern world.

He asked Gillian to sing and she complied. He told her her voice was charming, but he knew quite well in his own mind that it was distinctly second class. Any success that could have come to her in the profession she had adopted would have been won by her face, not her voice.

He was not particularly anxious to see young Burns again, so presently he rose to go. It was at that moment that his attention was attracted by an ornament on the mantelpiece which stood out among the other rather gimcrack objects like a jewel on a dust heap.

It was a curving beaker of thin green glass, long-stemmed and graceful, and poised on the edge of it was what looked like a gigantic soap-bubble, a ball of iridescent glass. Gillian noticed his absorption.

"That's an extra wedding present from Phil. It's rather pretty, I think. He works in a sort of glass factory."

"It is a beautiful thing," said Mr Satterthwaite reverently.

"The glass blowers of Murano might have been proud of that."

He went away with his interest in Philip Eastney strangely stimulated. An extraordinarily interesting young man. And yet the girl with the wonderful face preferred Charlie Burns. What a strange and inscrutable universe!

It had just occurred to Mr Satterthwaite that, owing to the remarkable beauty of Gillian West, his evening with Mr Quin had somehow missed fire. As a rule, every meeting with that mysterious individual had resulted in some strange and unforeseen happening. It was with the hope of perhaps running against the man of mystery that Mr Satterthwaite bent his steps towards the Arlecchino Restaurant where once, in the days gone by, he had met Mr Quin, and which Mr Quin had said he often frequented.

Mr Satterthwaite went from room to room at the Arlecchino, looking hopefully about him, but there was no sign of Mr Quin's dark, smiling face. There was, however, somebody else. Sitting at a small table alone was Philip Eastney.

The place was crowded and Mr Satterthwaite took his seat opposite the young man. He felt a sudden strange sense of exultation, as though he were caught up and made part of a shimmering pattern of events. He was in this thing - whatever it was. He knew now what Mr Quin had meant that evening at the Opera. There was a drama going on, and in it was a part, an important part, for Mr Satterthwaite. He must not fail to take his cue and speak his lines.

He sat down opposite Philip Eastney with the sense of accomplishing the inevitable. It was easy enough to get into conversation. Eastney seemed anxious to talk. Mr Satterthwaite was, as always, an encouraging and sympathetic listener. They talked of the war, of explosives, of poison gases. Eastney had a lot to say about these last, for during the greater part of the war he had been engaged in their manufacture. Mr Satterthwaite found him really interesting. There was one gas, Eastney said, that had never been tried. The Armistice had come too soon. Great things had been hoped for it. One whiff of it was deadly. He warmed to animation as he spoke.

Having broken the ice, Mr Satterthwaite gently turned the conversation to music. Eastney's thin face lit up. He spoke with the passion and abandon of the real music lover. They discussed Yoaschbim, and the young man was enthusiastic. Both he and Mr Satterthwaite agreed that nothing on earth could surpass a really fine tenor voice. Eastney as a boy had heard Caruso and he had never forgotten it.

"Do you know that he could sing to a wine-glass and shatter it?" he demanded.

"I always thought that was a fable," said Mr Satterthwaite smiling.

"No, it's gospel truth, I believe. The thing's quite possible. It's a question of resonance."

He went off into technical details. His face was flushed and his eyes shone. The subject seemed to fascinate him, and Mr Satterthwaite noted that he seemed to have a thorough grasp of what he was talking about. The elder man realised that he was talking to an exceptional brain, a brain that might almost be described as that of a genius. Brilliant, erratic, undecided as yet as to the true channel to give it outlet, but undoubtedly genius.

And he thought of Charlie Burns and wondered at Gillian West.

It was with quite a start that he realised how late it was getting, and he called for his bill. Eastney looked slightly apologetic.

"I'm ashamed of myself - running on so," he said. "But it was a lucky chance sent you along here tonight. I - I needed someone to talk to this evening."

He ended his speech with a curious little laugh. His eyes were still blazing with some subdued excitement. Yet there was something tragic about him.

"It has been quite a pleasure," said Mr Satterthwaite. "Our conversation has been most interesting and instructive to me."

He then made his funny, courteous little bow and passed out of the restaurant. The night was a warm one and as he walked slowly down the street a very odd fancy came to him. He had the feeling that he was not alone - that someone was walking by his side. In vain he told himself that the idea was a delusion - it persisted. Someone was walking beside him down that dark, quiet street, someone whom he could not see. He wondered what it was that brought the figure of Mr Quin so clearly before his mind. He felt exactly as though Mr Quin were there walking beside him, and yet he had only to use his eyes to assure himself that it was not so, that he was alone.

But the thought of Mr Quin persisted, and with it came something else - a need, an urgency of some kind, an oppressive foreboding of calamity. There was something he must do - and do quickly. There was something very wrong, and it lay in his hands to put it right.

So strong was the feeling that Mr Satterthwaite forebore to fight against it. Instead, he shut his eyes and tried to bring that mental image of Mr Quin nearer. If he could only have asked Mr Quin - but even as the thought flashed through his mind he knew it was wrong. It was never any use asking Mr Quin anything. "The threads are all in your hands -" that was the kind of thing Mr Quin would say.

The threads. Threads of what? He analysed his own feeling and impressions carefully. That presentiment of danger, now. Whom did it threaten?

At once a picture rose up before his eyes, the picture of Gillian West sitting alone listening to the wireless.

Mr Satterthwaite flung a penny to a passing newspaper boy, and snatched at a paper. He turned at once to the London Radio programme. Yoaschbim was broadcasting tonight, he noted with interest. He was singing "Salve Dimora," from Faust and, afterwards, a selection of his folk songs, "The Shepherd's Song," "The Fish," "The Little Deer," etc.

Mr Satterthwaite crumpled the paper together. The knowledge of what Gillian was listening to seemed to make the picture of her clearer.

Sitting there alone...

An odd request, that, of Philip Eastney's. Not like the man, not like him at all. There was no sentimentality in Eastney. He was a man of violent feeling, a dangerous man, perhaps -

Again his thought brought up with a jerk. A dangerous man - that meant something. "The threads are all in your hands." That meeting with Philip Eastney tonight - rather odd. A lucky chance, Eastney had said. Was it chance? Or was it part of that interwoven design of which Mr Satterthwaite had once or twice been conscious this evening?

He cast his mind back. There must be something in Eastney's conversation, some clue there. There must, or else why this strange feeling of urgency? What had he talked about? Singing, war work, Caruso.

Caruso - Mr Satterthwaite's thoughts went off at a tangent. Yoaschbim's voice was very nearly equal to that of Caruso. Gillian would be sitting listening to it now as it rang out true and powerful, echoing round the room, setting glasses ringing -

He caught his breath. Glasses ringing! Caruso, singing to a wine-glass and the wine-glass breaking. Yoaschbim singing in the London studio and in a room over a mile away the crash and tinkle of glass - not a wine glass, a thin, green, glass beaker. A crystal soap bubble falling, a soap bubble that perhaps was not empty...

It was at that moment that Mr Satterthwaite, as judged by passers-by, suddenly went mad. He tore open the newspaper once more, took a brief glance at the wireless announcements and then began to run for his life down the quiet street. At the end of it he found a crawling taxi, and jumping into it, he yelled an address to the driver and the information that it was life or death to get there quickly. The driver, judging him mentally afflicted but rich, did his utmost.

Mr Satterthwaite lay back, his head a jumble of fragmentary thoughts, forgotten bits of science learned at school, phrases used by Eastney that night. Resonance - natural periods - if the period of the force coincides with the natural period - there was something about a suspension bridge, soldiers marching over it and the swing of their stride being the same as the period of the bridge. Eastney had studied the subject. Eastney knew. And Eastney was a genius.

At 10.45 Yoaschbim was to broadcast. It was that now. Yes, but the Faust had to come first. It was the "Shepherd's Song," with the great shout after the refrain that would - that would - do what?

His mind went whirling round again. Tones, overtones, half-tones. He didn't know much about these things - but Eastney knew. Pray heaven he would be in time!

The taxi stopped. Mr Satterthwaite flung himself out and, raced up the stone stairs to a second floor like a young athlete. The door of the flat was ajar. He pushed it open and the great tenor voice welcomed him. The words of the "Shepherd's Song" were familiar to him in a less unconventional setting.

"Shepherd, see thy horse's flowing main -"

He was in time then. He burst open the sitting-room door. Gillian was sitting there in a tall chair by the fireplace

"Bayra Mischa's daughter is to wed today - To the wedding I must haste away."

She must have thought him mad. He clutched at her, crying out something incomprehensible, and half pulled, half dragged her out till they stood upon the stairway.

"To the wedding I must haste away - Yaha!"

A wonderful high note, full-throated, powerful, hit full in, the middle, a note any singer might be proud of. And with it another sound, the faint tinkle of broken glass.

A stray cat darted past them and in through the flat door -

Gillian made a movement, but Mr Satterthwaite held her back, speaking incoherently.

"No, no - it's deadly - no smell, nothing to warn you. A mere whiff, and it's all over. Nobody knows quite how deadly it would be. It's unlike anything that's ever been tried before."

He was repeating the things that Philip Easter had told him over the table at dinner.

Gillian stared at him uncomprehendingly.

III

Philip Eastney drew out his watch and looked at it. It was just half-past eleven. For the past three-quarters of an hour he had been pacing up and down the Embankment. He looked out over the Thames and then turned - to look into the face of his dinner companion.

"That's odd," he said, and laughed. "We seem fated to run into each other tonight."

"If you call it Fate." said Mr Satterthwaite.

Philip Eastney looked at him more attentively and his own expression changed.

"Yes?" he said quietly.

Mr Satterthwaite went straight to the point

"I have just come from Miss West's flat."

"Yes?"

The same voice, with the same deadly quiet.

"We have taken a dead cat out of it."

There was silence, then Eastney said, "Who are you?"

Mr Satterthwaite spoke for some time. He recited the whole history of events.

"So you see, I was in time," he ended up. He paused and added quite gently, "Have you anything-to say?"

He expected something, some outburst, some wild justification. But nothing came.

"No," said Philip Eastney quietly, and turned on his heel and walked away.

Mr Satterthwaite looked after him till his figure was swallowed up in the gloom. In spite of himself, he had a strange fellow-feeling for

Eastney, the feeling of an artist for another artist, of a sentimentalist for a real lover, of a plain man for a genius.

At last he roused himself with a start and began to walk in the same direction as Eastney. A fog was beginning to come up. Presently he met a policeman who looked at him suspiciously.

"Did you hear a kind of splash just now?" asked the policeman.

"No," said Mr Satterthwaite.

The policeman was peering out over the river.

"Another of these suicides, I expect," he grunted disconsolately. "They will do it."

"I suppose," said Mr Satterthwaite, "that they have their reasons."

"Money, mostly," said the policeman. "Sometimes it's a woman," he said, as he prepared to move away. "It's not always their fault, but some women cause a lot of trouble."

"Some women," agreed Mr Satterthwaite softly.

When the policeman had gone on, he sat down on a seat with the fog coming up all around him, and thought about Helen of Troy, and wondered if she were a nice, ordinary woman, blessed or cursed with a wonderful face.

Chapter 9

THE DEAD HARLEQUIN

Mr Satterthwaite walked slowly up Bond Street enjoying the sunshine. He was, as usual, carefully and beautifully dressed, and was bound for the Harchester Galleries where there was an exhibition of the paintings of one Frank Bristow, a new and hitherto unknown artist who showed signs of suddenly becoming the rage. Mr Satterthwaite was a patron of the arts.

As Mr Satterthwaite entered the Harchester Galleries, he was greeted at once with a smile of pleased recognition.

"Good morning, Mr Satterthwaite, I thought we should see you before long. You know Bristow's work? Fine - very fine indeed. Quite unique of its kind."

Mr Satterthwaite purchased a catalogue and stepped through the open archway into the long room where the artist's works were displayed. They were water colours, executed with such extraordinary technique and finish that they resembled coloured etchings. Mr Satterthwaite walked slowly round the walls scrutinising and, on the whole, approving. He thought that this young man deserved to arrive. Here was originality, vision, and a most severe and exacting technique. There were crudities, of course. That was only to be expected - but there was also something closely allied

to genius. Mr Satterthwaite paused before a little masterpiece representing Westminster Bridge with its crowd of buses, trams and hurrying pedestrians. A tiny thing and wonderfully perfect. It was called, he noted, The Ant Heap. He passed on and quite suddenly drew in his breath with a gasp, his imagination held and riveted.

The picture was called the Dead Harlequin. The forefront of it represented a floor of inlaid squares of black and white marble. In the middle of the floor lay Harlequin on his back with his arms outstretched, in his motley of black and red. Behind him was a window and outside that window, gazing in at the figure on the floor, was what appeared to be the same man silhouetted against the red glow of the setting sun.

The picture excited Mr Satterthwaite for two reasons, the first was that he recognised, or thought that he recognised, the face of the man in the picture. It bore a distinct resemblance to a certain Mr Quin, an acquaintance whom Mr Satterthwaite had encountered once or twice under somewhat mystifying circumstances.

"Surely I can't be mistaken," he murmured. "If it is so - what does it mean?"

For it had been Mr Satterthwaite's experience that every appearance of Mr Quin had some distinct significance attaching to it.

There was, as already mentioned, a second reason for Mr Satterthwaite's interest. He recognised the scene of the picture.

"The Terrace Room at Charnley," said Mr Satterthwaite. "Curious - and very interesting."

He looked with more attention at the picture, wondering what exactly had been in the artist's mind. One Harlequin dead on the floor, another Harlequin looking through the window - or was it the same Harlequin? He moved slowly along the walls gazing at other pictures with unseeing eyes, with his mind always busy on the same subject. He was excited. Life, which had seemed a little drab this morning, was drab no longer. He knew quite certainly that he was on the threshold of exciting and interesting events. He crossed to the table where sat Mr Cobb, a dignitary of the Harchester Galleries, whom he had known for many years.

"I have a fancy for buying no. 39," he said, "if it is not already sold."

Mr Cobb consulted a ledger.

"The pick of the bunch," he murmured, "quite a little gem, isn't it? No, it is not sold." he quoted a price. "It is a good investment, Mr Satterthwaite. You will have to pay three times as much for it this time next year."

"That is always said on these occasions," said Mr Satterthwaite, smiling.

"Well, and haven't I been right?" demanded Mr Cobb. "I don't believe if you were to sell your collection, Mr Satterthwaite, that a single picture would fetch less than you gave for it."

"I will buy this picture," said Mr Satterthwaite. "I will give you a cheque now."

"You won't regret it. We believe in Bristow."

"He is a young man?"

"Twenty-seven or eight, I should say."

"I should like to meet him," said Mr Satterthwaite. "Perhaps he will come and dine with me one night?"

"I can give you his address. I am sure he would leap at the chance. Your name stands for a good deal in the artistic world."

"You flatter me," said Mr Satterthwaite, and was going on when Mr Cobb interrupted.

"There he is now. I will introduce you to him right away." He rose from behind his table. Mr Satterthwaite accompanied him to where a big, clumsy young man was leaning against the wall surveying the world at large from behind the barricade of a ferocious scowl.

Mr Cobb made the necessary introductions and Mr Satterthwaite made a formal and gracious little speech.

"I have just had the pleasure of acquiring one of your pictures - The Dead Harlequin."

"Oh! Well, you won't lose by it," said Mr Bristow ungraciously. "It's a bit of damned good work, although I say it."

"I can see that," said Mr Satterthwaite. "Your work interests me very much, Mr Bristow. It is extraordinarily mature for so young a man. I wonder if you would give me the pleasure of dining with me one night? Are you engaged this evening?"

"As a matter of fact, I am not," said Mr Bristow, still with no overdone appearance of graciousness.

"Then shall we say eight o'clock?" said Mr Satterthwaite. "Here is my card with the address on it."

"Oh, all right," said Mr Bristow. "Thanks," he added as a somewhat obvious afterthought.

"A young man who has a poor opinion of himself and is afraid that the world should share it."

Such was Mr Satterthwaite's summing up as he stepped out into the sunshine of Bond Street, and Mr Satterthwaite's judgment of his fellow men was seldom far astray.

Frank Bristow arrived about five minutes past eight to find his host and a third guest awaiting him. The other guest was introduced as a Colonel Monckton. They went in to dinner almost immediately. There was a fourth place laid at the oval mahogany table and Mr Satterthwaite uttered a word of explanation.

"I half expected my friend, Mr Quin, might drop in," he said. "I wonder if you have ever met him. Mr Harley Quin?"

"I never meet people," growled Bristow. Colonel Monckton stared at the artist with the detached interest he might have accorded to a new species of jelly fish. Mr Satterthwaite exerted himself to keep the ball of conversation rolling amicably.

"I took a special interest in that picture of yours because I thought I recognised the scene of it as being the Terrace Room at Charnley. Was I right?" As the artist nodded, he went on. "That is very interesting. I have stayed at Charnley several times myself in the past. Perhaps you know some of the family?"

"No, I don't!" said Bristow. "That sort of family wouldn't care to know me. I went there in a charabanc."

"Dear me," said Colonel Monckton for the sake of saying something. "In a charabanc! Dear me."

Frank Bristow scowled at him. "Why not?" he demanded ferociously. Poor Colonel Monckton was taken aback. He looked reproachfully at Mr Satterthwaite as though to say, "These primitive forms of life may be interesting to you as a naturalist, but why drag me in?"

"Oh, beastly things, charabancs!" he said. "They jolt you so going over the bumps."

"If you can't afford a Rolls Royce you have got to go in charabancs," said Bristow fiercely.

Colonel Monckton stared at him. Mr Satterthwaite thought, "Unless I can manage to put this young man at his ease we are going to have a very distressing evening."

"Charnley always fascinated me," he said. "I have been there only once since the tragedy. A grim house - and a ghostly one."

"That's true," said Bristow.

"There are actually two authentic ghosts," said Monckton. "They say that Charles I walks up and down the terrace with his head under his arm - I have forgotten why, I'm sure. Then there is the Weeping Lady with the Silver Ewer, who is always seen after one of the Charnleys dies."

"Tosh," said Bristow scornfully.

"They have certainly been a very ill-fated family," said Mr Satterthwaite hurriedly. "Four holders of the title have died a violent death and the late Lord Charnley committed suicide."

"A ghastly business," said Monckton gravely. "I was there when it happened."

"Let me see, that must be fourteen years ago," said Mr Satterthwaite, "the house has been shut up ever since."

"I don't wonder at that," said Monckton. "It must have been a terrible shock for a young girl. They had been married a month, just home

from their honeymoon. Big fancy dress ball to celebrate their home-coming. Just as the guests were starting to arrive Charnley locked himself into the Oak Parlour and shot himself. That sort of thing isn't done. I beg your pardon?"

He turned his head sharply to the left and looked across at Mr Satterthwaite with an apologetic laugh.

"I am beginning to get the jimjams, Satterthwaite. I thought for a moment there was someone sitting in that empty chair and that he said something to me.

"Yes," he went on after a minute or two, "it was a pretty ghastly shock to Alix Charnley. She was one of the prettiest girls you could see anywhere and cram full of what people call the joy of living, and now they say she is like a ghost herself. Not that I have seen her for years. I believe she lives abroad most of the time."

"And the boy?"

"The boy is at Eton. What he will do when he comes of age I don't know. I don't think, somehow, that he will reopen the old place."

"It would make a good People's Pleasure Park," said Bristow.

Colonel Monckton looked at him with cold abhorrence.

"No, no, you don't really mean that," said Mr Satterthwaite. "You wouldn't have painted that picture if you did. Tradition and atmosphere are intangible things. They take centuries to build up

and if you destroyed them you couldn't rebuild them again in twenty-four hours."

He rose. "Let us go into the smoking-room. I have some photographs there of Charnley which I should like to show you."

One of Mr Satterthwaite's hobbies was amateur photography. He was also the proud author of a book, "Homes of My Friends." The friends in question were all rather exalted and the book itself showed Mr Satterthwaite forth in rather a more snobbish light than was really fair to him.

"That is a photograph I took of the Terrace Room last year," he said. He handed it to Bristow. "You see it is taken at almost the same angle as is shown in your picture. That is rather a wonderful rug - it is a pity that photographs can't show colouring."

"I remember it," said Bristow, "a marvellous bit of colour. It glowed like a flame. All the same it looked a bit incongruous there. The wrong size for that big room with its black and white squares. There is no rug anywhere else in the room. It spoils the whole effect - it was like a gigantic blood stain."

"Perhaps that gave you your idea for your picture?" said Mr Satterthwaite.

"Perhaps it did," said Bristow thoughtfully. "On the face, of it, one would naturally stage a tragedy in the little panelled room leading out of it."

"The Oak Parlour," said Monckton. "Yes, that is the haunted room right enough. There is a Priests hiding hole there - a movable panel by the fireplace. Tradition has it that Charles I was concealed there once. There were two deaths from duelling in that room. And it was there, as I say, that Reggie Charnley shot himself."

He took the photograph from Bristow's hand. "Why, that is the Bokhara rug," he said, "worth a couple of thousand pounds, I believe. When I was there it was in the Oak Parlour - the right place for it. It looks silly on that great expanse of marble flags."

Mr Satterthwaite was looking at the empty chair which he had drawn up beside his. Then he said thoughtfully, "I wonder when it was moved?"

"It must have been recently. Why, I remember having a conversation about it on the very day of the tragedy. Charnley was saying it really ought to be kept under glass." Mr Satterthwaite shook his head. "The house was shut up immediately after the tragedy and everything was left exactly as it was."

Bristow broke in with a question. He had laid aside his aggressive manner. "Why did Lord Charnley shoot himself?" he asked.

Colonel Monckton shifted uncomfortably in his chair. "No one ever knew," he said vaguely.

"I suppose," said Mr Satterthwaite slowly, "that it was suicide."

The Colonel looked at him in blank astonishment.

"Suicide," he said, "why, of course it was suicide. My dear fellow, I was there in the house myself."

Mr Satterthwaite looked towards the empty chair at his side and, smiling to himself as though at some hidden joke the others could not see, he said quietly, "Sometimes one sees things more clearly years afterwards than one could possibly at the time."

"Nonsense," spluttered Monckton, "arrant nonsense! How can you possibly see things better when they are vague in your memory instead of clear and sharp?"

But Mr Satterthwaite was reinforced from an unexpected quarter.

"I know what you mean," said the artist. "I should say that possibly you were right. It is a question of proportion, isn't it? And more than proportion probably. Relativity and all that sort of thing."

"If you ask me," said the Colonel, "all this Einstein business is a lot of dashed nonsense. So are spiritualists and the spook of one's grandmother!" He glared round fiercely. "Of course it was suicide," he went on. "Didn't I practically see the thing happen with my own eyes?"

"Tell us about it," said Mr Satterthwaite, "so that we shall see it with our eyes also."

With a somewhat mollified grunt the Colonel settled himself more comfortably in his chair.

"The whole thing was extraordinarily unexpected," he began. "Charnley had been his usual normal self. There was a big party staying in the house for this ball. No one could ever have guessed he would go and shoot himself just as the guests began arriving."

"It would have been better taste if he had waited until they had gone," said Mr Satterthwaite.

"Of course it would. Damned bad taste - to do a thing like that."

"Uncharacteristic," said Mr Satterthwaite.

"Yes," admitted Monckton, "it wasn't like Charnley."

"And yet it was suicide?"

"Of course it was suicide. Why, there were three or four of us there at the top of the stairs. Myself, the Ostrander girl, Algie Darcy - oh, and one or two others. Charnley passed along the hall below and went into the Oak Parlour. The Ostrander girl said there was a ghastly look on his face and his eyes were staring - but, of course, that is nonsense - she couldn't even see his face from where we were - but he did walk in a hunched way, as if he had the weight of the world on his shoulders. One of the girls called to him - she was somebody's governess, I think, whom Lady Charnley had included in the party out of kindness. She was looking for him with a message. She called out 'Lord Charnley, Lady Charnley wants to know -' He

paid no attention and went into the Oak Parlour and slammed the door and we heard the key turn in the lock. Then, one minute after, we heard the shot.

"We rushed down to the hall. There is another door from the Oak Parlour leading into the Terrace Room. We tried that but it was locked, too. In the end we had to break the door down. Charnley was lying on the floor - dead - with a pistol close beside his right hand. Now, what could that have been but suicide? Accident? Don't tell me. There is only one other possibility - murder - and you can't have murder without a murderer. You admit that, I suppose."

"The murderer might have escaped," suggested Mr Satterthwaite.

"That is impossible. If you have a bit of paper and a pencil I will draw you a plan of the place. There are two doors into the Oak Parlour, one into the hall and one into the Terrace Room. Both these doors were locked in the inside and the keys were in the locks."

"The window?"

"Shut, and the shutters fastened across it."

There was a pause.

"So that is that," said Colonel Monckton triumphantly.

"It certainly seems to be," said Mr Satterthwaite sadly.

"Mind you," said the Colonel, "although I was laughing just now at the spiritualists, I don't mind admitting that there was a deuced rummy atmosphere about the place - about that room in particular. There are several bullet holes in the panels of the walls, the results of the duels that took place in that room, and there is a queer stain on the floor, that always comes back though they have replaced the wood several times. I suppose there will be another blood stain on the floor now - poor Charnley's blood."

"Was there much blood?" asked Mr Satterthwaite.

"Very little - curiously little - so the doctor said."

"Where did he shoot himself, through the head?"

"No, through the heart."

"That is not the easy way to do it," said Bristow. "Frightfully difficult to know where one's heart is. I should never do it that way myself."

Mr Satterthwaite shook his head. He was vaguely dissatisfied. He had hoped to get at something - he hardly knew what. Colonel Monckton went on.

"It is a spooky place, Charnley. Of course, I didn't see anything."

"You didn't see the Weeping Lady with the Silver Ewer?"

"No, I did not, sir," said the Colonel emphatically. "But I expect every servant in the place swore they did."

"Superstition was the curse of the Middle Ages," said Bristow. "There are still traces of it here and there, but thank goodness, we are getting free from it."

"Superstition," mused Mr Satterthwaite, his eyes turned again to the empty chair. "Sometimes, don't you think, it might be useful?"

Bristow stared at him.

"Useful, that's a queer word."

"Well, I hope you are convinced now, Satterthwaite," said the Colonel

"Oh, quite," said Mr Satterthwaite. "On the face of it, it seems odd - so purposeless for a newly-married man, young, rich, happy, celebrating his home-coming - curious - but I agree there is no getting away from the facts." He repeated softly, "The facts," and frowned.

"I suppose the interesting thing is none of us will ever know," said Monckton, "the story behind it all. Of course there were rumours - all sorts of rumours. You know the kind of things people say."

"But no one knew anything," said Mr Satterthwaite thoughtfully.

"It's not a best seller mystery, is it?" remarked Bristow. "No one gained by the man's death."

"No one except an unborn child," said Mr Satterthwaite.

Monckton gave a sharp chuckle. "Rather a blow to poor Hugo Charnley," he observed. "As soon as it was known that there was going to be a child he had the graceful task of sitting tight and waiting to see if it would be a girl or boy. Rather an anxious wait for his creditors, too. In the end a boy it was and a disappointment for the lot of them."

"Was the widow very disconsolate?" asked Bristow.

"Poor child," said Monckton, "I shall never forget her. She didn't cry or break down or anything. She was like something frozen. As I say, she shut up the house shortly afterwards and, as far as I know, it has never been reopened since."

"So we are left in the dark as to motive," said Bristow with a slight laugh. "Another man or another woman, it must have been one or the other, eh?"

"It seems like it," said Mr Satterthwaite.

"And the betting is strongly on another woman," continued Bristow, "since the fair widow has not married again. I hate women," he added dispassionately.

Mr Satterthwaite smiled a little and Frank Bristow saw the smile and pounced upon it.

"You may smile," he said, "but I do. They upset everything. They interfere. They get between you and your work. They - I only once met a woman who was - well, interesting."

"I thought there would be one," said Mr Satterthwaite.

"Not in the way you mean. I - I just met her casually. As a matter of fact - it was in a train. After all," he added defiantly, "why shouldn't one meet people in trains?"

"Certainly, certainly," said Mr Satterthwaite soothingly, "a train is as good a place as anywhere else."

"It was coming down from the North. We had the carriage to ourselves. I don't know why, but we began to talk. I don't know her name and I don't suppose I shall ever meet her again. I don't know that I want to. It might be - a pity." He paused, struggling to express himself. "She wasn't quite real, you know. Shadowy. Like one of the people who come out of the hills in Gaelic fairy tales."

Mr Satterthwaite nodded gently. His imagination pictured the scene easily enough. The very positive and realistic Bristow and a figure that was silvery and ghostly - shadowy, as Bristow had said.

"I suppose if something very terrible had happened, so terrible as to be almost unbearable, one might get like that. One might run away from reality into a half world of one's own and then, of course, after a time, one wouldn't be able to get back."

"Was that what had happened to her?" asked Mr Satterthwaite curiously.

"I don't know," said Bristow. "She didn't tell me anything, I am only guessing. One has to guess if one is going to get anywhere."

"Yes," said Mr Satterthwaite slowly, "One has to guess."

He looked up as the door opened. He looked up quickly and expectantly but the butler's words disappointed him.

"A lady, sir, has called to see you on very urgent business. Miss Aspasia Glen."

Mr Satterthwaite rose in some astonishment. He knew the name of Aspasia Glen. Who in London did not? First advertised as the Woman with the Scarf, she had given a series of matinйes single-handed that had taken London by storm. With the aid of her scarf she had impersonated rapidly various characters. In turn the scarf had been the coif of a nun, the shawl of a mill-worker, the head-dress of a peasant and a hundred other things, and in each impersonation Aspasia Glen had been totally and utterly different. As an artist, Mr Satterthwaite paid full reverence to her. As it happened, he had never made her acquaintance. A call upon him at this unusual hour intrigued him greatly. With a few words of apology to the others he left the room and crossed the hall to the drawing-room.

Miss Glen was sitting in the very centre of a large settee upholstered in gold brocade. So poised she dominated the room. Mr Satterthwaite perceived at once that she meant to dominate the

situation. Curiously enough, his first feeling was one of repulsion. He had been a sincere admirer of Aspasia Glen's art. Her personality, as conveyed to him over the footlights, had been appealing and sympathetic. Her effects there had been wistful and suggestive rather than commanding. But now, face to face with the woman herself, he received a totally different impression. There was some thing hard - bold - forceful about her. She was tall and dark, possibly about thirty-five years of age. She was undoubtedly very good-looking and she clearly relied upon the fact.

"You must forgive this unconventional call, Mr Satterthwaite," she said. Her voice was full and rich and seductive. "I won't say that I have wanted to know you for a long time, but I am glad of the excuse. As for coming tonight -" she laughed - "well, when I want a thing, I simply can't wait. When I want a thing, I simply must have it."

"Any excuse that has brought me such a charming lady guest must be welcomed by me," said Mr Satterthwaite in an old-fashioned gallant manner.

"How nice you are to me," said Aspasia Glen.

"My dear lady," said Mr Satterthwaite, "may I thank you here and now for the pleasure you have so often given me - in my seat in the stalls."

She smiled delightfully at him.

"I am coming straight to the point. I was at the Harchester Galleries today. I saw a picture there I simply couldn't live without. I wanted to

buy it and I couldn't because you had already bought it. So -" she paused - "I do want it so," she went on. "Dear Mr Satterthwaite, I simply must have it. I brought my cheque book." She looked at him hopefully. "Everyone tells me you are so frightfully kind. People are kind to me, you know. It is very bad for me - but there it is."

So these were Aspasia Glen's methods. Mr Satterthwaite was inwardly coldly critical of this ultra-femininity and of this spoilt child pose. It ought to appeal to him, he supposed, but it didn't. Aspasia Glen had made a mistake. She had judged him as an elderly dilettante, easily flattered by a pretty woman. But Mr Satterthwaite behind his gallant manner had a shrewd and critical mind. He saw people pretty well as they were, not as they wished to appear to him. He saw before him, not a charming woman pleading for a whim, but a ruthless egoist determined to get her own way for some reason which was obscure to him. And he knew quite certainly that Aspasia Glen was not going to get her own way. He was not going to give up the picture of the Dead Harlequin to her. He sought rapidly in his mind for the best way of circumventing her without overt rudeness.

"I am sure," he said, "that everyone gives you your own way as often as they can and is only too delighted to do so."

"Then you are really going to let me have the picture?"

Mr Satterthwaite shook his head slowly and regretfully. "I am afraid that is impossible. You see -" he paused - "I bought that picture for a lady. It is a present."

"Oh! but surely -"

The telephone on the table rang sharply. With a murmured word of excuse Mr Satterthwaite took up the receiver. A voice spoke to him, a small, cold voice that sounded very far away.

"Can I speak to Mr Satterthwaite, please?"

"It is Mr Satterthwaite speaking."

"I am Lady Charnley, Alix Charnley. I daresay you don't remember me, Mr Satterthwaite, it is a great many years since we met."

"My dear Alix. Of course, I remember you."

"There is something I wanted to ask you. I was at the Harchester Galleries at an exhibition of pictures today, there was one called The Dead Harlequin, perhaps you recognised it - it was the Terrace Room at Charnley. I - I want to have that picture. It was sold to you." She paused. "Mr Satterthwaite, for reasons of my own I want that picture. Will you resell it to me?"

Mr Satterthwaite thought to himself, "Why, this is a miracle."

As he spoke into the receiver he was thankful that Aspasia Glen could only hear one side of the conversation.

"If you will accept my gift, dear lady, it will make me very happy." He heard a sharp exclamation behind him and hurried on.

"I bought it for you. I did indeed. But listen, my dear Alix, I want to ask you to do me a great favour, if you will."

"Of course, Mr Satterthwaite, I am so very grateful."

He went on. "I want you to come round now to my house, at once."

There was a slight pause and then she answered quietly, "I will come at once."

Mr Satterthwaite put down the receiver and turned to Miss Glen.

She said quickly and angrily, "That was the picture you were talking about?"

"Yes," said Mr Satterthwaite, "the lady to whom I am presenting it is coming round to this house in a few minutes."

Suddenly Aspasia Glen's face broke once more into smiles.

"You will give me a chance of persuading her to turn the picture over to me?"

"I will give you a chance of persuading her." Inwardly he was strangely excited. He was in the midst of a drama that was shaping itself to some foredoomed end. He, the looker on, was playing a star part. He turned to Miss Glen.

"Will you come into the other room with me? I should like you to meet some friends of mine."

He held the door open for her and, crossing the hall, opened the door of the smoking-room.

"Miss Glen," he said, "let me introduce you to an old friend of mine, Colonel Monckton. Mr Bristow, the painter of the picture you admire so much." Then he started as a third figure rose from the chair which he had left empty beside his own.

"I think you expected me this evening," said Mr Quin. "During your absence I introduced myself to your friends. I am so glad I was able to drop in."

"My dear friend," said Mr Satterthwaite, "I - I have been carrying on as well as I am able, but -" he stopped before the slightly sardonic glance of Mr Quin's dark eyes.

"Let me introduce you. Mr Harley Quin, Miss Aspasia Glen."

Was it fancy - or did she shrink back slightly. A curious expression flitted over her face.

Suddenly Bristow broke in boisterously. "I have got it."

"Got what?"

"Got hold of what was puzzling me. There is a likeness, there is a distinct likeness." He was staring curiously at Mr Quin. "You see it?" He turned to Mr Satterthwaite. "Don't you see a distinct likeness to

the Harlequin of my picture - the man looking in through the window?"

It was no fancy this time. He distinctly heard Miss Glen draw in her breath sharply and even saw that she stepped back one pace.

"I told you that I was expecting someone," said Mr Satterthwaite. He spoke with an air of triumph. "I must tell you that my friend, Mr Quin, is a most extraordinary person. He can unravel mysteries. He can make you see things."

"Are you a medium, sir?" demanded Colonel Monckton, eyeing Mr Quin doubtfully.

The latter smiled and slowly shook his head.

"Mr Satterthwaite exaggerates," he said quietly. "Once or twice when I have been with him he has done some extraordinary good deductive work. Why he puts the credit down to me I can't say. His modesty, I suppose."

"No, no," said Mr Satterthwaite excitedly. "It isn't. You make me see things - things that I ought to have seen all along - that I actually have seen - but without knowing that I saw them."

"It sounds to me deuced complicated," said Colonel Monckton.

"Not really," said Mr Quin. "The trouble is that we are not content just to see things - we will tack the wrong interpretation on to the things we see."

Aspasia Glen turned to Frank Bristow.

"I want to know," she said nervously, "what put the idea of painting that picture into your head?"

Bristow shrugged his shoulders.

"I don't quite know," he confessed. "Something about the place - about Charnley, I mean, took hold of my imagination. The big empty room. The terrace outside, the idea of ghosts and things, I suppose.

I have just been hearing the tale of the last Lord Charnley, who shot himself. Supposing you are dead, and your spirit lives on? It must be odd, you know. You might stand outside on the terrace looking in at the window at your own dead body, and you would see everything."

"What do you mean?" said Aspasia Glen. "See everything?"

"Well, you would see what happened. You would see -"

The door opened and the butler announced Lady Charnley.

Mr Satterthwaite went to meet her. He had not seen her for nearly thirteen years. He remembered her as she once was, an eager, glowing girl. And now he saw - a Frozen Lady. Very fair, very pale, with an air of drifting rather than walking, a snowflake driven at random by an icy breeze. Something unreal about her. So cold, so far away.

"It was very good of you to come," said Mr Satterthwaite.

He led her forward. She made a half gesture of recognition towards Miss Glen and then paused as the other made no response.

"I am so sorry," she murmured, "but surely I have met you somewhere, haven't I?"

"Over the footlights, perhaps," said Mr Satterthwaite. "This is Miss Aspasia Glen, Lady Charnley."

"I am very pleased to meet you, Lady Charnley," said Aspasia Glen.

Her voice had suddenly a slight transatlantic tinge to it. Mr Satterthwaite was reminded of one of her various stage impersonations.

"Colonel Monckton you know," continued Mr Satterthwaite, "and this is Mr Bristow."

He saw a sudden faint tinge of colour in her cheeks.

"Mr Bristow and I have met too," she said, and smiled a little.

"In a train."

"And Mr Harley Quin."

He watched her closely, but this time there was no flicker of recognition. He set a chair for her, and then, seating himself, he cleared his throat and spoke a little nervously.

"I - this is rather an unusual little gathering. It centres round this picture. I - I think that if we liked we could - clear things up."

"You are not going to hold a sйance, Satterthwaite?" asked Colonel Monckton. "You are very odd this evening."

"No," said Mr Satterthwaite, "not exactly a sйance. But my friend, Mr Quin, believes, and I agree, that one can, by looking back over the past, see things as they were and not as they appeared to be."

"The past?" said Lady Charnley.

"I am speaking of your husband's suicide, Alix. I know it hurts you -"

"No," said Alix Charnley, "it doesn't hurt me. Nothing hurts me now."

Mr Satterthwaite thought of Frank Bristow's words. "She was not quite real you know. Shadowy, like one of those people who come out of hills in Gaelic fairy tales."

"Shadowy," he had called her. That described her exactly. A shadow, a reflection of something else. Where then was the real Alix, and his mind answered quickly, "In the past. Divided from us by fourteen years of time."

"My dear," he said, "you frighten me. You are like the Weeping Lady with the Silver Ewer."

Crash! The coffee cup on the table by Aspasia's elbow fell shattered to the floor. Mr Satterthwaite waved aside her apologies. He thought, "We are getting nearer, we are getting nearer every minute - but nearer to what?"

"Let us take our minds back to that night fourteen years ago," he said." Lord Charnley killed himself. For what reason? No one knows."

Lady Charnley stirred slightly in her chair.

"Lady Charnley knows," said Frank Bristow abruptly.

"Nonsense," said Colonel Monckton, then stopped, frowning at her curiously.

She was looking across at the artist. It was as though he drew the words out of her. She spoke, nodding her head slowly, and her voice was like a snowflake, cold and soft. "Yes, you are quite right. I know. That is why as long as I live I can never go back to Charnley. That is why when my boy Dick wants me to open the place up and live there again I tell him it can't be done."

"Will you tell us the reason, Lady Charnley?" said Mr Quin.

She looked at him. Then, as though hypnotised, she spoke as quietly and naturally as a child.

"I will tell you if you like. Nothing seems to matter very much now. I found a letter among his papers and I destroyed it."

"What letter?" said Mr Quin.

"The letter from the girl - from that poor child. She was the Merriam's nursery governess. He had - he had made love to her - yes, while he was engaged to me just before we were married. And she - she was going to have a child too. She wrote saying so, and that she was going to tell me about it. So, you see, he shot himself."

She looked round at them wearily and dreamily like a child who has repeated a lesson it knows too well.

Colonel Monckton blew his nose.

"My God," he said, "so that was it. Well, that explains things with a vengeance."

"Does it?" said Mr Satterthwaite, "it doesn't explain one thing. It doesn't explain why Mr Bristow painted that picture."

"What do you mean?"

Mr Satterthwaite looked across at Mr Quin as though for encouragement, and apparently got it, for he proceeded, "Yes, I know I sound mad to all of you, but that picture is the focus of the whole thing. We are all here tonight because, of that picture. That picture had to be painted - that is what I mean."

"You mean the uncanny influence of the Oak Parlour?" began Colonel Monckton.

"No," said Mr Satterthwaite. "Not the Oak Parlour. The Terrace Room. That is it! The spirit of the dead man standing outside the window and looking in and seeing his own dead body on the floor."

"Which he couldn't have done," said the Colonel, "because the body was in the Oak Parlour."

"Supposing it wasn't," said Mr Satterthwaite, "supposing it was exactly where Mr Bristow saw it, saw it imaginatively, I mean, on the black and white flags in front of the window."

"You are talking nonsense," said Colonel Monckton, "if it was there we shouldn't have found it in the Oak Parlour."

"Not unless someone carried it there," said Mr Satterthwaite.

"And in that case how could we have seen Charnley going in at the door of the Oak Parlour?" inquired Colonel Monckton.

"Well, you didn't see his face, did you?" asked Mr Satterthwaite. "What I mean is, you saw a man going into the Oak Parlour in fancy dress, I suppose."

"Brocade things and a wig," said Monckton.

"Just so, and you thought it was Lord Charnley because the girl called out to him as Lord Charnley."

"And because when we broke in a few minutes later there was only Lord Charnley there dead. You can't get away from that, Satterthwaite."

"No," said Mr Satterthwaite, discouraged. "No - unless there was a hiding-place of some kind."

"Weren't you saying something about there being a Priests hole in that room?" put in Frank Bristow.

"Oh!" cried Mr Satterthwaite.

"Supposing -?"

He waved a hand for silence and sheltered his forehead with his other hand and then spoke slowly and hesitatingly.

"I have got an idea - it may be just an idea, but I think it hangs together. Supposing someone shot Lord Charnley. Shot him in the Terrace Room. Then he - and another person - dragged the body into the Oak Parlour. They laid it down there with the pistol by its right hand. Now we go on to the next step. It must seem absolutely certain Lord Charnley has committed suicide. I think that could be done very easily. The man in his brocade and wig passes along the hall by the Oak Parlour door and someone, to make sure of things, calls out to him as Lord Charnley from the top of the stairs. He goes in and locks both doors and fires a shot into the woodwork. There were bullet

holes already in that room if you remember, one more wouldn't be noticed. He then hides quietly in the secret chamber. The doors are broken open and people rush in. It seems certain that Lord Charnley has committed suicide. No other hypothesis is even entertained."

"Well, I think that is balderdash," said Colonel Monckton. "You forget that Charnley had a motive right enough for suicide."

"A letter found afterwards," said Mr Satterthwaite. "A lying cruel letter written by a very clever and unscrupulous little actress who meant one day to be Lady Charnley herself."

"You mean?"

"I mean the girl in league with Hugo Charnley," said Mr Satterthwaite.

"You know, Monckton, everyone knows, that that man was a blackguard. He thought that he was certain to come into the title."

He turned sharply to Lady Charnley.

"What was the name of the girl who wrote that letter?"

"Monica Ford," said Lady Charnley.

"Was it Monica Ford Monckton, who called out to Lord Charnley from the top of the stairs?"

"Yes, now you come to speak of it, I believe it was."

"Oh, that's impossible," said Lady Charnley. "I - I went to her about it. She told me it was all true. I only saw her once afterwards, but surely she couldn't have been acting the whole time."

Mr Satterthwaite looked across the room at Aspasia Glen.

"I think she could," he said quietly. "I think she had in her the makings of a very accomplished actress."

"There is one thing you haven't got over," said Frank Bristow, "there would be blood on the floor of the Terrace Room. Bound to be. They couldn't clear that up in a hurry."

"No," admitted Mr Satterthwaite, "but there is one thing - the Bokhara rug. Nobody ever saw the Bokhara rug in the Terrace Room before that night."

"I believe you are right," said Monckton, "but all the same those bloodstains would have to be cleared up some time?"

"Yes," said Mr Satterthwaite, "in the middle of the night. A woman with a jug and basin could go down the stairs and clear up the bloodstains quite easily."

"But supposing someone saw her?"

"It wouldn't matter," said Mr Satterthwaite. "I am speaking now of things as they are. I said a woman with a jug and basin. But if I had

said a Weeping Lady with a Silver Ewer that is what they would have appeared, to be."

He got up and went across to Aspasia Glen.

"That is what you did, wasn't it?" He said.

"They call you the 'Woman with the Scarf' now, but it was that night you played your first part, the 'Weeping Lady with the Silver Ewer.' That is why you knocked the coffee cup off that table just now. You were afraid when you saw that picture. You thought someone knew."

Lady Charnley stretched out a white accusing hand.

"Monica Ford," she breathed. "I recognise you now."

Aspasia Glen sprang to her feet with a cry. She pushed little Mr Satterthwaite aside with a shove of the hand and stood shaking in front of Mr Quin.

"So I was right. Someone did know! Oh, I haven't been deceived by this tomfoolery. This pretence of working things out."

She pointed at Mr Quin.

"You were there. You were there outside the window looking in. You saw what we did, Hugo and I. I knew there was someone looking in, I felt it all the time. And yet when I looked up, there was nobody there. I knew someone was watching us. I thought once I caught a glimpse of a face at the window. It has frightened me all these years. And

then I saw that picture with you standing at the window and I recognised your face. You have known all these years. Why did you break silence now? That is what I want to know?"

"Perhaps so that the dead may rest in peace," said Mr Quin.

Suddenly Aspasia Glen made a rush for the door and stood there flinging a few defiant words over her shoulder.

"Do what you like. God knows there are witnesses enough to what I have been saying. I don't care, I don't care. I loved Hugo and I helped him with the ghastly business and he chucked me afterwards. He died last year. You can set the police on my tracks if you like, but as that little dried-up fellow there said, I am a pretty good actress. They will find it hard to find me." She crashed the door behind her, and a moment later they heard the slam of the front door also.

"Reggie," cried Lady Charnley, "Reggie." The tears were streaming down her face. "Oh, my dear, my dear, I can go back to Charnley now. I can live there with Dickie. I can tell him what his father was, the finest, the most splendid man in all the world."

"We must consult very seriously as to what must be done in the matter," said Colonel Monckton. "Alix, my dear, if you will let me take you home I shall be glad to have a few words with you on the subject."

Lady Charnley rose. She came across to Mr Satterthwaite, and laying both hands on his shoulders, she kissed him very gently.

"It is so wonderful to be alive again after being so long dead," she said. "It was like being dead, you know. Thank you, dear Mr Satterthwaite."

She went out of the room with Colonel Monckton. Mr Satterthwaite gazed after them. A grunt from Frank Bristow whom he had forgotten made him turn sharply round.

"She is a lovely creature," said Bristow moodily. "But she's not nearly so interesting as she was," he said gloomily.

"There speaks the artist," said Mr Satterthwaite.

"Well, she isn't," said Mr Bristow. "I suppose I should only get the cold shoulder if I ever went butting in at Charnley. I don't want to go where I am not wanted."

"My dear young man," said Mr Satterthwaite, "if you will think a little less of the impression you are making on other people, you will, I think, be wiser and happier. You would also do well to disabuse your mind of some very old-fashioned notions, one of which is that birth has any significance at all in our modern conditions. You are one of those large proportioned young men whom women always consider good-looking, and you have possibly, if not certainly, genius. Just say that over to yourself ten times before you go to bed every night and in three months time go and call on Lady Charnley at Charnley. That is my advice to you, and I am an old man with considerable experience of the world."

A very charming smile suddenly spread over the artist's face.

"You have been thunderingly good to me," he said suddenly. He seized Mr Satterthwaite's hand and wrung it in a powerful grip.

"I am no end grateful. I must be off now. Thanks very much for one of the most extraordinary evenings I have ever spent."

He looked round as though to say good-bye to someone else and then started.

"I say, sir, your friend has gone. I never saw him go. He is rather a queer bird, isn't he?"

"He goes and comes very suddenly," said Mr Satterthwaite. "That is one of his characteristics. One doesn't always see him come and go."

"Like Harlequin," said Frank Bristow, "he is invisible," and laughed heartily at his own joke.

Chapter 10

THE BIRD WITH THE BROKEN WING

Mr Satterthwaite looked out of the window. It was raining steadily. He shivered. Very few country houses, he reflected, were really properly heated. It cheered him to think that in a few hours time he

would be speeding towards London. Once one had passed sixty years of age, London was really much the best place.

He was feeling a little old and pathetic. Most of the members of the house party were so young. Four of them had just gone off into the library to do table turning. They had invited him to accompany them, but he had declined. He failed to derive any amusement from the monotonous counting of the letters of the alphabet and the usual meaningless jumble of letters that resulted.

Yes, London was the best place for him. He was glad that he had declined Madge Keeley's invitation when she had rung up to invite him over to Laidell half an hour ago. An adorable young person, certainly, but London was best.

Mr Satterthwaite shivered again and remembered that the fire in the library was usually a good one. He opened the door and adventured cautiously into the darkened room.

"If I'm not in the way -"

"Was that N or M? We shall have to count again. No, of course not, Mr Satterthwaite. Do you know, the most exciting things have been happening. The spirit says her name is Ada Spiers, and John here is going to marry someone called Gladys Bun almost immediately."

Mr Satterthwaite sat down in a big easy chair in front of the fire. His eyelids drooped over his eyes and he dozed. From time to time he returned to consciousness, hearing fragments of speech.

"It can't be P-A-B-Z-L - not unless he's a Russian. John, you're shoving. I saw you. I believe it's a new spirit come."

Another interval of dozing. Then a name jerked him wide awake.

"Q-U-I-N. Is that right?"

"Yes, it's rapped once for 'Yes.'"

"Quin. Have you a message for someone here? Yes. For me? For John? For Sarah? For Evelyn? No - but there's no one else. Oh! It's for Mr Satterthwaite, perhaps? It says 'Yes.' Mr Satterthwaite, it's a message for you."

"What does it say?"

Mr Satterthwaite was broad awake now, sitting taut and erect in his chair, his eyes shining.

The table rocked and one of the girls counted.

"L A I - it can't be - that doesn't make sense. No word begins LAI."

"Go on," said Mr Satterthwaite, and the command in his voice was so sharp that he was obeyed without question.

"LAIDEL and another L - Oh! that seems to be all."

"Go on."

"Tell us some more, please."

A pause.

"There doesn't seem to be any more. The table's gone quite dead. How silly."

"No," said Mr Satterthwaite thoughtfully. "I don't think it's silly."

He rose and left the room. He went straight to the telephone. Presently he was through.

"Can I speak to Miss Keeley? Is that you, Madge, my dear? I want to change my mind, if I may, and accept your kind invitation. It is not so urgent as I thought that I should get back to town. Yes - yes - I will arrive in time for dinner."

He hung up the receiver, a strange flush on his withered cheeks. Mr Quin - the mysterious Mr Harley Quin. Mr Satterthwaite counted over on his fingers the times he had been brought into contact with that man of mystery. Where Mr Quin was concerned - things happened! What had happened or was going to happen - at Laidell?

Whatever it was, there was work for him, Mr Satterthwaite, to do. In some way or other, he would have an active part to play. He was sure of that.

Laidell was a large house. Its owner, David Keeley, was one of those quiet men with indeterminate personalities who seem to count as part of the furniture. Their inconspicuousness has nothing to do with

brain power - David Keeley was a most brilliant mathematician, and had written a book totally incomprehensible to ninety-nine hundreths of humanity. But like so many men of brilliant intellect, he radiated no bodily vigour or magnetism. It was a standing joke that David Keeley was a real "invisible man." Footmen passed him by with the vegetables, and guests forgot to say how do you do or good-bye.

His daughter Madge was very different. A fine upstanding young woman, bursting with energy and life. Thorough, healthy and normal, and extremely pretty.

It was she who received Mr Satterthwaite when he arrived.

"How nice of you to come - after all."

"Very delightful of you to let me change my mind. Madge, my dear, you're looking very well."

"Oh! I'm always well."

"Yes, I know. But it's more than that. You look - well, blooming is the word I have in mind. Has anything happened my dear? Anything - well - special?"

She laughed - blushed a little.

"It's too bad, Mr Satterthwaite. You always guess things."

He took her hand.

"So it's that, is it? Mr Right has come along?"

It was an old-fashioned term, but Madge did not object to it. She rather liked Mr Satterthwaite's old-fashioned ways.

"I suppose so - yes. But nobody's supposed to know. It's a secret. But I don't really mind your knowing, Mr Satterthwaite. You're always so nice and sympathetic."

Mr Satterthwaite thoroughly enjoyed romance at second hand. He was sentimental and Victorian.

"I mustn't ask who the lucky man is? Well, then all I can say is that I hope he is worthy of the honour you are conferring on him."

Rather a duck, old Mr Satterthwaite, thought Madge.

"Oh! we shall get on awfully well together, I think," she said. "You see, we like doing the same things, and that's so awfully important, isn't it? We've really got a lot in common - and we know all about each other and all that. It's really been coming on for a long time. That gives one such a nice safe feeling, doesn't it?"

"Undoubtedly," said Mr Satterthwaite. "But in my experience one can never really know all about anyone else. That is part of the interest and charm of life."

"Oh! I'll risk it," said Madge, laughing, and they went up to dress for dinner.

Mr Satterthwaite was late. He had not brought a valet, and having his things unpacked for him by a stranger always flurried him a little. He came down to find everyone assembled, and in the modern style Madge merely said, "Oh! Here's Mr Satterthwaite. I'm starving. Let's go in."

She led the way with a tall grey-haired woman - a woman of striking personality. She had a very clear rather incisive voice, and her face was clear cut and rather beautiful.

"How d'you do, Satterthwaite," said Mr Keeley.

Mr Satterthwaite jumped.

"How do you do," he said. "I'm afraid I didn't see you."

"Nobody does," said Mr Keeley sadly.

They went in. The table was a low oval of mahogany. Mr Satterthwaite was placed between his young hostess and a short dark girl - a very hearty girl with a loud voice and a ringing determined laugh that expressed more the determination to be cheerful at all costs than any real mirth. Her name seemed to be Doris, and she was the type of young woman Mr Satterthwaite most disliked. She had, he considered, no artistic justification for existence.

On Madge's other side was a man of about thirty, whose likeness to the grey-haired woman proclaimed them mother and son.

Next to him -

Mr Satterthwaite caught his breath.

He didn't know what it was exactly. It was not beauty. It was something else - something much more elusive and intangible than beauty.

She was listening to Mr Keeley's rather ponderous dinner-table conversation, her head bent a little sideways. She was there, it seemed to Mr Satterthwaite - and yet she was not there! She was somehow a great deal less substantial than anyone else seated round the oval table. Something in the droop of her body sideways was beautiful - was more than beautiful. She looked up - her eyes met Mr Satterthwaite's for a moment across the table - and the word he wanted leapt to his mind.

Enchantment - that was it. She had the quality of enchantment. She might have been one of those creatures who are only half-human - one of the Hidden People from the Hollow Hills. She made everyone else look rather too real...

But at the same time, in a queer way, she stirred his pity. It was as though semi-humanity handicapped her. He sought for a phrase and found it.

"A bird with a broken wing," said Mr Satterthwaite.

Satisfied, he turned his mind back to the subject of Girl Guides and hoped that the girl Doris had not noticed his abstraction. When she

turned to the man on the other side of her - a man Mr Satterthwaite had hardly noticed, he himself turned to Madge.

"Who is the lady sitting next to your father?" he asked in a low voice.

"Mrs Graham? Oh, no! You mean Mabelle. Don't you know her? Mabelle Annesley. She was a Clydesley - one of the ill-fated Clydesleys."

He started. The ill-fated Clydesleys. He remembered. A brother had shot himself, a sister had been drowned, another had perished in an earthquake. A queer doomed family. This girl must be the youngest of them.

His thoughts were recalled suddenly. Madge's hand touched his under the table. Everyone else was talking. She gave a faint inclination of her head to her left.

"That's him," she murmured ungrammatically.

Mr Satterthwaite nodded quickly in comprehension. So this young Graham was the man of Madge's choice. Well, she could hardly have done better as far as appearances went - and Mr Satterthwaite was a shrewd observer. A pleasant, likeable, rather matter-of-fact young fellow. They'd make a nice pair - no nonsense about either of them - good healthy sociable young folk.

Laidell was run on old-fashioned lines. The ladies left the dining-room first. Mr Satterthwaite moved up to Graham and began to talk to him. His estimate of the young man was confirmed, yet there was

something that struck him as being not quite true to type. Roger Graham was distrait, his mind seemed far away, his hand shook as he replaced the glass on the table.

"He's got something on his mind," thought Mr Satterthwaite acutely. "Not nearly as important as he thinks it is, I dare say. All the same, I wonder what it is."

Mr Satterthwaite was in the habit of swallowing a couple of digestive pastilles after meals. Having neglected to bring them down with him, he went up to his room to fetch them.

On his way down to the drawing-room, he passed along the long corridor on the ground floor. About half-way along it was a room known as the terrace room. As Mr Satterthwaite looked through the open doorway in passing, he stopped short

Moonlight was streaming into the room. The latticed panes gave it a queer rhythmic pattern. A figure was sitting on the low window sill, drooping a little sideways and softly twanging the string of a ukelele - not in a jazz rhythm, but in a far older rhythm, the beat of fairy horses riding on fairy hills.

Mr Satterthwaite stood fascinated. She wore a dress of dull dark blue chiffon, pleated so that it looked like the feathers of a bird. She bent over the instrument, crooning to it

He came into the room - slowly, step by step. He was close to her when she looked up and saw him. She didn't start, he noticed, or seem surprised.

"I hope I'm not intruding," he began.

"Please - sit down."

He sat near her on a polished oak chair. She hummed softly under her breath.

"There's a lot of magic about tonight," she said. "Don't you think so?"

"Yes, there was a lot of magic about."

"They wanted me to fetch my uke," she explained. "And as I passed here, I thought it would be so lovely to be alone here - in the dark and the moon."

"Then I -" Mr Satterthwaite half rose, but she stopped him.

"Don't go. You - you fit in, somehow. It's queer, but you do."

He sat down again.

"It's been a queer sort of evening," she said. "I was out in the woods late this afternoon, and I met a man - such a strange sort of man - tall and dark, like a lost soul. The sun was setting, and the light of it through the trees made him look like a kind of Harlequin."

"Ah!" Mr Satterthwaite leant forward - his interest quickened.

"I wanted to speak to him - he - he looked so like somebody I know. But I lost him in the trees."

"I think I know him," said Mr Satterthwaite.

"Do you? He is - interesting, isn't he?"

"Yes, he is interesting."

There was a pause. Mr Satterthwaite was perplexed. There was something, he felt, that he ought to do - and he didn't know what it was. But surely - surely, it had to do with this girl. He said rather clumsily -

"Sometimes - when one is unhappy - one wants to get away -"

"Yes. That's true." She broke off suddenly. "Oh! I see what you mean. But you're wrong. It's just the other way round. I wanted to be alone because I'm happy."

"Happy?"

"Terribly happy."

She spoke quite quietly, but Mr Satterthwaite had a sudden sense of shock. What this strange girl meant by being happy wasn't the same as Madge Keeley would have meant by the same words. Happiness, for Mabelle Annesley, meant some kind of intense and vivid ecstasy... something that was not only human, but more than human. He shrank back a little.

"I - didn't know," he said clumsily.

"Of course you couldn't. And it's not - the actual thing - I'm not happy yet - but I'm going to be." She leaned forward. "Do you know what it's like to stand in a wood - a big wood with dark shadows and trees very close all round you - a wood you might never get out of - and then, suddenly - just in front of you, you see the country of your dreams - shining and beautiful - you've only got to step out from the trees and the darkness and you've found it..."

"So many things look beautiful," said Mr Satterthwaite, "before we've reached them. Some of the ugliest things in the world look the most beautiful..."

There was a step on the floor. Mr Satterthwaite turned his head. A fair man with a stupid, rather wooden face, stood there. He was the man Mr Satterthwaite had hardly noticed at the dinner-table.

"They're waiting for you, Mabelle," he said.

She got up, the expression had gone out of her face, her voice was flat and calm.

"I'm coming, Gerard," she said. "I've been talking to Mr Satterthwaite."

She went out of the room, Mr Satterthwaite following. He turned his head over his shoulder as he went and caught the expression on her husband's face. A hungry despairing look.

"Enchantment," thought Mr Satterthwaite. "He feels it right enough. Poor fellow - poor fellow."

The drawing-room was well lighted. Madge and Doris Coles were vociferous in reproaches.

"Mabelle, you little beast - you've been ages."

She sat on a low stool, tuned the ukelele and sang. They all joined in.

"Is it possible," thought Mr Satterthwaite, "that so many idiotic songs could have been written about My Baby."

But he had to admit that the syncopated wailing tunes were stirring. Though, of course, they weren't a patch on the old-fashioned waltz.

The air got very smoky. The syncopated rhythm went on.

"No conversation," thought Mr Satterthwaite. "No good music. No peace." He wished the world had not become definitely so noisy.

Suddenly Mabelle Annesley broke off, smiled across the room at him, and began to sing a song of Grieg's.

"My swan - my fair one..."

It was a favourite of Mr Satterthwaite's. He liked the note of ingenuous surprise at the end.

"Only a swan then? A swan then?"

After that, the party broke up. Madge offered drinks whilst her father picked up the discarded ukelele and began twanging it absent-mindedly. The party exchanged good-nights, drifted nearer and nearer to the door. Everyone talked at once. Gerard Annesley slipped away unostentatiously, leaving the others.

Outside the drawing-room door, Mr Satterthwaite bade Mrs Graham a ceremonious good-night. There were two staircases, one close at hand, the other at the end of a long corridor. It was by the latter that Mr Satterthwaite reached his room. Mrs Graham and her son passed up the stairs near at hand whence the quiet Gerard Annesley had already preceded them.

"You'd better get your ukelele, Mabelle," said Madge. "You'll forget it in the morning if you don't. You've got to make such an early start."

"Come on, Mr Satterthwaite," said Doris Coles, seizing him boisterously by one arm. "Early to bed - et cetera."

Madge took him by the other arm and all three ran down the corridor to peals of Doris's laughter. They paused at the end to wait for David Keeley, who was following at a much more sedate pace, turning out electric lights as he came. The four of them went upstairs together.

Mr Satterthwaite was just preparing to descend to the dining-room for breakfast on the following morning, when there was a light tap on the door and Madge Keeley entered. Her face was dead white, and she was shivering all over.

"Oh, Mr Satterthwaite."

"My dear child, what's happened?" he took her hand.

"Mabelle - Mabelle Annesley..."

"Yes?"

What had happened? What? Something terrible - he knew that. Madge could hardly get the words out.

"She - she hanged herself last night... On the back of her door. Oh! It's too horrible." She broke down - sobbing.

Hanged herself. Impossible. Incomprehensible!

He said a few soothing old-fashioned words to Madge, and hurried downstairs. He found David Keeley looking perplexed and incompetent.

"I've telephoned to the police, Satterthwaite. Apparently that's got to be done. So the doctor said. He's just finished examining the - the - good lord, it's a beastly business. She must have been desperately unhappy - to do it that way - Queer that song last night. Swan song, eh? She looked rather like a swan - a black swan."

"Yes."

"Swan Song," repeated Keeley. "Shows it was in her mind, eh?"

"It would seem so - yes, certainly it would seem so."

He hesitated, then asked if he might see - if, that is...

His host comprehended the stammering request.

"If you want to - I'd forgotten you have a penchant for human tragedies."

He led the way up the broad staircase. Mr Satterthwaite followed him. At the head of the stairs was the room occupied by Roger Graham and opposite it, on the other side of the passage, his mother's room. The latter door was ajar and a faint wisp of smoke floated through it.

A momentary surprise invaded Mr Satterthwaite's mind. He had not judged Mrs Graham to be a woman who smoked so early in the day. Indeed, he had had the idea that she did not smoke at all.

They went along the passage to the end door but one. David Keeley entered the room and Mr Satterthwaite followed him.

The room was not a very large one and showed signs of a man's occupation. A door in the wall led into a second room. A bit of cut rope still dangled from a hook high up on the door. On the bed...

Mr Satterthwaite stood for a minute looking down on the heap of huddled chiffon. He noticed that it was pleated like the plumage of a bird. At the face, after one glance, he did not look again.

He glanced from the door with its dangling rope to the communicating door through which they had come. "Was that open?"

"Yes. At least the maid says so."

"Annesley slept in there? Did he hear anything?"

"He says - nothing."

"Almost incredible," murmured Mr Satterthwaite. He looked back at the form on the bed. "Where is he?"

"Annesley? He's downstairs with the doctor."

They went downstairs to find an Inspector of police had arrived. Mr Satterthwaite was agreeably surprised to recognise in him an old acquaintance, Inspector Winkfield. The Inspector went upstairs with the doctor, and a few minutes later a request came that all members of the house party should assemble in the drawing-room.

The blinds had been drawn, and the whole room had a funereal aspect. Doris Coles looked frightened and subdued. Every now and then she dabbed her eyes with a handkerchief. Madge was resolute and alert, her feelings fully under control by now. Mrs Graham was composed, as always, her face grave and impassive. The tragedy seemed to have affected her son more keenly than anyone. He looked a positive wreck this morning. David Keeley, as usual, had subsided into the background.

The bereaved husband sat alone, a little apart from the others. There was a queer dazed look about him, as though he could hardly realise what had taken place.

Mr Satterthwaite, outwardly composed, was inwardly seething with the importance of a duty shortly to be performed.

Inspector Winkfield, followed by Dr Morris, came in and shut the door behind him. He cleared his throat and spoke.

"This is a very sad occurrence - very sad, I'm sure. It's necessary, under the circumstances, that I should ask everybody a few questions. You'll not object, I'm sure. I'll begin with Mr Annesley. You'll forgive my asking, sir, but had your good lady ever threatened to take her life?"

Mr Satterthwaite opened his lips impulsively, then closed them again. There was plenty of time. Better not speak too soon.

"I - no, I don't think so."

His voice was so hesitating, so peculiar, that everyone shot a covert glance at him. "You're not sure, sir?"

"Yes - I'm - quite sure. She didn't."

"Ah! Were you aware that she was unhappy in any way?"

"No. I - no, I wasn't."

"She said nothing to you. About feeling depressed, for instance?"

"I - no, nothing."

Whatever the Inspector thought, he said nothing. Instead he proceeded to his next point.

"Will you describe to me briefly the events of last night?"

"We - all went up to bed. I fell asleep immediately and heard nothing. The housemaid's scream aroused me this morning. I rushed into the adjoining room and found my wife - and found her -"

His voice broke. The Inspector nodded. "Yes, yes, that's quite enough. We needn't go into that. When did you last see your wife the night before?"

"I - downstairs."

"Downstairs?"

"Yes, we all left the drawing-room together. I went straight up leaving the others talking in the hall."

"And you didn't see your wife again? Didn't she say good-night when she came up to bed?"

"I was asleep when she came up."

"But she only followed you a few minutes later. That's right, isn't it, sir?" He looked at David Keeley, who nodded.

"She hadn't come up half an hour later." Annesley spoke stubbornly.

The Inspector's eyes strayed gently to Mrs Graham.

"She didn't stay in your room talking, Madam?"

Did Mr Satterthwaite fancy it, or was there a slight pause before Mrs Graham said with her customary quiet decision of manner, "No, I went straight into my room and closed the door. I heard nothing."

"And you say, sir -" the Inspector had shifted his attention back to Annesley - "that you slept and heard nothing. The communicating door was open, was it not?"

"I - I believe so. But my wife would have entered her room by the other door from the corridor."

"Even so, sir, there would have been certain sounds - a choking noise, a drumming of heels on the door -"

"No."

It was Mr Satterthwaite who spoke, impetuously, unable to stop himself. Every eye turned towards him in surprise. He himself became nervous, stammered, and turned pink.

"I - I beg your pardon, Inspector. But I must speak. You are on the wrong track - the wrong track altogether. Mrs Annesley did not kill herself - I am sure of it. She was murdered."

There was a dead silence, then Inspector Winkfield said quietly, "What leads you to say that, sir?"

"I - it is a feeling. A very strong feeling."

"But I think, sir, there must be more than that to it. There must be some particular reason."

Well, of course there was a particular reason. There was the mysterious message from Mr Quin. But you couldn't tell a police inspector that. Mr Satterthwaite cast about desperately, and found something. "Last night - when we were talking together, she said she was very happy. Very happy - just that. That wasn't like a woman thinking of committing suicide."

He was triumphant. He added, "She went back to the drawing-room to fetch her ukelele, so that she wouldn't forget it in the morning. That didn't look like suicide either."

"No," admitted the Inspector. "No, perhaps it didn't." He turned to David Keeley. "Did she take the ukelele upstairs with her?"

The mathematician tried to remember.

"I think - yes, she did. She went upstairs carrying it in her hand. I remember seeing it just as she turned the corner of the staircase before I turned off the light down here"

"Oh!" cried Madge. "But it's here now."

She pointed dramatically to where the ukelele lay on a table.

"That's curious," said the Inspector. He stepped swiftly across and rang the bell.

A brief order sent the butler in search of the housemaid whose business it was to do the rooms in the morning. She came, and was quite positive in her answer. The ukelele had been there first thing that morning when she had dusted.

Inspector Winkfield dismissed her and then said curtly, "I would like to speak to Mr Satterthwaite in private, please. Everyone may go. But no one is to leave the house."

Mr Satterthwaite twittered into speech as soon as the door had closed behind the others.

"I - I am sure, Inspector, that you have the case excellently in hand. Excellently. I just felt that - having, as I say, a very strong feeling -"

The Inspector arrested further speech with an upraised hand.

"You're quite right, Mr Satterthwaite. The lady was murdered."

"You knew it?" Mr Satterthwaite was chagrined.

"There were certain things that puzzled Dr Morris." He looked across at the doctor, who had remained, and the doctor assented to his statement with a nod of the head. "We made a thorough examination. The rope that was round her neck wasn't the rope that she was strangled with - it was something much thinner that did the job, something more like a wire. It had cut right into the flesh. The mark of the rope was superimposed on it. She was strangled and then hung up on the door afterwards to make it look like suicide."

"But who -?"

"Yes," said the inspector. "Who? That's the question. What about the husband sleeping next door, who never said good-night to his wife and who heard nothing? I should say we hadn't far to look. Must find out what terms they were on. That's where you can be useful to us, Mr Satterthwaite. You've here, and you can get the hang of things in a way we can't. Find out what relations there were between the two."

"I hardly like -" began Mr Satterthwaite, stiffening.

"It won't be the first murder mystery you've helped us with. I remember the case of Mrs Strangeways. You've got a flair for that sort of thing, sir. An absolute flair."

Yes, it was true - he had a flair -

He said quietly, "I will do my best, Inspector."

Had Gerard Annesley killed his wife? Had he? Mr Satterthwaite recalled that look of misery last night. He loved her - and he was suffering. Suffering will drive a man to strange deeds.

But there was something else - some other factor. Mabelle had spoken of herself as coming out of a wood - she was looking forward to happiness - not a quiet rational happiness - but a happiness that was irrational - a wild ecstasy... If Gerard Annesley had spoken the truth, Mabelle had not come to her room till at least half an hour later than he had done. Yet David Keeley had seen her going up those stairs. There were two other rooms occupied in that wing. There was Mrs Graham's, and there was her son's. Her son's. But he and Madge... Surely Madge would have guessed... But Madge wasn't the guessing kind. All the same, no smoke without fire -

Smoke!

Ah! he remembered. A wisp of smoke curling out through Mrs Graham's bedroom door.

He acted on impulse. Straight up the stairs and into her room. It was empty. He closed the door behind him and locked it.

He went across to the grate. A heap of charred fragments. Very gingerly he raked them over with his finger. His luck was in. In the very centre were some unburnt fragments - fragments of letters...

Very disjointed fragments, but they told him something of value.

"Life can be wonderful, Roger darling. I never knew..."

"all my life has been a dream till I met you, Roger..."

"... Gerard knows, I think... I am sorry but what can I do? Nothing is real to me but you, Roger... We shall be together, soon."

"What are you going to tell him at Laidell, Roger? You write strangely - but I am not afraid..."

Very carefully, Mr Satterthwaite put the fragments into an envelope from the writing-table. He went to the door, unlocked it and opened it to find himself face to face with Mrs Graham.

It was an awkward moment, and Mr Satterthwaite was momentarily out of countenance. He did what was, perhaps, the best thing, attacked the situation with simplicity.

"I have been searching your room, Mrs Graham. I have found something - a packet of letters imperfectly burnt."

A wave of alarm passed over her face. It was gone in a flash, but it had been there.

"Letters from Mrs Annesley to your son."

She hesitated for a minute, then said quietly, "That is so. I thought they would be better burnt."

"For what reason?"

"My son is engaged to be married. These letters - if they had been brought into publicity through the poor girl's suicide - might have caused much pain and trouble."

"Your son could burn his own letters."

She had no answer ready for that. Mr Satterthwaite pursued his advantage.

"You found these letters in his room, brought them into your room and burnt them. Why? You were afraid, Mrs Graham."

"I am not in the habit of being afraid, Mr Satterthwaite."

"No - but this was a desperate case."

"Desperate?"

"Your son might have been in danger of arrest - for murder."

"Murder!"

He saw her face go white. He went on quickly, "You heard Mrs Annesley go into your son's room last night. He had told her of his engagement? No, I see he hadn't. He told her then. They quarrelled, and he -"

"That's a lie!"

They had been so absorbed in their duel of words that they had not heard approaching footsteps. Roger Graham had come up behind them unperceived by either.

"It's all right, Mother. Don't worry. Come into my room, Mr Satterthwaite."

Mr Satterthwaite followed him into his room. Mrs Graham had turned away and did not attempt to follow them. Roger Graham shut the door.

"Listen, Mr Satterthwaite, you think I killed Mabelle. You think I strangled her - here - and took her along and hung her up on that door - later - when everyone was asleep?"

Mr Satterthwaite stared at him. Then he said surprisingly, "No, I do not think so."

"Thank God for that. I couldn't have killed Mabelle. I - I loved her. Or didn't I? I don't know. It's a tangle that I can't explain. I'm fond of Madge - I always have been. And she's such a good sort. We suit each other. But Mabelle was different. It was - I can't explain it - a sort of enchantment. I was, I think - afraid of her."

Mr Satterthwaite nodded.

"It was madness - a kind of bewildering ecstasy... But it was impossible. It wouldn't have worked. That sort of thing doesn't last. I know what it means now to have a spell cast over you."

"Yes, it must have been like that," said Mr Satterthwaite thoughtfully.

"I - I wanted to get out of it all. I was going to tell Mabelle - last night."

"But you didn't?"

"No, I didn't," said Graham slowly. "I swear to you, Mr Satterthwaite, that I never saw her after I said good-night downstairs."

"I believe you," said Mr Satterthwaite.

He got up. It was not Roger Graham who had killed Mabelle Annesley. He could have fled from her, but he could not have killed her. He had been afraid of her, afraid of that wild intangible fairy-like quality of hers. He had known enchantment - and turned his back on it. He had gone for the safe sensible thing that he had known "would work" and had relinquished the intangible dream that might lead him he knew not where.

He was a sensible young man, and, as such, uninteresting to Mr Satterthwaite, who was an artist and a connoisseur in life.

He left Roger Graham in his room and went downstairs. The drawing-room was empty. Mabelle's ukelele lay on a stool by the window. He took it up and twanged it absent-mindedly. He knew nothing of the instrument, but his ear told him that it was abominably out of tune. He turned a key experimentally.

Doris Coles came into the room. She looked at him reproachfully.

"Poor Mabelle's uke," she said.

Her clear condemnation made Mr Satterthwaite feel obstinate.

"Tune it for me," he said, and added - "If you can."

"Of course I can," said Doris, wounded at the suggestion of incompetence in any direction.

She took it from him, twanged a string, turned a key briskly - and the string snapped.

"Well, I never. Oh! I see - but how extraordinary! It's the wrong string - a size too big. It's an A string. How stupid to put that on. Of course it snaps when you try to tune it up. How stupid people are."

"Yes," said Mr Satterthwaite. "They are - even when they try to be clever..."

His tone was so odd that she stared at him. He took the ukelele from her and removed the broken string. He went out of the room holding it in his hand. In the library he found David Keeley.

"Here," he said. He held out the string. Keeley took it.

"What's this?"

"A broken ukelele string." He paused and then went on - "What did you do with the other one?"

"The other one?"

"The one you strangled her with. You were very clever, weren't you? It was done very quickly - just in that moment we were all laughing and talking in the hall.

"Mabelle came back into this room for her ukelele. You had taken the string off as you fiddled with it just before. You caught her round the throat with it and strangled her. Then you came out and locked the door and joined us. Later, in the dead of night, you came down and - and disposed of the body by hanging it on the door of her room. And you put another string on the ukelele - but it was the wrong string, that's why you were stupid." There was a pause.

"But why did you do it?" said Mr Satterthwaite. "In God's name, why?"

Mr Keeley laughed, a funny giggling little laugh that made Mr Satterthwaite feel rather sick.

"It was so very simple," he said. "That's why! And then - nobody ever noticed me. Nobody ever noticed what I was doing. I thought - I thought I'd have the laugh of them..."

And again he gave that furtive little giggle and looked at Mr Satterthwaite with mad eyes.

Mr Satterthwaite was glad that at that moment Inspector Winkfield came into the room.

It was twenty-four hours later, on his way to London, that Mr Satterthwaite awoke from a doze to find a tall dark man sitting opposite to him in the railway carriage. He was not altogether surprised.

"My dear Mr Quin!"

"Yes - I am here."

Mr Satterthwaite said slowly, "I can hardly face you. I am ashamed - I failed."

"Are you so sure of that?"

"I did not save her."

"But you discovered the truth?"

"Yes - that is true. One or other of those young men might have been accused - might even have been found guilty. So, at any rate, I saved a man's life. But, she - she - that strange enchanting creature..." His voice broke off.

Mr Quin looked at him.

"Is death the greatest evil that can happen to anyone?"

"I - well - perhaps - no -"

Mr Satterthwaite remembered... Madge and Roger Graham... Mabelle's face in the moonlight - its serene unearthly happiness..."

"No," he admitted. "No - perhaps death is not the greatest evil..."

He remembered the ruffled blue chiffon of her dress that had seemed to him like the plumage of a bird... A bird with a broken wing...

When he looked up, he found himself alone. Mr Quin was no longer there.

But he had left something behind.

On the seat was a roughly carved bird fashioned out of some dim blue stone. It had, possibly, no great artistic merit. But it had something else.

It had the vague quality of enchantment.

So said Mr Satterthwaite - and Mr Satterthwaite was a connoisseur.

Chapter 11

THE WORLD'S END

Mr Satterthwaite had come to Corsica because of the Duchess. It was out of his beat. On the Riviera he was sure of his comforts, and to be comfortable meant a lot to Mr Satterthwaite. But though he liked his comfort, he also liked a Duchess. In his way, a harmless, gentlemanly, old-fashioned way, Mr Satterthwaite was a snob. He liked the best people. And the Duchess of Leith was a very authentic Duchess. There were no Chicago pork butchers in her ancestry. She was the daughter of a Duke as well as the wife of one.

For the rest, she was rather a shabby-looking old lady, a good deal given to black bead trimmings on her clothes. She had quantities of diamonds in old-fashioned settings, and she wore them as her mother before her had worn them - pinned all over her indiscriminately. Someone had suggested once that the Duchess stood in the middle of the room whilst her maid flung brooches at her haphazard. She subscribed generously to charities, and looked well after her tenants and dependents, but was extremely mean over small sums. She cadged lifts from her friends, and did her shopping in bargain basements.

The Duchess was seized with a whim for Corsica. Cannes bored her and she had a bitter argument with the hotel proprietor over the price of her rooms.

"And you shall go with me, Satterthwaite," she said firmly. "We needn't be afraid of scandal at our time of life."

Mr Satterthwaite was delicately flattered. No one had ever mentioned scandal in connection with him before. He was far too insignificant. Scandal - and a Duchess - delicious!

"Picturesque you know," said the Duchess. "Brigands - all that sort of thing. And extremely cheap, so I've heard. Manuel was positively impudent this morning. These hotel proprietors need putting in their place. They can't expect to get the best people if they go on like this. I told him so plainly."

"I believe," said Mr Satterthwaite, "that one can fly over quite comfortably. From Antibes."

"They probably charge you a pretty penny for it," said the Duchess sharply. "Find out, will you?"

"Certainly, Duchess."

Mr Satterthwaite was still in a flutter of gratification despite the fact that his rφle was clearly to be that of a glorified courier.

When she learned the price of a passage by Avion, the Duchess turned it down promptly.

"They needn't think I'm going to pay a ridiculous sum like that to go in one of their nasty dangerous things."

So they went by boat, and Mr Satterthwaite endured ten hours of acute discomfort. To begin with, as the boat sailed at seven, he took it for granted that there would be dinner on board. But there was no dinner. The boat was small and the sea was rough. Mr Satterthwaite was decanted at Ajaccio in the early hours of the morning more dead than alive.

The Duchess, on the contrary, was perfectly fresh. She never minded discomfort if she could feel she was saving money. She looked enthusiastic over the scene on the quay, with the palm trees and the rising sun. The whole population seemed to have turned out to watch the arrival of the boat, and the launching of the gangway was attended with excited cries and directions.

"On dirait," said a stout Frenchman who stood beside them, "que jamais avant on a fait cette manoeuvre lб!"

"That maid of mine has been sick all night," said the Duchess. "The girl's a perfect fool."

Mr Satterthwaite smiled in a pallid fashion.

"A waste of good food, I call it," continued the Duchess robustly.

"Did she get any food?" asked Mr Satterthwaite enviously.

"I happened to bring some biscuits and a stick of chocolate on board with me," said the Duchess. "When I found there was no dinner to be got, I gave the lot to her. The lower classes always make such a fuss about going without their meals."

With a cry of triumph the launching of the gangway was accomplished. A Musical Comedy chorus of brigands rushed aboard and wrested hand-luggage from the passengers by main force.

"Come on, Satterthwaite," said the Duchess. "I want a hot bath and some coffee."

So did Mr Satterthwaite. He was not wholly successful, however. They were received at the hotel by a bowing manager and were shown to their rooms. The Duchess's had a bathroom attached. Mr Satterthwaite, however, was directed to a bath that appeared to be situated in somebody else's bedroom. To expect the water to be hot at that hour in the morning was, perhaps, unreasonable. Later he drank intensely black coffee, served in a pot without a lid. The shutters and the window of his room had been flung open, and the crisp morning air came in fragrantly. A day of dazzling blue and green.

The waiter waved his hand with a flourish to call attention to the view.

"Ajaccio," he said solemnly. "Le plus beau port du monde!"

And he departed abruptly.

Looking out over the deep blue of the bay, with the snow mountains beyond, Mr Satterthwaite was almost inclined to agree with him. He finished his coffee, and lying down on the bed, fell fast asleep.

At dejeuner the Duchess was in great spirits.

"This is just what will be good for you, Satterthwaite," she said. "Get you out of all those dusty little old-maidish ways of yours."

She swept a lorgnette round the room. "Upon my word, there's Naomi Carlton Smith."

She indicated a girl sitting by herself at a table in the window. A round-shouldered girl, who slouched as she sat. Her dress appeared to be made of some kind of brown sacking. She had black hair, untidily bobbed.

"An artist?" asked Mr Satterthwaite.

He was always good at placing people.

"Quite right," said the Duchess. "Calls herself one anyway. I knew she was mooching around in some queer quarter of the globe. Poor as a church mouse, proud as Lucifer, and a bee in her bonnet like all the Carlton Smiths. Her mother was my first cousin."

"She's one of the Knowlton lot then?"

The Duchess nodded.

"Been her own worst enemy," she volunteered. "Clever girl too. Mixed herself up with a most undesirable young man. One of that Chelsea crowd. Wrote plays or poems or something unhealthy. Nobody took 'em, of course. Then he stole somebody's jewels and

got caught out. I forget what they gave him. Five years, I think. But you must remember? It was last winter."

"Last winter I was in Egypt," explained Mr Satterthwaite. "I had flu very badly the end of January, and the doctors insisted on Egypt afterwards. I missed a lot."

His voice rang with a note of real regret.

"That girl seems to me to be moping," said the Duchess, raising her lorgnette once more. "I can't allow that."

On her way out, she stopped by Miss Carlton Smith's table and tapped the girl on the shoulder.

"Well, Naomi, you don't seem to remember me?"

Naomi rose rather unwillingly to her feet.

"Yes, I do, Duchess. I saw you come in. I thought it was quite likely you mightn't recognise me."

She drawled the words lazily, with a complete indifference of manner.

"When you've finished your lunch, come and talk to me on the terrace," ordered the Duchess.

"Very well." Naomi yawned.

"Shocking manners," said the Duchess, to Mr Satterthwaite, as she resumed her progress. "All the Carlton Smiths have."

They had their coffee outside in the sunshine. They had been there about six minutes when Naomi Carlton Smith lounged out from the hotel and joined them. She let herself fall slackly on to a chair with her legs stretched out ungracefully in front of her.

An odd face, with its jutting chin and deep-set grey eyes. A clever, unhappy face - a face that only just missed being beautiful.

"Well, Naomi," said the Duchess briskly. "And what are you doing with yourself?"

"Oh, I dunno. Just marking time."

"Been painting?"

"A bit."

"Show me your things."

Naomi grinned. She was not cowed by the autocrat. She was amused. She went into the hotel and came out again with a portfolio.

"You won't like 'em, Duchess," she said warningly. "Say what you like. You won't hurt my feelings."

Mr Satterthwaite moved his chair a little nearer. He was interested. In another minute he was more interested still. The Duchess was frankly unsympathetic.

"I can't even see which way the things ought to be," she complained. "Good gracious, child, there was never a sky that colour - or a sea either."

"That's the way I see 'em," said Naomi placidly.

"Ugh!" said the Duchess, inspecting another. "This gives me the creeps."

"It's meant to," said Naomi. "You're paying me a compliment without knowing it."

It was a queer vorticist study of a prickly pear - just recognisable as such. Grey-green with slodges of violent colour where the fruit glittered like jewels. A swirling mass of evil, fleshy - festering. Mr Satterthwaite shuddered and turned his head aside.

He found Naomi looking at him and nodding her head in comprehension.

"I know," she said. "But it is beastly."

The Duchess cleared her throat.

"It seems quite easy to be an artist nowadays," she observed witheringly. "There's no attempt to copy things. You just shovel on some paint - I don't know what with, not a brush, I'm sure -"

"Palette knife," interposed Naomi, smiling broadly once more.

"A good deal at a time," continued the Duchess, "in lumps. And there you are! Everyone says, 'How clever.' Well, I've no patience with that sort of thing. Give me a nice picture of a dog or a horse, by Edwin Landseer.

"And why not?" demanded the Duchess. "What's wrong with Landseer?"

"Nothing," said Naomi. "He's all right. And you're all right. The tops of things are always nice and shiny and smooth. I respect you, Duchess, you've got force. You've met life fair and square and you've come out on top. But the people who are underneath see the under side of things. And that's interesting in a way."

The Duchess stared at her.

"I haven't the faintest idea what you're talking about," she declared.

Mr Satterthwaite was still examining the sketches. He realised, as the Duchess could not, the perfection of technique behind them. He was startled and delighted. He looked up at the girl.

"Will you sell me one of these, Miss Carlton Smith?" he asked.

"You can have any one you like for five guineas," said the girl indifferently.

Mr Satterthwaite hesitated a minute or two and then he selected a study of prickly pear and aloe. In the foreground was a vivid blur of yellow mimosa, the scarlet of the aloe flower danced in and out of the picture, and inexorable, mathematically underlying the whole, was the oblong pattern of the prickly pear and the sword motif of the aloe.

He made a little bow to the girl.

"I am very happy to have secured this, and I think I have made a bargain. Some day Miss Carlton Smith, I shall be able to sell this sketch at a very good profit - if I want to!"

The girl leant forward to see which one he had taken. He saw a new look come into her eyes. For the first time she was really aware of his existence, and there was respect in the quick glance she gave him.

"You have chosen the best," she said. "I - I am glad."

"Well, I suppose you know what you're doing," said the Duchess. "And I daresay you're right. I've heard that you are quite a connoisseur. But you can't tell me that all this new stuff is art, because it isn't. Still, we needn't go into that. Now I'm only going to be here a few days and I want to see something of the island. You've got a car, I suppose, Naomi?"

The girl nodded.

"Excellent," said the Duchess. "We'll make a trip somewhere tomorrow."

"It's only a two-seater."

"Nonsense, there's a dickey, I suppose, that will do for Mr Satterthwaite?"

A shuddering sigh went through Mr Satterthwaite. He had observed the Corsican roads that morning. Naomi was regarding him thoughtfully.

"I'm afraid my car would be no good to you," she said. "It's a terribly battered old bus. I bought it second-hand for a mere song. It will just get me up the hills - with coaxing. But I can't take passengers. There's quite a good garage, though, in the town. You can hire a car there."

"Hire a car?" said the Duchess, scandalised. "What an idea. Who's that nice-looking man, rather yellow, who drove up in a four-seater just before lunch?"

"I expect you mean Mr Tomlinson. He's a retired Indian judge."

"That accounts for the yellowness," said the Duchess. "I was afraid it might be jaundice. He seems quite a decent sort of man. I shall talk to him."

That evening, on coming down to dinner, Mr Satterthwaite found the Duchess resplendent in black velvet and diamonds, talking earnestly to the owner of the four-seater car. She beckoned authoritatively.

"Come here, Mr Satterthwaite, Mr Tomlinson is telling me the most interesting things, and what do you think? He is actually going to take us an expedition tomorrow in his car."

Mr Satterthwaite regarded her with admiration.

"We must go in to dinner," said the Duchess. "Do come and sit at our table, Mr Tomlinson, and then you can go on with what you were telling me."

"Quite a decent sort of man," the Duchess pronounced later.

"With quite a decent sort of car," retorted Mr Satterthwaite.

"Naughty," said the Duchess, and gave him a resounding blow on the knuckles with the dingy black fan she always carried. Mr Satterthwaite winced with pain.

"Naomi is coming too," said the Duchess. "In her car. That girl wants taking out of herself. She's very selfish. Not exactly self-centred, but totally indifferent to everyone and everything. Don't you agree?"

"I don't think that's possible," said Mr Satterthwaite, slowly. "I mean, everyone's interest must go somewhere. There are, of course, the people who revolve round themselves - but I agree with you, she's not one of that kind. She's totally uninterested in herself. And yet

she's got a strong character - there must be something. I thought at first it was her art - but it isn't. I've never met anyone so detached from life. That's dangerous."

"Dangerous? What do you mean?"

"Well, you see - it must mean an obsession of some kind, and obsessions are always dangerous."

"Satterthwaite," said the Duchess, "don't be a fool. And listen to me. About tomorrow -"

Mr Satterthwaite listened. It was very much his rφle in life.

They started early the following morning, taking their lunch with them. Naomi, who had been six months on the island, was to be the pioneer. Mr Satterthwaite went over to her as she sat waiting to start.

"You are sure that - I can't come with you?" he said wistfully.

She shook her head.

"You'll be much more comfortable in the back of the other car. Nicely padded seats and all that. This is a regular old rattle trap. You'd leap in the air going over the bumps."

"And then, of course, the hills."

Naomi laughed.

"Oh, I only said that to rescue you from the dickey. The Duchess could perfectly well afford to have hired a car. She's the meanest woman in England. All the same, the old thing is rather a sport, and I can't help liking her."

"Then I could come with you after all?" said Mr Satterthwaite eagerly.

She looked at him curiously.

"Why are you so anxious to come with me?"

"Can you ask?" Mr Satterthwaite made his funny old-fashioned bow.

She smiled, but shook her head.

"That isn't the reason," she said thoughtfully. "It's odd... But you can't come with me - not today."

"Another day, perhaps," suggested Mr Satterthwaite politely.

"Oh, another day!" she laughed suddenly, a very queer laugh, Mr Satterthwaite thought. "Another day! Well, we'll see."

They started. They drove through the town, and the round the long curve of the bay, winding inland to cross a river and then back to the coast with its hundreds of little sandy coves. And then they began to climb. In and out, round nerve-shattering curves, upwards, ever upwards on the tortuous winding road. The blue bay was far below

them, and on the other side of it Ajaccio sparkled in the sun, white, like a fairy city.

In and out, in and out, with a precipice first one side of them, then the other. Mr Satterthwaite felt slightly giddy, he also felt slightly sick. The road was not very wide. And still they climbed.

It was cold now. The wind came to them straight off the snow peaks. Mr Satterthwaite turned up his coat collar and buttoned it tightly under his chin.

It was very cold. Across the water, Ajaccio was still bathed in sunlight, but up here thick grey clouds came drifting across the face of the sun. Mr Satterthwaite ceased to admire the view. He yearned for a steam-heated hotel and a comfortable arm-chair.

Ahead of them Naomi's little two-seater drove steadily forward. Up, still up. They were on top of the world now. On either side of them were lower hills, hills sloping down to valleys. They looked straight across to the snow peaks. And the wind come tearing over them, sharp, like a knife. Suddenly Naomi's car stopped, and she looked back.

"We've arrived," she said. "At the World's End. And I don't think it's an awfully good day for it."

They all got out. They had arrived in a tiny village, with half a dozen stone cottages. An imposing name was printed in letters a foot high.

"Cote Chiaveeri."

Naomi shrugged her shoulders.

"That's its official name, but I prefer to call it the World's End."

She walked on a few steps, and Mr Satterthwaite joined her. They were beyond the houses now. The road stopped. As Naomi had said, this was the end, the back of beyond, the beginning of nowhere. Behind them the white ribbon of the road, in front of them - nothing. Only far, far below, the sea...

Mr Satterthwaite drew a deep breath.

"It's an extraordinary place. One feels that anything might happen here, that one might meet - anyone -"

He stopped, for just in front of them a man was sitting on a boulder, his face turned to the sea. They had not seen him till this moment, and his appearance had the suddenness of a conjuring trick. He might have sprung from the surrounding landscape.

"I wonder -" began Mr Satterthwaite.

But at that minute the stranger turned, and Mr Satterthwaite saw his face.

"Why, Mr Quin! How extraordinary! Miss Carlton Smith, I want to introduce my friend Mr Quin to you. He's the most unusual fellow. You are, you know. You always turn up in the nick of time -"

He stopped, with the feeling that he had said something awkwardly significant, and yet for the life of him he could not think what it was.

Naomi had shaken hands with Mr Quin in her usual abrupt style.

"We're here for a picnic," she said. "And it seems to me we shall be pretty well frozen to the bone."

Mr Satterthwaite shivered.

"Perhaps," he said uncertainly, "we shall find a sheltered spot?"

"Which this isn't," agreed Naomi. "Still, it's worth seeing, isn't it?"

"Yes, indeed." Mr Satterthwaite turned to Mr Quin. "Miss Carlton Smith calls this place the world's end. Rather a good name, eh?"

Mr Quin nodded his head slowly several times.

"Yes - a very suggestive name. I suppose one only comes once in one's life to a place like that - a place where one can't go on any longer."

"What do you mean?" asked Naomi sharply.

He turned to her.

"Well, usually, there's a choice, isn't there? To the right or to the left. Forward or back. Here - there's the road behind you and in front of you - nothing."

Naomi stared at him. Suddenly she shivered and began to retrace her steps towards the others. The two men fell in beside her. Mr Quin continued to talk, but his tone was now easily conversational.

"Is the small car yours, Miss Carlton Smith?"

"Yes."

"You drive yourself? One needs, I think, a good deal of nerve to do that round here. The turns are rather appalling. A moment of inattention, a brake that failed to hold, and - over the edge - down - down - down. It would be - very easily done."

They had now joined the others. Mr Satterthwaite introduced his friend. He felt a tug at his arm. It was Naomi. She drew him apart from the others.

"Who is he?" she demanded fiercely.

Mr Satterthwaite gazed at her in astonishment.

"Well, I hardly know. I mean, I have known him for some years now - we have run across each other from time to time, but in the sense of knowing actually -"

He stopped. These were futilities that he was uttering, and the girl by his side was not listening. She was standing with her head bent down, her hands clenched by her sides.

"He knows things," she said. "He knows things... How does he know?"

Mr Satterthwaite had no answer. He could only look at her dumbly, unable to comprehend die storm that shook her.

"I'm afraid," she muttered.

"Afraid of Mr Quin?"

"I'm afraid of his eyes. He sees things..."

Something cold and wet fell on Mr Satterthwaite's cheek. He looked up.

"Why, it's snowing," he exclaimed, in great surprise.

"A nice day to have chosen for a picnic," said Naomi.

She had regained control of herself with an effort.

What was to be done? A babel of suggestions broke out. The snow came down thick and fast. Mr Quin made a suggestion and everyone welcomed it. There was a little stone Cassecroute at the end of the row of houses. There was a stampede towards it.

"You have your provisions," said Mr Quin, "and they will probably be able to make you some coffee."

It was a tiny place, rather dark, for the one little window did little towards lighting it, but from one end came a grateful glow of warmth. And old Corsican woman was just throwing a handful of branches on the fire. It blazed up, and by its light the newcomers realised that others were before them.

Three people were sitting at the end of a bare wooden table. There was something unreal about the scene to Mr Satterthwaite's eye, there was something even more unreal about the people.

The woman who sat at the end of the table looked like a duchess - that is, she looked more like a popular conception of a duchess. She was the ideal stage grande dame. Her aristocratic head was held high, her exquisitely dressed hair was of a snowy white. She was dressed in grey-soft draperies that fell about her in artistic folds. One long white hand supported her chin, the other was holding a roll spread with pвtй de foie gras. On her right was a man with a very white face, very black hair, and horn-rimmed spectacles. He was marvellously and beautifully dressed. At the moment his head was thrown back, and his left arm was thrown out as though he were about to declaim something.

On the left of the white-haired lady was a jolly-looking little man with a bald head. After the first glance, nobody looked at him.

There was just a moment of uncertainty, and then the Duchess (the authentic Duchess) took charge.

"Isn't this storm too dreadful?" she said pleasantly, coming forward, and smiling a purposeful and efficient smile that she had found very

useful when serving on Welfare and other committees. I suppose you've been caught in it just like we have? But Corsica is a marvellous place. I only arrived this morning."

The man with the black hair got up, and the Duchess with a gracious smile slipped into his seat.

The white-haired lady spoke.

"We have been here a week," she said.

Mr Satterthwaite started. Could anyone who had once heard that voice ever forget it? It echoed round the stone room, charged with emotion - with exquisite melancholy. It seemed to him that she had said something wonderful, memorable, full of meaning. She had spoken from her heart.

He spoke in a hurried aside to Mr Tomlinson,

"The man in spectacles is Mr Vyse - the producer, you know."

The retired Indian judge was looking at Mr Vyse with a good deal of dislike.

"What does he produce?" he asked. "Children?"

"Oh, dear me, no," said Mr Satterthwaite, shocked by the mere mention of anything so crude in connection with Mr Vyse. "Plays."

"I think," said Naomi, "I'll go out again. It's too hot in here." Her voice, strong and harsh, made Mr Satterthwaite jump. She made almost blindly, as it seemed, for the door, brushing Mr Tomlinson aside. But in the doorway itself she came face to face with Mr Quin, and he barred her way.

"Go back and sit down," he said.

His voice was authoritative. To Mr Satterthwaite's surprise the girl hesitated a minute and then obeyed. She sat down at the foot of the table as far from the others as possible.

Mr Satterthwaite bustled forward and button-holed the producer.

"You may not remember me," he began, "my name is Satterthwaite."

"Of course!" A long bony hand shot out and enveloped the other's in a painful grip. "My dear man. Fancy meeting you here. You know Miss Nunn, of course?"

Mr Satterthwaite jumped. No wonder that voice had been familiar. Thousands, all over England, had thrilled to those wonderful emotion-laden tones. Rosina Nunn! England's greatest emotional actress. Mr Satterthwaite too had lain under her spell. No one like her for interpreting a part - for bringing out the finer shades of meaning. He had thought of her always as an intellectual actress, one who comprehended and got inside the soul of her part.

He might be excused for not recognising her. Rosina Nunn was volatile in her tastes. For twenty-five years of her life she had been a

blonde. After a tour in the States she had returned with the locks of the raven, and she had taken up tragedy in earnest. This "French Marquise" effect was her latest whim.

"Oh, by the way, Mr Judd - Miss Nunn's husband," said Vyse, carelessly introducing the man with the bald head.

Rosina Nunn had had several husbands, Mr Satterthwaite knew. Mr Judd was evidently the latest.

Mr Judd was busily unwrapping packages from a hamper at his side. He addressed his wife.

"Some more pвtй, dearest? That last wasn't as thick as you like it."

Rosina Nunn surrendered her roll to him, as she murmured simply, "Henry thinks of the most enchanting meals. I always leave the commissariat to him."

"Feed the brute," said Mr Judd, and laughed. He patted his wife on the shoulder.

"Treats her just as though she were a dog," murmured the melancholy voice of Mr Vyse in Mr Satterthwaite's car. "Cuts up her food for her. Odd creatures, women."

Mr Satterthwaite and Mr Quin between them unpacked lunch. Hard-boiled eggs, cold ham and gruyere cheese were distributed round the table. The Duchess and Miss Nunn appeared to be deep in

murmured confidences. Fragments came along in the actress's deep contralto.

"The bread must be lightly toasted, you understand? Then just a very thin layer of marmalade. Rolled up and put in the oven for one minute - not more. Simply delicious."

"That woman lives for food," murmured Mr Vyse. "Simply lives for it. She can't think of anything else. I remember in Riders to the Sea - you know and it's the fine quiet time I'll be having. I could not get the effect I wanted. At last I told her to think of peppermint creams - she's very fond of peppermint creams. I got the effect at once - a sort of far-away look that went to your very soul."

Mr Satterthwaite was silent. He was remembering.

Mr Tomlinson opposite cleared his throat preparatory to entering into conversation.

"You produce plays, I hear, eh? I'm fond of a good play myself. 'Jim the Penman,' now, that was a play."

"My God," said Mr Vyse, and shivered down all the long length of him.

"A tiny clove of garlic," said Miss Nunn to the Duchess. "You tell your cook. It's wonderful."

She sighed happily and turned to her husband.

"Henry," she said plaintively, "I've never even seen the caviare."

"You're as near as nothing to sitting on it," returned Mr Judd cheerfully. "You put it behind you on the chair."

Rosina Nunn retrieved it hurriedly, and beamed round the table.

"Henry is too wonderful. I'm so terribly absent-minded. I never know where I've put anything."

"Like the day you packed your pears in your sponge bag," said Henry jocosely. "And then left it behind at the hotel. My word, I did a bit of wiring and phoning that day."

"They were insured," said Miss Nunn dreamily. "Not like my opal."

A spasm of exquisite heartrending grief flitted across her face.

Several times, when in the company of Mr Quin, Mr Satterthwaite had had the feeling of taking part in a play. The illusion was with him very strongly now. This was a dream. Everyone had his part. The words "my opal" were his own cue. He leant forward.

"Your opal, Miss Nunn?"

"Have you got the butter, Henry? Thank you. Yes, my opal. It was stolen, you know. And I never got it back."

"Do tell us," said Mr Satterthwaite.

"Well - I was born in October - so it was lucky for me to wear opals, and because of that I wanted a real beauty. I waited a long time for it. They said it was one of the most perfect ones known. Not very large - about the size of a two-shilling piece - but oh! the colour and the fire."

She sighed. Mr Satterthwaite observed that the Duchess was fidgeting and seemed uncomfortable, but nothing could stop Miss Nunn now. She went on, and the exquisite inflections of her voice made the story sound like some mournful Saga of old.

"It was stolen by a young man called Alec Gerard. He wrote plays."

"Very good plays," put in Mr Vyse professionally. "Why, I once kept one of his plays for six months."

"Did you produce it?" asked Mr Tomlinson.

"Oh, no!" said Mr Vyse, shocked at the idea. "But do you know, at one time I actually thought of doing so?"

"It had a wonderful part in it for me," said Miss Nunn. "'Rachel's Children,' it was called - though there wasn't anyone called Rachel in the play. He came to talk to me about it - at the theatre. I liked him. He was a nice-looking - and very shy, poor boy. I remember -" a beautiful faraway look stole over her face - "He bought me some peppermint creams. The opal was lying on the dressing-table. He'd been out in Australia, and he knew something about opals. He took it over to the light to look at it. I suppose he must have slipped it into

his pocket then. I missed it as soon as he'd gone. There was a to-do. You remember?"

She turned to Mr Vyse.

"Oh, I remember," said Mr Vyse with a groan.

"They found the empty case in his rooms," continued the actress. "He'd been terribly hard up, but the very next day he was able to pay large sums into his bank. He pretended to account for it by saying that a friend of his had put some money on a horse for him, but he couldn't produce the friend. He said he must have put the case in his pocket by mistake. I think that was a terribly weak thing to say, don't you? He might have thought of something better than that... I had to go and give evidence. There were pictures of me in all the papers. My press agent said it was very good publicity - but I'd much rather have had my opal back."

She shook her head sadly.

"Have some preserved pineapple?" said Mr Judd.

Miss Nunn brightened up.

"Where is it?"

"I gave it to you just now."

Miss Nunn looked behind her and in front of her, eyed her grey silk pochette, and then slowly drew up a large purple silk bag that was

reposing on the ground beside her. She began to turn the contents out slowly on the table, much to Mr Satterthwaite's interest.

There was a powder puff, a lip-stick, a small jewel case, a skein of wool, another powder puff, two handkerchiefs, a box of chocolate creams, an enamelled paper knife, a mirror, a little dark brown wooden box, five letters, a walnut, a small square of mauve crкpe de chine, a piece of ribbon and the end of a croissant. Last of all came the preserved pineapple.

"Eureka..." murmured Mr Satterthwaite softly.

"I beg your pardon?"

"Nothing," said Mr Satterthwaite hastily. "What a charming paper knife."

"Yes, isn't it? Somebody gave it to me. I can't remember who."

"That's an Indian box, "remarked Mr Tomlinson. "Ingenious little things, aren't they?"

"Somebody gave me that too," said Miss Nunn. "I've had it a long time. It used always to stand on my dressing-table at the theatre. I don't think it's very pretty, though, do you?"

The box was of plain dark brown wood. It pushed open from the side. On the top of it were two plain flaps of wood that could be turned round and round.

"Not pretty, perhaps," said Mr Tomlinson with a chuckle. "But I'll bet you've never seen one like it."

Mr Satterthwaite leaned forward. He had an excited feeling.

"Why did you say it was ingenious?" he demanded.

"Well, isn't it?"

The judge appealed to Miss Nunn. She looked at him blankly.

"I suppose I mustn't show them the trick of it - eh?"

Miss Nunn still looked blank.

"What trick?" asked Mr Judd.

"God bless my soul, don't you know?"

He looked round the inquiring faces.

"Fancy that now. May I take the box a minute? Thank you."

He pushed it open.

"Now then, can anyone give me something to put in it - not too big. Here's a small piece of gruyere cheese. That will do capitally. I place it inside, shut the box."

He fumbled for a minute or two with his hands.

"Now see -"

He opened the box again. It was empty.

"Well, I never," said Mr Judd. "How do you do it?"

"It's quite simple. Turn the box upside down, and move the left hand flap half-way round, then shut the right hand flap. Now to bring our piece of cheese back again we must reverse that. The right hand flap half-way round, and the left one closed, still keeping the box upside down. And now - Hey Presto!"

The box slid open. A gasp went round the table. The cheese was there - but so was something else. A round thing that blinked forth every colour of the rainbow.

"My God!"

It was a clarion note. Rosina Nunn stood upright, her hands clasped to her breast.

"My opal! How did it get there?"

Henry Judd cleared his throat.

"I - er - I rather think, Rosy, my girl, you must have put it there yourself."

Someone got up from the table and blundered out into the air. It was Naomi Carlton Smith. Mr Quin followed her.

"But when? Do you mean -?"

Mr Satterthwaite watched her while the truth dawned on her. It took over two minutes before she got it

"You mean last year - at the theatre."

"You know," said Henry apologetically. "You do fiddle with things, Rosy. Look at you with the caviare today."

Miss Nunn was painfully following out her mental processes.

"I just slipped it in without thinking, and then I suppose I turned the box about and did the thing by accident, but then - but then -" At last it came. "But then Alec Gerard didn't steal it after all. Oh!" A full-throated cry, poignant, moving - "How dreadful!"

"Well," said Mr Vyse, "that can be put right now."

"Yes, but he's been in prison a year." And then she startled them. She turned sharp on the Duchess. "Who is that girl - that girl who has just gone out?"

"Miss Carlton Smith," said the Duchess, "was engaged to Mr Gerard. She - took the thing very hard."

Mr Satterthwaite stole softly away. The snow had stopped, Naomi was sitting on the stone wall. She had a sketch book in her hand, some coloured crayons were scattered around. Mr Quin was standing beside her.

She held out the sketch book to Mr Satterthwaite. It was a very rough affair - but it had genius. A kaleidoscopic whirl of snowflakes with a figure in the centre.

"Very good," said Mr Satterthwaite.

Mr Quin looked up at the sky.

"The storm is over," he said. "The roads will be slippery, but I do not think there will be any accident - now."

"There will be no accident," said Naomi. Her voice was charged with some meaning that Mr Satterthwaite did not understand. She turned and smiled at him - a sudden dazzling smile. "Mr Satterthwaite can drive back with me if he likes."

He knew then to what length desperation had driven her.

"Well," said Mr Quin, "I must bid you good-bye."

He moved away.

"Where is he going?" said Mr Satterthwaite, staring after him.

"Back where he came from, I suppose," said Naomi in an odd voice.

"But - but there isn't anything there," said Mr Satterthwaite, for Mr Quin was making for that spot on the edge of the cliff where they had first seen him. "You know you said yourself it was the World's End."

He handed back the sketchbook.

"It's very good," he said. "A very good likeness. But why - er - why did you put him in Fancy Dress?"

Her eyes met his for a brief second.

"I see him like that," said Naomi Carlton Smith.

Chapter 12

HARLEQUIN'S LANE

Mr Satterthwaite was never quite sure what took him to stay with the Denmans. They were not of his kind - that is to say, they belonged neither to the great world, nor to the more interesting artistic circles. They were Philistines, and dull Philistines at that. Mr Satterthwaite had met them first at Biarritz, had accepted an invitation to stay with them, had come, had been bored, and yet strangely enough had come again and yet again.

Why? He was asking himself that question on this twenty-first of June, as he sped out of London in his Rolls Royce.

John Denman was a man of forty, a solid well-established figure respected in the business world. His friends were not Mr Satterthwaite's friends, his ideas even less so. He was a man clever in his own line but devoid of imagination outside it.

Why am I doing this thing? Mr Satterthwaite asked himself once more - and the only answer that came seemed to him so vague and so inherently preposterous that he almost put it aside. For the only reason that presented itself was the fact that one of the rooms in the house (a comfortable, well-appointed house) stirred his curiosity. That room was Mrs Denman's own sitting-room.

It was hardly an expression of her personality because, so far as Mr Satterthwaite could judge, she had no personality. He had never met a woman so completely expressionless. She was, he knew, a Russian by birth. John Denman had been in Russia at the outbreak of the European war, he had, fought with the Russian troops, had narrowly escaped with his life on the outbreak of the revolution, and had brought this Russian girl with him, a penniless refugee. In face of strong disapproval from his parents he had married her.

Mrs Denman's room was in no way remarkable. It was well and solidly furnished with good Hepplewhite furniture - a trifle more masculine than feminine in atmosphere. But in it there was one incongruous item - a Chinese lacquer screen - a thing of creamy yellow and pale rose. Any museum might have been glad to own it. It was a collector's piece, rare and beautiful.

It was out of place against that solid English background. It should have been the key-note of the room with everything arranged to harmonise subtly with it. And yet Mr Satterthwaite could not accuse the Denmans of lack of taste. Everything else in the house was in perfectly blended accord. He shook his head. The thing - trivial though it was - puzzled him. Because of it, so he verily believed, he had come again and again to the house. It was, perhaps, a woman's fantasy - but that solution did not satisfy him as he thought of Mrs Denman - a quiet hard-featured woman, speaking English so correctly that no one would ever have guessed her a foreigner.

The car drew up at his destination and he got out, his mind still dwelling on the problem of the Chinese screen. The name of the Denman's house was "Ashmead," and it occupied some five acres of Melton Heath, which is thirty miles from London, stands five hundred feet above sea level and is, for the most part, inhabited by those who have ample incomes.

The butler received Mr Satterthwaite suavely. Mr and Mrs Denman were both out - at a rehearsal - they hoped Mr Satterthwaite would make himself at home until they returned.

Mr Satterthwaite nodded and proceeded to carry out these injunctions by stepping into the garden. After a cursory examination of the flower beds, he strolled down a shady walk and presently came to a door in the wall. It was unlocked and he passed through it and came out into a narrow lane.

Mr Satterthwaite looked to left and right. A very charming lane, shady and green, with high hedges - a rural lane that twisted and turned in good old-fashioned style. He remembered the stamped address - ASHMEAD, HARLEQUIN'S LANE - remembered too, a local name for it that Mrs Denman had once told him.

"Harlequin's Lane," he murmured to himself softly.

"I wonder -"

He turned a corner.

Not at the time, but afterwards, he wondered why this time he felt no surprise at meeting that elusive friend of his - Mr Harley Quin. The two men clasped hands.

"So you're down here," said Mr Satterthwaite.

"Yes," said Mr Quin. "I'm staying in the same house as you are."

"Staying there?"

"Yes. Does it surprise you?"

"No," said Mr Satterthwaite slowly. "Only - well, you never stay anywhere for long, do you?"

"Only as long as is necessary," said Mr Quin gravely.

"I see," said Mr Satterthwaite.

They walked on in silence for some minutes.

"This lane," began Mr Satterthwaite, and stopped.

"Belongs to me," said Mr Quin.

"I thought it did," said Mr Satterthwaite. "Somehow, I thought it must. There's the other name for it, too, the local name. They call it the 'Lovers Lane.' You know that?"

Mr Quin nodded.

"But surely," he said gently, "there is a 'Lovers Lane' in every village?"

"I suppose so," said Mr Satterthwaite, and he sighed a little.

He felt suddenly rather old and out of things, a little dried-up wizened old fogey of a man. Each side of him were the hedges, very green and alive,

"Where does this lane end, I wonder?" he asked suddenly.

"It ends - here," said Mr Quin.

They came round the last bend. The lane ended in a piece of waste ground, and almost at their feet a great pit opened. In it were tin cans gleaming in the sun, and other cans that were too red with rust

to gleam, old boots, fragments of newspapers, a hundred and one odds and ends that were no longer of account to anybody.

"A rubbish heap," exclaimed Mr Satterthwaite, and breathed deeply and indignantly.

"Sometimes there are very wonderful things on a rubbish heap," said Mr Quin.

"I know, I know," cried Mr Satterthwaite, and quoted with just a trace of self-consciousness, "Bring me the two most beautiful things in the city, said God. You know how it goes, eh?"

Mr Quin nodded.

Mr Satterthwaite looked up at the ruins of a small cottage perched on the brink of the wall of the cliff.

"Hardly a pretty view for a house," he remarked.

"I fancy this wasn't a rubbish heap in those days," said Mr Quin. "I believe the Denmans lived there when they were first married. They moved into the big house when the old people died. The cottage was pulled down when they began to quarry the rock here - but nothing much was done, as you can see."

They turned and began retracing their steps.

"I suppose," said Mr Satterthwaite, smiling, "that many couples come wandering down this lane on these warm summer evenings."

"Probably."

"Lovers," said Mr Satterthwaite. He repeated the word thoughtfully and quite without the normal embarrassment of the Englishman. Mr Quin had that effect upon him. "Lovers... You have done a lot for lovers, Mr Quin."

The other bowed his head without replying.

"You have saved them from sorrow - from worse than sorrow, from death. You have been an advocate for the dead themselves."

"You are speaking of yourself - of what you have done - not of me."

"It is the same thing," said Mr Satterthwaite. "You know it is," he urged, as the other did not speak. "You have acted - through me. For some reason or other you do not act directly - yourself."

"Sometimes I do," said Mr Quin.

His voice held a new note. In spite of himself Mr Satterthwaite shivered a little. The afternoon, he thought, must be growing chilly. And yet the sun seemed as bright as ever.

At that moment a girl turned the corner ahead of them and came into sight. She was a very pretty girl, fair-haired and blue-eyed, wearing a pink cotton frock. Mr Satterthwaite recognised her as Molly Stanwell, whom he had met down here before.

She waved a hand to welcome him.

"John and Anna have just gone back," she cried. "They thought you must have come, but they simply had to be at the rehearsal."

"Rehearsal of what?" inquired Mr Satterthwaite.

"This masquerade thing - I don't quite know what you'll call it. There is singing and dancing and all sorts of things in it. Mr Manly, do you remember him down here? He had quite a good tenor voice, is to be Pierrot, and I am Pierrette. Two professionals are coming down for the dancing - Harlequin and Columbine, you know. And then there is a big chorus of girls. Lady Roscheimer is so keen on training village girls to sing. She's really getting the thing up for that. The music is rather lovely - but very modern - next to no tune anywhere. Claude Wickam. Perhaps you know him?"

Mr Satterthwaite nodded, for, as has been mentioned before, it was his manner to know everybody. He knew all about that aspiring genius Claude Wickam, and about Lady Roscheimer who was a fat Jewess with a penchant for young men of the artistic persuasion. And he knew all about Sir Leopold Roscheimer who liked his wife to be happy and, most rare among husbands, did not mind her being happy in her own way.

They found Claude Wickam at tea with the Denmans, cramming his mouth indiscriminately with anything handy, talking rapidly, and waving long white hands that had a double-jointed appearance. His short-sighted eyes peered through large horn-rimmed spectacles.

John Denman, upright, slightly florid, with the faintest possible tendency to sleekness, listened with an air of bored attention. On the appearance of Mr Satterthwaite, the musician transferred his remarks to him. Anne Denman sat behind the tea things, quiet and expressionless as usual.

Mr Satterthwaite stole a covert glance at her. Tall, gaunt, very thin, with the skin tightly stretched over high cheek bones, black hair parted in the middle, a skin that was weatherbeaten. An out of door woman who cared nothing for the use of cosmetics. A Dutch Doll of a woman, wooden, lifeless - and yet...

He thought, "There should be meaning behind that face, and yet there isn't. That's what's all wrong. Yes, all wrong." And to Claude Wickam he said, "I beg your pardon? You were saying?"

Claude Wickam, who liked the sound of his own voice, began all over again.

"Russia," he said, "that was the only country in the world worth being interested in. They experimented. With lives, if you like, but still they experimented. Magnificent!" He crammed a sandwich into his mouth with one hand, and added a bite of the chocolate йclair he was waving about in the other.

"Take," he said (with his mouth full), "the Russian Ballet."

Remembering his hostess, he turned to her. What did she think of the Russian Ballet?

The question was obviously only a prelude to the important point - what Claude Wickam thought of the Russian Ballet, but her answer was unexpected and threw him completely out of his stride. "I have never seen it."

"What?" He gazed at her open-mouthed, "But - surely -"

Her voice went on, level and emotionless.

"Before my marriage, I was a dancer So now -"

"A busman's holiday," said her husband.

"Dancing." She shrugged her shoulders. "I know all the tricks of it. It does not interest me."

"Oh!"

It took but a moment for Claude to recover his aplomb. His voice went on.

"Talking of lives," said Mr Satterthwaite, "and experimenting in them. The Russian nation made one costly experiment."

Claude Wickam swung round on him. "I know what you are going to say," he cried. "Kharsanova! The immortal, the only Kharsanova! You saw her dance?"

"Three times," said Mr Satterthwaite. "Twice in Paris, once in London. I shall not forget it."

He spoke in an almost reverent voice.

"I saw her, too," said Claude Wickam. "I was ten years old. An uncle took me. God! I shall never forget it."

He threw a piece of bun fiercely into a flower bed.

"There is a statuette of her in a Museum in Berlin," said Mr Satterthwaite. "It is marvellous. That impression of fragility - as though you could break her with a flip of the thumb nail. I have seen her as Columbine, in the Swan, as the dying Nymph." He paused, shaking his head. "There was genius. It will be long years before such another is born. She was young too. Destroyed ignorantly and wantonly in the first days of the Revolution."

"Fools! Madmen! Apes!" said Claude Wickam. He choked with a mouthful of tea.

"I studied with Kharsanova," said Mrs Denman. "I remember her well."

"She was wonderful?" said Mr Satterthwaite.

"Yes," said Mrs Denman quietly. "She was wonderful."

Claude Wickam departed and John Denman drew a deep sigh of relief at which his wife laughed.

Mr Satterthwaite nodded. "I know what you think. But in spite of everything, the music that that boy writes is music."

"I suppose it is," said Denman.

"Oh, undoubtedly. How long it will be - well, that is different."

John Denman looked at him curiously.

"You mean?"

"I mean that success has come early. And that is dangerous. Always dangerous." He looked across at Mr Quin. "You agree with me?"

"You are always right," said Mr Quin.

"We will come upstairs to my room," said Mrs Denman. "It is pleasant there."

She led the way, and they followed her. Mr Satterthwaite drew a deep breath as he caught sight of the Chinese screen. He looked up to find Mrs Denman watching him.

"You are the man who is always right," she said, nodding her head slowly at him. "What do you make of my screen?"

He felt that in some way the words were a challenge to him, and he answered almost haltingly, stumbling over the words a little.

"Why, it's - it's beautiful. More, it's unique."

"You're right." Denman had come up behind him. "We bought it early in our married life. Got it for about a tenth of its value, but even then - well, it crippled us for over a year. You remember, Anna?"

"Yes," said Mrs Denman, "I remember."

"In fact, we'd no business to buy it at all - not then. Now, of course, it's different. There was some very good lacquer going at Christie's the other day. Just what we need to make this room perfect. All Chinese together. Clear out the other stuff. Would you believe it, Satterthwaite, my wife wouldn't hear of it?"

"I like this room as it is," said Mrs Denman. There was a curious look on her face. Again Mr Satterthwaite felt challenged and defeated. He looked round him, and for the first time he noticed the absence of all personal touch. There were no photographs, no flowers, no knick-knacks. It was not like a woman's room at all. Save for that one incongruous factor of the Chinese screen, it might have been a sample room shown at some big furnishing house.

He found her smiling at him.

"Listen," she said. She bent forward, and for a moment she seemed less English, more definitely foreign. "I speak to you for you will understand. We bought that screen with more than money - with love. For love of it, because it was beautiful and unique, we went without other things, things we needed and missed. These other Chinese pieces my husband speaks of, those we should buy with money only, we should not pay away anything of ourselves."

Her husband laughed.

"Oh, have it your own way," he said, but with a trace of irritation in his voice. "But it's all wrong against this English background. This other stuff, it's good enough of its kind, genuine solid, no fake about it - but mediocre. Good plain late Hepplewhite."

She nodded.

"Good, solid, genuine English," she murmured softly.

Mr Satterthwaite stared at her. He caught a meaning behind these words. The English room - the flaming beauty of the Chinese screen... No, it was gone again.

"I met Miss Stanwell in the lane," he said conversationally. "She tells me she is going to be Pierrette in this show tonight."

"Yes," said Denman. "And she's awfully good, too."

"She has clumsy feet," said Anna.

"Nonsense," said her husband. "All women are alike, Satterthwaite. Can't bear to hear another woman praised. Molly is a very good-looking girl, and so of course every woman has to have their knife into her."

"I spoke of dancing," said Anna Denman. She sounded faintly surprised. "She is very pretty, yes, but her feet move clumsily. You cannot tell me anything else because I know about dancing."

Mr Satterthwaite intervened tactfully.

"You have two professional dancers coming down, I understand?"

"Yes. For the ballet proper. Prince Oranoff is bringing them down in his car."

"Sergius Oranoff?"

The question came from Anna Denman. Her husband turned and looked at her.

"You know him?"

"I used to know him - in Russia."

Mr Satterthwaite thought that John Denman looked disturbed. "Will he know you?"

"Yes. He will know me."

She laughed - a low, almost triumphant laugh. There was nothing of the Dutch Doll about her face now. She nodded reassuringly at her husband.

"Sergius. So he is bringing down the two dancers. He was always interested in dancing."

"I remember."

John Denman spoke abruptly, then turned and left the room. Mr Quin followed him. Anna Denman crossed to the telephone and asked for a number. She arrested Mr Satterthwaite with a gesture as he was about to follow the example of the other two men.

"Can I speak to Lady Roscheimer. Oh! it is you. This is Anna Denman speaking. Has Prince Oranoff arrived yet? What? What? Oh, my dear! But how ghastly."

She listened for a few moments longer, then replaced the receiver. She turned to Mr Satterthwaite.

"There has been an accident. There would be with Sergius Ivanovitch driving. Oh, he has not altered in all these years. The girl was not badly hurt, but bruised and shaken, too much to dance tonight. The man's arm is broken. Sergius Ivanovitch himself is unhurt. The devil looks after his own, perhaps."

"And what about tonight's performance?"

"Exactly, my friend. Something must be done about it."

She sat thinking. Presently she looked at him.

"I am a bad hostess, Mr Satterthwaite. I do not entertain you."

"I assure you that it is not necessary. There's one thing though, Mrs Denman, that I would very much like to know."

"Yes?"

"How did you come across Mr Quin?"

"He is often down here," she said slowly. "I think he owns land in this part of the world."

"He does, he does. He told me so this afternoon," said Mr Satterthwaite.

"He is -" She paused. Her eyes met Mr Satterthwaite's. "I think you know what he is better than I do," she finished.

"I?"

"Is it not so?"

He was troubled. His neat little soul found her disturbing. He felt that she wished to force him further than he was prepared to go, that she wanted him to put into words that which he was not prepared to admit to himself.

"You know!" she said. "I think you know most things, Mr Satterthwaite."

Here was incense, yet for once it failed to intoxicate him. He shook his head in unwonted humility.

"What can anyone know?" he asked. "So little - so very little."

She nodded in assent. Presently she spoke again, in a queer brooding voice, without looking at him.

"Supposing I were to tell you something - you would not laugh? No, I do not think you would laugh. Supposing, then, that to carry on one's -" she paused - "one's trade, one's profession, one were to make use of a phantasy - one were to pretend to oneself something that did not exist- that one were to imagine a certain person... It is a pretence, you understand, a make believe - nothing more. But one day -"

"Yes?" said Mr Satterthwaite.

He was keenly interested.

"The phantasy came true! The thing one imagined - the impossible thing, the thing that could not be - was real! Is that madness? Tell me, Mr Satterthwaite. Is that madness - or do you believe it too?"

"I -" Queer how he could not get the words out.

How they seemed to stick somewhere at the back of his throat.

"Folly," said Anna Denman.

"Folly."

She swept out of the room and left Mr Satterthwaite with his confession of faith unspoken.

He came down to dinner to find Mrs Denman entertaining a guest, a tall dark man approaching middle age.

"Prince Oranoff - Mr Satterthwaite."

The two men bowed. Mr Satterthwaite had the feeling that some conversation had been broken off on his entry which would not be resumed. But there was no sense of strain. The Russian conversed easily and naturally on those objects which were nearest to Mr Satterthwaite's heart. He was a man of very fine artistic taste, and they soon found that they had many friends in common. John Denman joined them, and the talk became localised. Oranoff expressed regret for the accident.

"It was not my fault. I like to drive fast - yes, but I am a good driver. It was Fate - chance -" he shrugged his shoulders - "the masters of all of us."

"There speaks the Russian in you, Sergius Ivanovitch," said Mrs Denman.

"And finds an echo in you, Anna Mikalovna," he threw back quickly.

Mr Satterthwaite looked from one to the other of the three of them. John Denman, fair, aloof, English, and the other two, dark, thin, strangely alike. Something rose in his mind - what was it? Ah! he had

it now. The first Act of the Walkьre. Siegmund and Sieglinde - so alike - and the alien Hunding. Conjectures began to stir in his brain. Was this the meaning of the presence of Mr Quin? One thing he believed in firmly - wherever Mr Quin showed himself - there lay drama. Was this it here - the old hackneyed three cornered tragedy?

He was vaguely disappointed. He had hoped for better things.

"What has been arranged, Anna?" asked Denman. "The thing will have to be put off, I suppose. I heard you ringing the Roscheimers up."

She shook her head.

"No - there is no need to put it off."

"But you can't do it without the ballet?"

"You certainly couldn't have a Harlequinade without Harlequin and Columbine," agreed Anna Denman dryly. "I'm going to be Columbine, John."

"You?" he was astonished-disturbed, Mr Satterthwaite thought.

She nodded composedly.

"You need not be afraid, John. I shall not disgrace you. You forget - it was my profession once."

Mr Satterthwaite thought, "What an extraordinary thing a voice is. The things it says - and the things it leaves unsaid and means! I wish I knew..."

"Well," said John Denman grudgingly, "that solves one half of the problem. What about the other? Where will you find Harlequin?"

"I have found him - there!"

She gestured towards the open doorway where Mr Quin had just appeared. He smiled back at her.

"Good lord, Quin," said John Denman. "Do you know anything of this game? P should never have imagined it."

"Mr Quin is vouched for by an expert," said his wife. "Mr Satterthwaite will answer for him."

She smiled at Mr Satterthwaite, and the little man found himself murmuring, "Oh, yes - I answer for Mr Quin."

Denman turned his attention elsewhere.

"You know there's to be a fancy dress dance business afterwards. Great nuisance. We'll have to rig you up, Satterthwaite."

Mr Satterthwaite shook his head very decidedly.

"My years will excuse me." A brilliant idea struck him. A table napkin under his arm. "There I am, an elderly waiter who has seen better days."

He laughed.

"An interesting profession," said Mr Quin. "One sees so much."

"I've got to put on some fool pierrot thing," said Denman gloomily. "It's cool anyway, that's one thing. What about you?" he looked at Oranoff.

"I have a Harlequin costume," said the Russian. His eyes wandered for a minute to his hostess's face.

Mr Satterthwaite wondered if he was mistaken in fancying that there was just a moment of constraint.

"There might have been three of us," said Denman, with a laugh. "I've got an old Harlequin costume my wife made me when we were first married for some show or other." He paused, looking down on his broad shirt front. "I don't suppose I could get into it now."

"No," said his wife, "you couldn't get into it now."

And again her voice said something more than mere words.

She glanced up at the clock

"If Molly doesn't turn up soon, we won't wait for her."

But at that moment the girl was announced. She was already wearing her Pierrette dress of white and green, and very charming she looked in it, so Mr Satterthwaite reflected.

She was full of excitement and enthusiasm over the forthcoming performance.

"I'm getting awfully nervous, though," she announced, as they drank coffee after dinner. "I know my voice will wobble, and I shall forget the words."

"Your voice is very charming," said Anna. "I should not worry about it if I were you."

"Oh, but I do. The other I don't mind about - the dancing, I mean. That's sure to go all right. I mean, you can't go very far wrong with your feet, can you?"

She appealed to Anna, but the older woman did not respond. Instead she said -

"Sing something now to Mr Satterthwaite. You will find that he will reassure you."

Molly went over to the piano. Her voice rang out, fresh and tuneful, in an old Irish ballad.

"Shiela, dark Shiela, what is it that you're seeing? What is it that you're seeing, that you're seeing in the fire?"

"I see a lad that loves me - and I see a lad that leaves me. And a third lad, a Shadow Lad - and he's the lad that grieves me."

The song went on. At the end, Mr Satterthwaite nodded vigorous approval

"Mrs Denman is right. Your voice is charming. Not, perhaps, very fully trained, but delightfully natural, and with that unstudied quality of youth in it."

"That's right," agreed John Denman. "You go ahead, Molly, and don't be downed by stage fright. We'd better be getting over to the Roscheimers now."

The party separated to don cloaks. It was a glorious night I and they proposed to walk over, the house being only a few hundred yards down the road.

Mr Satterthwaite found himself by his friend.

"It's an odd thing," he said, "but that song made me think of you. A third lad - a Shadow Lad - there's mystery there, and wherever there's mystery I - well, think of you."

"Am I so mysterious?" smiled Mr Quin.

Mr Satterthwaite nodded vigorously.

"Yes, indeed. Do you know, until tonight, I had no idea that you were a professional dancer."

"Really?" said Mr Quin.

"Listen," said Mr Satterthwaite. He hummed the love motif from the Walkьre. "That is what has been ringing in my head all through dinner as I looked at those two."

"Which two?"

"Prince Oranoff and Mrs Denman. Don't you see the difference in her tonight? It's as though - as though a shutter had suddenly been opened and you see the glow within."

"Yes," said Mr Quin. "Perhaps so."

"The same old drama," said Mr Satterthwaite. "I am right, am I not? Those two belong together. They are of the same world, think the same thoughts, dream the same dreams One sees how it has come about. Ten years ago Denman must have been very good-looking, young, dashing, a figure of romance. And he saved her life. All quite natural. But now - what is he, after all? A good fellow - prosperous, successful - but - well, mediocre. Good honest English stuff - very much like that - Hepplewhite furniture upstairs. As English - and as ordinary - as that pretty English girl with her fresh untrained voice. Oh, you may smile, Mr Quin, but you cannot deny what I am saying."

"I deny nothing. In what you see you are always right. And yet-"

"Yet what?"

Mr Quin leaned forward. His dark melancholy eyes searched for those of Mr Satterthwaite. "Have you learned so little of life?" He breathed. He left Mr Satterthwaite vaguely disquieted, such a prey to meditation that he found the others had started without him owing to his delay in selecting a scarf for his neck. He went out by the garden, and through the same door as in the afternoon. The lane was bathed in moonlight, and even as he stood in the doorway he saw a couple enlaced in each other's arms.

For a moment he thought -

And then he saw. John Denman and Molly Stanwell.

Denman's voice came to him, hoarse and anguished.

"I can't live without you. What are we to do?"

Mr Satterthwaite turned to go back the way he had come, but a hand stayed him. Someone else stood in the doorway beside him, someone else whose eyes had also seen.

Mr Satterthwaite had only to catch one glimpse of her face to know how wildly astray all his conclusions had been.

Her anguished hand held him there until those other two had passed up the lane and disappeared from sight He heard himself speaking to her, saying foolish little things meant to be comforting, and

ludicrously inadequate to the agony he had divined. She only spoke once.

"Please," she said, "don't leave me."

He found that oddly touching. He was, then, of use to someone. And he went on saying those things that meant nothing at all, but which were, somehow, better than silence.

They went that way to the Roscheimers. Now and then her hand tightened on his shoulder, and he understood that she was glad of his company. She only took it away when they finally came to their destination. She stood very erect, her head held high.

"Now," she said, "I shall dance! Do not be afraid for me, my friend. I shall dance."

She left him abruptly. He was seized upon by Lady Roscheimer, much bediamonded and very full of lamentations. By her he was passed on to Claude Wickam.

"Ruined! Completely ruined. The sort of thing that always happens to me. All these country bumpkins think they can dance. I was never even consulted -His voice went on - went on interminably. He had found a sympathetic listener, a man who knew. He gave himself up to an orgy of self-pity. It only ended when the first strains of music began.

Mr Satterthwaite came out of his dreams. He was alert once more, the critic. Wickam was an unutterable ass, but he could write music -

delicate gossamer stuff, intangible as a fairy web - yet with nothing of the pretty pretty about it.

The scenery was good. Lady Roscheimer never spared expense when aiding her protegй's. A glade of Arcady with lighting effects that gave it the proper atmosphere of unreality.

Two figures dancing as they had danced through time immemorial. A slender Harlequin flashing spangles in the moonlight with magic wand and masked face... A white Columbine pirouetting like some immortal dream...

Mr Satterthwaite sat up. He had lived through this before. Yes, surely...

Now his body was far away from Lady Roscheimer's drawing-room. It was in a Berlin Museum at a statuette of an immortal Columbine.

Harlequin and Columbine danced on. The wide world was theirs to dance in...

Moonlight - and a human figure. Pierrot wandering through the wood, singing to the moon Pierrot who has seen Columbine and knows no rest. The Immortal two vanish, but Columbine looks back. She has heard the song of a human heart

Pierrot wandering on through the wood... darkness... his voice dies away in the distance...

The village green - dancing of village girls - Pierrots and Pierrettes. Molly as Pierrette. No dancer - Anna Denman was right there - but a fresh tuneful voice as she sings her song "Pierrette dancing on the Green."

A good tune - Mr Satterthwaite nodded approval. Wickham wasn't above writing a tune when there was a need for it. The majority of the village girls made him shudder, but he realised that Lady Roscheimer was determinedly philanthropical.

They press Pierrot to join the dance. He refuses. With white face he wanders on - the eternal lover seeking his ideal. Evening falls. Harlequin and Columbine, invisible, dance in and out of the unconscious throng. The place is deserted, only Pierrot, weary, falls asleep on a grassy bank. Harlequin and Columbine dance round him. He wakes and sees Columbine. He woos her in vain, pleads, beseeches...

She stands uncertain. Harlequin beckons to her to begone. But she sees him no longer, She is listening to Pierrot, to his song of love outpoured once more. She falls into his arms, and the curtain comes down.

The second Act is Pierrot's cottage. Columbine sits on her hearth. She is pale, weary. She listens - for what? Pierrot sings to her - woos her back to thoughts of him once more. The evening darkens. Thunder is heard... Columbine puts aside her spinning wheel. She is eager, stirred... She listens no longer to Pierrot. It is her own music that is in the air, the music of Harlequin and Columbine... She is awake. She remembers.

A crash of thunder! Harlequin stands in the doorway. Pierrot cannot see him, but Columbine springs up with a glad laugh. Children come running, but she pushes them aside. With another crash of thunder the walls fall, and Columbine dances out into the wild night with Harlequin.

Darkness, and through it the tune that Pierrette has sung. Light comes slowly. The cottage once more. Pierrot and Pierrette grown old and grey sit in front of the fire in two arm-chairs. The music is happy, but subdued. Pierrette nods in her chair. Through the window comes a shaft of moonlight, and with it the motif of Pierrot's long-forgotten song. He stirs in his chair.

Faint music - fairy music... Harlequin and Columbine outside. The door swings open and Columbine dances in. She leans over the sleeping Pierrot, kisses him on the lips...

Crash! A peal of thunder. She is outside again. In the centre of the stage is the lighted window and through it are seen the two figures of Harlequin and Columbine dancing slowly away, growing fainter and fainter...

A log falls. Pierrette jumps up angrily, rushes across to the window and pulls the blind. So it ends, on a sudden discord...

Mr Satterthwaite sat very still among the applause and vociferations. At last he got up and made his way outside. He came upon Molly Stanwell, flushed and eager, receiving compliments. He saw John Denman, pushing and elbowing his way through the throng, his eyes

alight with a new flame. Molly came towards him, but, almost unconsciously, he put her aside. It was not her he was seeking.

"My wife? Where is she?"

"I think she went out in the garden."

It was, however, Mr Satterthwaite who found her, sitting on a stone seat under a cypress tree. When he came up to her, he did an odd thing. He knelt down and raised her hand to his lips.

"Ah!" she said. "You think I danced well?"

"You danced - as you always danced, Madame Kharsanova."

She drew in her breath sharply.

"So - you have guessed."

"There is only one Kharsanova. No one could see you dance and forget. But why - why?"

"What else is possible?"

"You mean?"

She had spoken very simply. She was just as simple now.

"Oh! but you understand. You are of the world. A great dancer - she can have lovers, yes - but a husband, that is different. And he - he did

not want the other. He wanted me to belong to him as - as Kharsanova could never have belonged."

"I see," said Mr Satterthwaite. "I see. So you gave it up?"

She nodded.

"You must have loved him very much," said Mr Satterthwaite gently.

"To make such a sacrifice?" She laughed.

"Not quite that. To make it so light-heartedly."

"Ah, yes - perhaps - you are right."

"And now?" asked Mr Satterthwaite.

Her face grew grave.

"Now?" She paused, then raised her voice and spoke into the shadows. "Is that you, Sergius Ivanovitch?"

Prince Oranoff came out into the moonlight. He took her hand and smiled at Mr Satterthwaite without self-consciousness.

"Ten years ago I mourned the death of Anna Kharsanova," he said simply. "She was to me as my other self. Today I have found her again. We shall part no more."

"At the end of the lane in ten minutes," said Anna, "I shall not fail you."

Oranoff nodded and went off again. The dancer turned to Mr Satterthwaite. A smile played about her lips.

"Well - you are not satisfied, my friend?"

"Do you know," said Mr Satterthwaite abruptly, "that your husband is looking for you?"

He saw the tremor that passed over her face, but her voice was steady enough.

"Yes," she said gravely. "That may well be."

"I saw his eyes. They -" he stopped abruptly.

She was still calm.

"Yes, perhaps. For an hour. An hour's magic, born of past memories, of music, of moonlight... That is all."

"Then there is nothing that I can say?"

He felt old, dispirited.

"For ten years I have lived with the man I love," said Anna Kharsanova. "Now I am going to the man who for ten years has loved me."

Mr Satterthwaite said nothing. He had no arguments left. Besides it really seemed the simplest solution. Only - only, somehow, it was not the solution he wanted. He felt her hand on his shoulder.

"I know, my friend, I know. But there is no third way. Always one looks for one thing - the lover, the perfect, the eternal lover... It is the music of Harlequin one hears. No lover ever satisfies one, for all lovers are mortal. And Harlequin is only a myth, an invisible presence... unless -"

"Yes," said Mr Satterthwaite. "Yes?"

"Unless - his name is - Death!"

Mr Satterthwaite shivered. She moved away from him, was swallowed up in the shadows...

He never knew quite how long he sat on there, but suddenly he started up with the feeling that he had been wasting valuable time. He hurried away, impelled in a certain direction almost in spite of himself.

As he came out into the lane he had a strange feeling of unreality. Magic - magic and moonlight! And two figures coming towards him...

Oranoff in his Harlequin dress. So he thought at first. Then, as they passed him, he knew his mistake. That lithe swaying figure belonged to one person only - Mr Quin...

They went on down the lane - their feet light as though they were treading on air. Mr Quin turned his head and looked back, and Mr Satterthwaite had a shock, for it was not the face of Mr Quin as he had ever seen it before. It was the face of a stranger - no, not quite a stranger. Ah! he had it now, it was the face of John Denman as it might have looked before life went too well with him. Eager, adventurous, the face at once of a boy and a lover...

Her laugh floated down to him, clear and happy..." he looked after them and saw in the distance the lights of a little cottage. He gazed after them like a man in a dream.

He was rudely awakened by a hand that fell on his shoulder and he was jerked round to face Sergius Oranoff. The man looked white and distracted.

"Where is she? Where is she? She promised - and she has not come."

"Madam has just gone up the lane - alone."

It was Mrs Denman's maid who spoke from the shadow of the door behind them. She had been waiting with her mistress's wraps.

"I was standing here and saw her pass," she added.

Mr Satterthwaite threw one harsh word at her.

"Alone? Alone, did you say?"

The maid's eyes widened in surprise.

"Yes, sir. Didn't you see her off?"

Mr Satterthwaite clutched at Oranoff.

"Quickly," he muttered. "I'm - I'm afraid."

They hurried down the lane together, the Russian talking in quick disjointed sentences.

"She is a wonderful creature. Ah! how she danced tonight. And that friend of yours. Who is he? Ah! but he is wonderful - unique. In the old days, when she danced the Columbine of Rimsky Korsakoff, she never found the perfect Harlequin. Mordoff, Kassnine - none of them were quite perfect. She had her own little fancy. She told me of it once. Always she danced with a dream Harlequin - a man who was not really there. It was Harlequin himself, she said, who came to dance with her. It was that fancy of hers that made her Columbine so wonderful."

Mr Satterthwaite nodded. There was only one thought in his head.

"Hurry," he said. "We must be in time. Oh! We must be in time."

They came round the last corner - came to the deep pit and to something lying in it that had not been there before, the body of a woman lying in a wonderful pose, arms flung wide and head thrown back. A dead face and body that were triumphant and beautiful in the moonlight.

Words came back to Mr Satterthwaite dimly - Mr Quin's words - "wonderful things on a rubbish heap..." He understood them now.

Oranoff was murmuring broken phrases. The tears were streaming down his face.

"I loved her. Always I loved her." He used almost the same words that had occurred to Mr Satterthwaite earlier in the day. "We were of the same world, she and I. We had the same thoughts, the same dreams. I would have loved her always..."

"How do you know?"

The Russian stared at him - at the fretful peevishness of the tone.

"How do you know?" went on Mr Satterthwaite. "It is what all lovers think - what all lovers say... There is one, one lover -"

He turned and almost ran into Mr Quin. In an agitated manner, Mr Satterthwaite caught him by the arm and drew him aside.

"It was you," he said. "It was you who were with her just now?"'

Mr Quin waited a minute and then said gently, "You can put it that way, if you like."

"And the maid didn't see you?"

"The maid didn't see me."

"But I did. Why was that?"

"Perhaps, as a result of the price you have paid, you see things that other people - do not."

Mr Satterthwaite looked at him uncomprehendingly for a minute or two. Then he began suddenly to quiver all over like an aspen leaf.

"What is this place?" he whispered. "What is this place?"

"I told you earlier today. It is my lane."

"A Lovers Lane," murmured Mr Satterthwaite. "And people pass along it."

"Most people, sooner or later."

"And at the end of it - what do they find?"

Mr Quin smiled. His voice was very gentle. He pointed at the ruined cottage above them.

"The house of their dreams - or a rubbish heap - who shall say?"

Mr Satterthwaite looked up at him suddenly. A wild rebellion surged over him. He felt cheated, defrauded.

"But I -" His voice shook. "I have never passed down your lane..."

"And do you regret?"

Mr Satterthwaite quailed. Mr Quin seemed to have loomed to enormous proportions... Mr Satterthwaite had a vista of something at once menacing and terrifying... Joy, Sorrow, Despair.

And his comfortable little soul shrank back appalled.

"Do you regret?" Mr Quin repeated his question. There was something terrible about him.

"No," Mr Satterthwaite stammered. "N-no."

And then suddenly he rallied.

"But I see things," He cried. "I may have been only a looker-on at life - but I see things that other people do not. You said so yourself, Mr Quin..."

But Mr Quin had vanished.

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The Tuesday Night Club

'Unsolved mysteries.'

Raymond West blew out a cloud of smoke and repeated the words with a kind of deliberate self-conscious pleasure.

'Unsolved mysteries.'

He looked round him with satisfaction. The room was an old one with broad black beams across the ceiling and it was furnished with good old furniture that belonged to it. Hence Raymond

West's approving glance. By profession he was a writer and he liked the atmosphere to be flawless. His Aunt Jane's house always pleased him as the right setting for her personality. He looked across the hearth to where she sat erect in the big grandfather chair. Miss Marple wore a black brocade dress, very much pinched in round the waist. Mechlin lace was arranged in a cascade down the front of the bodice. She had on black lace mittens, and a black lace cap surmounted the piled-up masses of her snowy hair. She was knitting - something white and soft and fleecy. Her faded blue eyes, benignant and kindly, surveyed her nephew and her nephew's guests with gentle pleasure. They rested first on Raymond himself, self-consciously debonair, then on Joyce Lemprière, the artist, with her close-cropped black head and queer hazel-green eyes, then on that well-groomed man of the world, Sir Henry Clithering. There were two other people in the room, Dr Pender, the elderly clergyman of the parish, and Mr Petherick, the solicitor, a dried-up little man with eyeglasses which he looked over and not through. Miss Marple gave a brief moment of attention to all these people and returned to her knitting with a gentle smile upon her lips.

Mr Petherick gave the dry little cough with which he usually prefaced his remarks.

'What is that you say, Raymond? Unsolved mysteries? Ha - and what about them?'

'Nothing about them,' said Joyce Lemprière. 'Raymond just likes the sound of himself saying them.'

Raymond West threw her a glance of reproach at which she threw back her head and laughed.

'He is a humbug, isn't he, Miss Marple?' she demanded. 'You know that, I am sure.'

Miss Marple smiled gently at her but made no reply.

'Life itself is an unsolved mystery,' said the clergyman gravely.

Raymond sat up in his chair and flung away his cigarette with an impulsive gesture.

'That's not what I mean. I was not talking philosophy,' he said. 'I was thinking of actual bare prosaic facts, things that have happened and that no one has ever explained.'

'I know just the sort of thing you mean, dear,' said Miss Marple. 'For instance Mrs Carruthers had a very strange experience yesterday morning. She bought two gills of picked shrimps at Elliot's. She called at two other shops and when she got home she found she had not got the shrimps with her. She went back to the two shops she had visited but these shrimps had completely disappeared. Now that seems to me very remarkable.'

'A very fishy story,' said Sir Henry Clithering gravely.

'There are, of course, all kinds of possible explanations,' said Miss Marple, her cheeks growing slightly pinker with excitement. 'For instance, somebody else - '

'My dear Aunt,' said Raymond West with some amusement, 'I didn't mean that sort of village incident. I was thinking of murders and disappearances - the kind of thing that Sir Henry could tell us about by the hour if he liked.'

'But I never talk shop,' said Sir Henry modestly. 'No, I never talk shop.'

Sir Henry Clithering had been until lately Commissioner of Scotland Yard.

'I suppose there are a lot of murders and things that never are solved by the police,' said Joyce Lemprière.

'That is an admitted fact, I believe,' said Mr Petherick.

'I wonder,' said Raymond West, 'what class of brain really succeeds best in unravelling a mystery? One always feels that the average police detective must be hampered by lack of imagination.'

'That is the layman's point of view,' said Sir Henry dryly.

'You really want a committee,' said Joyce, smiling. 'For psychology and imagination go to the writer - '

She made an ironical bow to Raymond but he remained serious.

'The art of writing gives one an insight into human nature,' he said gravely. 'One sees, perhaps, motives that the ordinary person would pass by.'

'I know, dear,' said Miss Marple, 'that your books are very clever. But do you think that people are really so unpleasant as you make them out to be?'

'My dear Aunt,' said Raymond gently, 'keep your beliefs. Heaven forbid that I should in any way shatter them.'

'I mean,' said Miss Marple, puckering her brow a little as she counted the stitches in her knitting, 'that so many people seem to me not to be either bad or good, but simply, you know, very silly.'

Mr Petherick gave his dry little cough again.

'Don't you think, Raymond,' he said, 'that you attach too much weight to imagination? Imagination is a very dangerous thing, as we lawyers know only too well. To be able to sift evidence impartially, to take the facts and look at them as facts - that seems to me the only logical method of arriving at the truth. I may add that in my experience it is the only one that succeeds.'

'Bah!' cried Joyce, flinging back her black head indignantly. 'I bet I could beat you all at this game. I am not only a woman - and say what you like, women have an intuition that is denied to men - I am an artist as well. I see things that you don't. And then, too, as an artist I have knocked about among all sorts and conditions of

people. I know life as darling Miss Marple here cannot possibly know it.'

'I don't know about that, dear,' said Miss Marple. 'Very painful and distressing things happen in villages sometimes.'

'May I speak?' said Dr Pender smiling. 'It is the fashion nowadays to decry the clergy, I know, but we hear things, we know a side of human character which is a closed book to the outside world.'

'Well,' said Joyce, 'it seems to me we are a pretty representative gathering. How would it be if we formed a Club? What is today? Tuesday? We will call it The Tuesday Night Club. It is to meet every week, and each member in turn has to propound a problem. Some mystery of which they have personal knowledge, and to which, of course, they know the answer. Let me see, how many are we? One, two, three, four, five. We ought really to be six.'

'You have forgotten me, dear,' said Miss Marple, smiling brightly.

Joyce was slightly taken aback, but she concealed the fact quickly.

'That would be lovely, Miss Marple,' she said. 'I didn't think you would care to play.'

'I think it would be very interesting,' said Miss Marple, 'especially with so many clever gentlemen present. I am afraid I am not

clever myself, but living all these years in St Mary Mead does give one an insight into human nature.'

'I am sure your co-operation will be very valuable,' laid Sir Henry, courteously.

'Who is going to start?' said Joyce.

'I think there is no doubt as to that,' said Dr Pender, 'when we have the great good fortune to have such a distinguished man as Sir Henry staying with us - '

He left his sentence unfinished, making a courtly bow in the direction of Sir Henry.

The latter was silent for a minute or two. At last he sighed and recrossed his legs and began:

'It is a little difficult for me to select just the kind of thing you want, but I think, as it happens, I know of an instance which fits these conditions very aptly. You may have seen some mention of the case in the papers of a year ago. It was laid aside at the time as an unsolved mystery, but, as it happens, the solution came into my hands not very many days ago.

'The facts are very simple. Three people sat down to a supper consisting, amongst other things, of tinned lobster. Later in the night, all three were taken ill, and a doctor was hastily summoned. Two of the people recovered, the third one died.'

'Ah!' said Raymond approvingly.

'As I say, the facts as such were very simple. Death was considered to be due to ptomaine poisoning, a certificate was given to that effect, and the victim was duly buried. But things did not rest at that.'

Miss Marple nodded her head.

'There was talk, I suppose,' she said, 'there usually is.'

'And now I must describe the actors in this little drama. I will call the husband and wife Mr and Mrs Jones, and the wife's companion Miss Clark. Mr Jones was a traveller for a firm of manufacturing chemists. He was a good-looking man in a kind of coarse, florid way, aged about fifty. His wife was a rather common-place woman, of about forty-five. The companion, Miss Clark, was a woman of sixty, a stout cheery woman with a beaming rubicund face. None of them, you might say, very interesting.

'Now the beginning of the troubles arose in a very curious way. Mr Jones had been staying the previous night at a small commercial hotel in Birmingham. It happened that the blotting paper in the blotting book had been put in fresh that day, and the chambermaid, having apparently nothing better to do, amused herself by studying the blotter in the mirror just after Mr Jones had been writing a letter there. A few days later there was a report in the papers of the death of Mrs Jones as the result of eating tinned lobster, and the chambermaid then imparted to her

fellow servants the words that she had deciphered on the blotting pad. They were as follows: Entirely dependent on my wife... when she is dead I will... hundreds and thousands...

'You may remember that there had recently been a case of a wife being poisoned by her husband. It needed very little to fire the imagination of these maids. Mr Jones had planned to do away with his wife and inherit hundreds of thousands of pounds! As it happened one of the maids had relations living in the small market town where the Joneses resided. She wrote to them, and they in return wrote to her. Mr Jones, it seemed, had been very attentive to the local doctor's daughter, a good-looking young woman of thirty-three. Scandal began to hum. The Home Secretary was petitioned. Numerous anonymous letters poured into Scotland Yard all accusing Mr Jones of having murdered his wife. Now I may say that not for one moment did we think there was anything in it except idle village talk and gossip. Nevertheless, to quiet public opinion an exhumation order was granted. It was one of these cases of popular superstition based on nothing solid whatever which proved to be so surprisingly justified. As a result of the autopsy sufficient arsenic was found to make it quite clear that the deceased lady had died of arsenical poisoning. It was for Scotland Yard working with the local authorities to prove how that arsenic had been administered, and by whom.'

'Ah!' said Joyce. 'I like this. This is the real stuff.'

'Suspicion naturally fell on the husband. He benefited by his wife's death. Not to the extent of the hundreds of thousands

romantically imagined by the hotel chambermaid, but to the very solid amount of £8000. He had no money of his own apart from what he earned, and he was a man of somewhat extravagant habits with a partiality for the society of women. We investigated as delicately as possible the rumour of his attachment to the doctor's daughter; but while it seemed clear that there had been a strong friendship between them at one time, there had been a most abrupt break two months previously, and they did not appear to have seen each other since. The doctor himself, an elderly man of a straightforward and unsuspicious type, was dumbfounded at the result of the autopsy. He had been called in about midnight to find all three people suffering. He had realized immediately the serious condition of Mrs Jones, and had sent back to his dispensary for some opium pills, to allay the pain. In spite of all his efforts, however, she succumbed, but not for a moment did he suspect that anything was amiss. He was convinced that her death was due to a form of botulism. Supper that night had consisted of tinned lobster and salad, trifle and bread and cheese. Unfortunately none of the lobster remained - it had all been eaten and the tin thrown away. He had interrogated the young maid, Gladys Linch. She was terribly upset, very tearful and agitated, and he found it hard to get her to keep to the point, but she declared again and again that the tin had not been distended in any way and that the lobster had appeared to her in a perfectly good condition.

'Such were the facts we had to go upon. If Jones had feloniously administered arsenic to his wife, it seemed clear that it could not have been done in any of the things eaten at supper, as all three persons had partaken of the meal. Also - another point - Jones

himself had returned from Birmingham just as supper was being brought in to table, so that he would have had no opportunity of doctoring any of the food beforehand.'

'What about the companion?' asked Joyce. 'The stout woman with the good-humoured face.'

Sir Henry nodded.

'We did not neglect Miss Clark, I can assure you. But it seemed doubtful what motive she could have had for the crime. Mrs Jones left her no legacy of any kind and the net result of her employer's death was that she had to seek for another situation.'

'That seems to leave her out of it,' said Joyce thoughtfully.

'Now one of my inspectors soon discovered a significant fact,' went on Sir Henry. 'After supper on that evening Mr Jones had gone down to the kitchen and had demanded a bowl of cornflour for his wife who had complained of not feeling well. He had waited in the kitchen until Gladys Linch prepared it, and then carried it up to his wife's room himself. That, I admit, seemed to clinch the case.'

The lawyer nodded.

'Motive,' he said, ticking the points off on his fingers. 'Opportunity. As a traveller for a firm of druggists, easy access to the poison.'

'And a man of weak moral fibre,' said the clergyman.

Raymond West was staring at Sir Henry.

'There is a catch in this somewhere,' he said. 'Why did you not arrest him?'

Sir Henry smiled rather wryly.

'That is the unfortunate part of the case. So far all had gone swimmingly, but now we come to the snags. Jones was not arrested because on interrogating Miss Clark she told us that the whole of the bowl of cornflour was drunk not by Mrs Jones but by her. Yes, it seems that she went to Mrs Jones's room as was her custom. Mrs Jones was sitting up in bed and the bowl of cornflour was beside her.

'"I am not feeling a bit well, Milly," she said. "Serves me right, I suppose, for touching lobster at night. I asked Albert to get me a bowl of cornflour, but now that I have got it I don't seem to fancy it."

'"A pity," commented Miss Clark - "it is nicely made too, no lumps. Gladys is really quite a nice cook. Very few girls nowadays seem to be able to make a bowl of cornflour nicely. I declare I quite fancy it myself, I am that hungry."

'"I should think you were with your foolish ways," said Mrs Jones.

'I must explain,' broke off Sir Henry, 'that Miss Clark, alarmed at her increasing stoutness, was doing a course of what is popularly known as "banting".

'"It is not good for you, Milly, it really isn't," urged Mrs Jones. "If the Lord made you stout he meant you to be stout. You drink up that bowl of cornflour. It will do you all the good in the world."

'And straight away Miss Clark set to and did in actual fact finish the bowl. So, you see, that knocked our case against the husband to pieces. Asked for an explanation of the words on the blotting book Jones gave one readily enough. The letter, he explained, was in answer to one written from his brother in Australia who had applied to him for money. He had written, pointing out that he was entirely dependent on his wife. When his wife was dead he would have control of money and would assist his brother if possible. He regretted his inability to help but pointed out that there were hundreds and thousands of people in the world in the same unfortunate plight.'

'And so the case fell to pieces?' said Dr Pender.

'And so the case fell to pieces,' said Sir Henry gravely. 'We could not take the risk of arresting Jones with nothing to go upon.'

There was a silence and then Joyce said, 'And that is all, is it?'

'That is the case as it has stood for the last year. The true solution is now in the hands of Scotland Yard, and in two or three days' time you will probably read of it in the newspapers.'

'The true solution,' said Joyce thoughtfully. 'I wonder. Let's all think for five minutes and then speak.'

Raymond West nodded and noted the time on his watch. When the five minutes were up he looked over at Dr Pender.

'Will you speak first?' he said.

The old man shook his head. 'I confess,' he said, 'that I am utterly baffled. I can but think that the husband in some way must be the guilty party, but how he did it I cannot imagine. I can only suggest that he must have given her the poison in some way that has not yet been discovered, although how in that case it should have come to light after all this time I cannot imagine.'

'Joyce?'

'The companion!' said Joyce decidedly. "The companion every time! How do we know what motive she may have had? Just because she was old and stout and ugly it doesn't follow that she wasn't in love with Jones herself. She may have hated the wife for some other reason. Think of being a companion - always having to be pleasant and agree and stifle yourself and bottle yourself up. One day she couldn't bear it any longer and then she killed her. She probably put the arsenic in the bowl of cornflour and all that story about eating it herself is a lie.'

'Mr Petherick?'

The lawyer joined the tips of his fingers together professionally. 'I should hardly like to say. On the facts I should hardly like to say.'

'But you have got to, Mr Petherick,' said Joyce. 'You can't reserve judgement and say "without prejudice", and be legal. You have got to play the game.'

'On the facts,' said Mr Petherick, 'there seems nothing to be said. It is my private opinion, having seen, alas, too many cases of this kind, that the husband was guilty. The only explanation that will cover the facts seems to be that Miss Clark for some reason or other deliberately sheltered him. There may have been some financial arrangement made between them. He might realize that he would be suspected, and she, seeing only a future of poverty before her, may have agreed to tell the story of drinking the cornflour in return for a substantial sum to be paid to her privately. If that was the case it was of course most irregular. Most irregular indeed.'

'I disagree with you all,' said Raymond. 'You have forgotten the one important factor in the case. The doctor's daughter. I will give you my reading of the case. The tinned lobster was bad. It accounted for the poisoning symptoms. The doctor was sent for. He finds Mrs Jones, who has eaten more lobster than the others, in great pain, and he sends, as you told us, for some opium pills. He does not go himself, he sends. Who will give the messenger the opium pills? Clearly his daughter. Very likely she dispenses his medicines for him. She is in love with Jones and at this moment all the worst instincts in her nature rise and she realizes

that the means to procure his freedom are in her hands. The pills she sends contain pure white arsenic. That is my solution.'

'And now, Sir Henry, tell us,' said Joyce eagerly.

'One moment,' said Sir Henry. 'Miss Marple has not yet spoken.'

Miss Marple was shaking her head sadly.

'Dear, dear,' she said. 'I have dropped another stitch. I have been so interested in the story. A sad case, a very sad case. It reminds me of old Mr Hargraves who lived up at the Mount. His wife never had the least suspicion - until he died, leaving all his money to a woman he had been living with and by whom he had five children. She had at one time been their housemaid. Such a nice girl, Mrs Hargraves always said - thoroughly to be relied upon to turn the mattresses every day - except Fridays, of course. And there was old Hargraves keeping this woman in a house in the neighbouring town and continuing to be a Churchwarden and to hand round the plate every Sunday.'

'My dear Aunt Jane,' said Raymond with some impatience. 'What has dead and gone Hargraves got to do with the case?'

'This story made me think of him at once,' said Miss Marple. 'The facts are so very alike, aren't they? I suppose the poor girl has confessed now and that is how you know, Sir Henry.'

'What girl?' said Raymond. 'My dear Aunt, what are you talking about?'

'That poor girl, Gladys Linch, of course - the one who was so terribly agitated when the doctor spoke to her - and well she might be, poor thing. I hope that wicked Jones is hanged, I am sure, making that poor girl a murderess. I suppose they will hang her too, poor thing.'

'I think, Miss Marple, that you are under a slight misapprehension,' began Mr Petherick.

But Miss Marple shook her head obstinately and looked across at Sir Henry.

'I am right, am I not? It seems so clear to me. The hundreds and thousands - and the trifle - I mean, one cannot miss it.'

'What about the trifle and the hundreds and thousands?' cried Raymond.

His aunt turned to him.

'Cooks nearly always put hundreds and thousands on trifle, dear,' she said. 'Those little pink and white sugar things. Of course when I heard that they had trifle for supper and that the husband had been writing to someone about hundreds and thousands, I naturally connected the two things together. That is where the arsenic was - in the hundreds and thousands. He left it with the girl and told her to put it on the trifle.'

'But that is impossible,' said Joyce quickly. 'They all ate the trifle.'

'Oh, no.' said Miss Marple. 'The companion was banting, you remember. You never eat anything like trifle if you are banting; and I expect Jones just scraped the hundreds and thousands off his share and left them at the side of his plate. It was a clever idea, but a very wicked one.'

The eyes of the others were all fixed upon Sir Henry.

'It is a very curious thing,' he said slowly, 'but Miss Marple happens to have hit upon the truth. Jones had got Gladys Linch into trouble, as the saying goes. She was nearly desperate. He wanted his wife out of the way and promised to marry Gladys when his wife was dead. He doctored the hundreds and thousands and gave them to her with instructions how to use them. Gladys Linch died a week ago. Her child died at birth and Jones had deserted her for another woman. When she was dying she confessed the truth.'

There was a few moments' silence and then Raymond said:

'Well, Aunt Jane, this is one up to you. I can't think how on earth you managed to hit upon the truth. I should never have thought of the little maid in the kitchen being connected with the case.'

'No, dear,' said Miss Marple, 'but you don't know as much of life as I do. A man of that Jones's type - coarse and jovial. As soon as I heard there was a pretty young girl in the house I felt sure that he would not have left her alone. It is all very distressing and painful, and not a very nice thing to talk about I can't tell you the

shock it was to Mrs Hargraves, and a nine days' wonder in the village.'

The Idol House of Astarte

'And now, Dr Pender, what are you going to tell us?'

The old clergyman smiled gently.

'My life has been passed in quiet places,' he said. 'Very few eventful happenings have come my way. Yet once, when I was a young man, I had one very strange and tragic experience.'

'Ah!' said Joyce Lempriére encouragingly.

'I have never forgotten it,' continued the clergyman. 'It made a profound impression on me at the time, and to this day by a slight effort of memory I can feel again the awe and horror of that terrible moment when I saw a man stricken to death by apparently no mortal agency.'

'You make me feel quite creepy, Pender,' complained Sir Henry.

'It made me feel creepy, as you call it,' replied the other. 'Since then I have never laughed at the people who use the word atmosphere. There is such a thing. There are certain places imbued and saturated with good or evil influences which can make their power felt.'

'That house, The Larches, is a very unhappy one,' remarked Miss Marple. 'Old Mr Smithers lost all his money and had to leave it.

Then the Carslakes took it and Johnny Carslake fell downstairs and broke his leg and Mrs Carslake had to go away to the South of France for her health, and now the Burdens have got it and I hear that poor Mr Burden has got to have an operation almost immediately.'

'There is, I think, rather too much superstition about such matters,' said Mr Petherick. 'A lot of damage is done to property by foolish reports heedlessly circulated.'

'I have known one or two "ghosts" that have had a very robust personality,' remarked Sir Henry with a chuckle.

'I think,' said Raymond, 'we should allow Dr Pender to go on with his story.'

Joyce got up and switched off the two lamps, leaving the room lit only by the flickering firelight.

'Atmosphere,' she said. 'Now we can get along.'

Dr Pender smiled at her and, leaning back in his chair and taking off his pince-nez, he began his story in a gentle reminiscent voice.

'I don't know whether any of you know Dartmoor at all. The place I am telling you about is situated on the borders of Dartmoor. It was a very charming property, though it had been on the market without finding a purchaser for several years. The situation was perhaps a little bleak in winter, but the views were magnificent and there were certain curious and original features about the property itself. It was bought by a man called Haydon - Sir Richard Haydon. I had known him in his college days, and though

I had lost sight of him for some years, the old ties of friendship still held, and I accepted with pleasure his invitation to go down to Silent Grove, as his new purchase was called.

'The house party was not a very large one. There was Richard Haydon himself, and his cousin, Elliot Haydon. There was a Lady Mannering with a pale, rather inconspicuous daughter called Violet. There was a Captain Rogers and his wife, hard riding, weatherbeaten people, who lived only for horses and hunting. There was also a young Dr Symonds and there was Miss Diana Ashley. I knew something about the last named. Her picture was very often in the Society papers and she was one of the notorious beauties of the Season. Her appearance was indeed very striking. She was dark and tall, with a beautiful skin of an even tint of pale cream, and her half closed dark eyes set slantways in her head gave her a curiously piquant oriental appearance. She had, too, a wonderful speaking voice, deep-toned and bell-like.

'I saw at once that my friend Richard Haydon was very much attracted by her, and I guessed that the whole party was merely arranged as a setting for her. Of her own feelings I was not so sure. She was capricious in her favours. One day talking to Richard and excluding everyone else from her notice, and another day she would favour his cousin, Elliot and appear hardly to notice that such a person as Richard existed, and then again she would bestow the most bewitching smiles upon the quiet and retiring Dr Symonds.

'On the morning after my arrival our host showed us all over the place. The house itself was unremarkable, a good solid house built of Devonshire granite. Built to withstand time and exposure.

It was unromantic but very comfortable. From the windows of it one looked out over the panorama of the moor, vast rolling hills crowned with weather-beaten tors.

'On the slopes of the tor nearest to us were various hut circles, relics of the bygone days of the late Stone Age. On another hill was a barrow which had recently been excavated, and in which certain bronze implements had been found. Haydon was by way of being interested in antiquarian matters and he talked to us with a great deal of energy and enthusiasm. This particular spot, he explained, was particularly rich in relics of the past.

'Neolithic hut dwellers, Druids, Romans, and even traces of the early Phoenicians were to be found.

'"But this place is the most interesting of all," he said "You know its name - Silent Grove. Well, it is easy enough to see what it takes its name from."

'He pointed with his hand. That particular pan of the country was bare enough - rocks, heather and bracken, but about a hundred yards from the house there was a densely planted grove of trees.

'"That is a relic of very early days," said Haydon. "The trees have died and been replanted, but on the whole it has been kept very much as it used to be - perhaps in the time of the Phoenician settlers. Come and look at it."

'We all followed him. As we entered the grove of trees a curious oppression came over me. I think it was the silence. No birds seemed to nest in these trees. There was a feeling about it of

desolation and horror. I saw Haydon looking at me with a curious smile.

'"Any feeling about this place, Pender?" he asked me. "Antagonism now? Or uneasiness?"

'"I don't like it," I said quietly.

'"You are within your rights. This was a stronghold of one of the ancient enemies of your faith. This is the Grove of Astarte."

'"Astarte?"

'"Astarte, or Ishtar, or Ashtoreth, or whatever you choose to call her. I prefer the Phoenician name of Astarte. There is, I believe, one known Grove of Astarte in this country - in the North on the Wall. I have no evidence, but I like to believe that we have a true and authentic Grove of Astarte here. Here, within this dense circle of trees, sacred rites were performed."

'"Sacred rites," murmured Diana Ashley. Her eyes had a dreamy faraway look. "What were they, I wonder?"

'"Not very reputable by all accounts," said Captain Rogers with a loud unmeaning laugh. "Rather hot stuff, I imagine."

'Haydon paid no attention to him.

'"In the centre of the grove there should be a temple," he said. "I can't run to temples, but I have indulged in a little fancy of my own."

'We had at that moment stepped out into a little clearing in the centre of the trees. In the middle of it was something not unlike a

summerhouse made of stone. Diana Ashley looked inquiringly at Haydon.

'"I call it The Idol House," he said. "It is the Idol House of Astarte."

'He led the way up to it. Inside, on a rude ebony pillar, there reposed a curious little image representing a woman with crescent horns, seated on a lion.

'"Astarte of the Phoenicians," said Haydon, "the Goddess of the Moon."

'"The Goddess of the Moon," cried Diana. "Oh, do let us have a wild orgy tonight. Fancy dress. And we will come out here in the moonlight and celebrate the rites of Astarte."

'I made a sudden movement and Elliot Haydon, Richard's cousin, turned quickly to me.

'"You don't like all this, do you, Padre?" he said.

'"No," I said gravely. "I don't."

'He looked at me curiously. "But it is only tomfoolery. Dick can't know that this really is a sacred grove. It is just a fancy of his; he likes to play with the idea. And anyway, if it were - "

'"If it were?"

'"Well - " he laughed uncomfortably. "You don't believe in that sort of thing, do you? You, a parson."

'"I am not sure that as a parson I ought not to believe in it."

'"But that sort of thing is all finished and done with."

'"I am not so sure," I said musingly. "I only know this: I am not as a rule a sensitive man to atmosphere, but ever since I entered this grove of trees I have felt a curious impression and sense of evil and menace all round me."

'He glanced uneasily over his shoulder.

'"Yes," he said, "it is - it is queer, somehow. I know what you mean but I suppose it is only our imagination makes us feel like that. What do you say, Symonds?"

'The doctor was silent a minute or two before he replied. Then he said quietly:

'"I don't like it. I can't tell you why. But somehow or other, I don't like it."

'At that moment Violet Mannering came across to me.

'"I hate this place," she cried. "I hate it. Do let's get out of it."

'We moved away and the others followed us. Only Diana Ashley lingered. I turned my head over my shoulder and saw her standing in front of the idol house gazing earnestly at the image within it.

'The day was an unusually hot and beautiful one and Diana Ashley's suggestion of a fancy dress party that evening was received with general favour. The usual laughing and whispering and frenzied secret sewing took place and when we all made our appearance for dinner there were the usual outcries of merriment. Rogers and his wife were Neolithic hut dwellers - explaining the sudden lack of hearth rugs. Richard Haydon called

himself a Phoenician sailor, and his cousin was a brigand chief. Dr Symonds was a chef, Lady Mannering was a hospital nurse, and her daughter was a Circassian slave. I myself was arrayed somewhat too warmly as a monk. Diana Ashley came down last and was somewhat of a disappointment to all of us, being wrapped in a shapeless black domino.

'"The Unknown," she declared airily. "That is what I am. Now for goodness' sake let's go in to dinner."

'After dinner we went outside. It was a lovely night, warm and soft, and the moon was rising.

'We wandered about and chatted and the time passed quickly enough. It must have been an hour later when we realized that Diana Ashley was not with us.

'"Surely she has not gone to bed," said Richard Haydon.

'Violet Mannering shook her head.

'"Oh, no," she said. "I saw her going off in that direction about a quarter of an hour ago." She pointed as she spoke towards the grove of trees that showed black and shadowy in the moonlight.

'"I wonder what she is up to," said Richard Haydon. "Some devilment, I swear. Let's go and see."

'We all trooped off together, somewhat curious as to what Miss Ashley had been up to. Yet I, for one, felt a curious reluctance to enter that dark foreboding belt of trees. Something stronger than myself seemed to be holding me back and urging me not to enter. I felt more definitely convinced than ever of the essential evilness

of the spot. I think that some of the others experienced the same sensations that I did, though they would have been loath to admit it. The trees were so closely planted that the moonlight could not penetrate. There were a dozen soft sounds all round us, whisperings and sighings. The feeling was eerie in the extreme, and by common consent we all kept close together.

'Suddenly we came out into the open clearing in the middle of the grove and stood rooted to the spot in amazement, for there, on the threshold of the Idol House, stood a shimmering figure wrapped tightly round in diaphanous gauze and with two crescent horns rising from the dark masses of her hair.

'"My God!" said Richard Haydon, and the sweat sprang out on his brow.

'But Violet Mannering was sharper.

'"Why, it's Diana," she exclaimed. "What has she done to herself? Oh, she looks quite different somehow!"

'The figure in the doorway raised her hands. She took a step forward and chanted in a high sweet voice.

'"I am the Priestess of Astarte," she crooned. "Beware how you approach me, for I hold death in my hand."

'"Don't do it, dear," protested Lady Mannering. "You give us the creeps, you really do."

'Haydon sprang forward towards her.

'"My God, Diana!" he cried. "You are wonderful."

'My eyes were accustomed to the moonlight now and I could see more plainly. She did, indeed, as Violet had said, look quite different. Her face was more definitely oriental, and her eyes more of slits with something cruel in their gleam, and the strange smile on her lips was one that I had never seen there before.

'"Beware," she cried warningly. "Do not approach the Goddess. If anyone lays a hand on me it is death."

'"You are wonderful, Diana," cried Haydon, "but do stop it. Somehow or other I - I don't like it."

'He was moving towards her across the grass and she flung out a hand towards him.

'"Stop," she cried. "One step nearer and I will smite you with the magic of Astarte."

'Richard Haydon laughed and quickened his pace, when all at once a curious thing happened. He hesitated for a moment, then seemed to stumble and fall headlong.

'He did not get up again but lay where he had fallen prone on the ground.

'Suddenly Diana began to laugh hysterically. It was a strange horrible sound breaking the silence of the glade.

'With an oath Elliot sprang forward.

'"I can't stand this," he cried, "get up, Dick, get up, man."

'But still Richard Haydon lay where he had fallen. Elliot Haydon reached his side, knelt by him and turned him gently over. He bent over him, peering in his face.

'Then he rose sharply to his feet and stood swaying a little.

'"Doctor," he said. "Doctor, for God's sake come. I - I think he is dead."

'Symonds ran forward and Elliot rejoined us walking very slowly. He was looking down at his hands in a way I didn't understand.

'At that moment there was a wild scream from Diana.

'"I have killed him," she cried. "Oh, my God! I didn't mean to, but I have killed him."

'And she fainted dead away, falling in a crumpled heap on the grass.

'There was a cry from Mrs Rogers.

'"Oh, do let us get away from this dreadful place," she wailed, "anything might happen to us here. Oh, it's awful!"

'Elliot got hold of me by the shoulder.

'"It can't be, man," he murmured. "I tell you it can't *be*. A man cannot be killed like that. It is - it's against Nature."

'I tried to soothe him.

'"There is some explanation," I said. "Your cousin must have had some unsuspected weakness of the heart. The shock and excitement - "

'He interrupted me.

'"You don't understand," he said. He held up his hands for me to see and I noticed a red stain on them.

'"Dick didn't die of shock, he was stabbed - stabbed to the heart, and *there is no weapon*."

'I stared at him incredulously. At that moment Symonds rose from his examination of the body and came towards us. He was pale and shaking all over.

'"Are we all mad?" he said. "What is this place - that things like this can happen in it?"

'"Then it is true," I said.

'He nodded.

'"The wound is such as would be made by a long thin dagger, but - there is no dagger there."

'We all looked ill each other.

'"But it must be there," cried Elliot Haydon. "It must have dropped out. It must be on the ground somewhere. Let us look."

'We peered about vainly on the ground. Violet Mannering said suddenly:

'"Diana had something in her hand. A kind of dagger. I saw it, I saw it glitter when she threatened him."

'Elliot Haydon shook his head.

'"He never even got within three yards of her," he objected.

'Lady Mannering was bending over the prostrate girl on the ground.

'"There is nothing in her hand now," she announced, "and I can't see anything on the ground. Are you sure you saw it, Violet? I didn't."

'Dr Symonds came over to the girl.

'"We must get her to the house," he said. "Rogers, will you help?"

'Between us we carried the unconscious girl back to the house. Then we returned and fetched the body of Sir Richard.'

Dr Pender broke off apologetically and looked round.

'One would know better nowadays,' he said, 'owing to the prevalence of detective fiction. Every street boy knows that a body must be left where it is found. But in these days we had not the same knowledge, and accordingly we carried the body of Richard Haydon back to his bedroom in the square granite house and the butler was despatched on a bicycle in search of the police - a ride of some twelve miles.

'It was then that Elliot Haydon drew me aside.

'"Look here," he said. "I am going back to the grove. That weapon has got to be found."

'"If there was a weapon," I said doubtfully.

'He seized my arm and shook it fiercely. "You have got that superstitious stuff into your head. You think his death was supernatural; well, I am going back to the grove to find out."

'I was curiously averse to his doing so. I did my utmost to dissuade him, but without result. The mere idea of that thick circle of trees was abhorrent to me and I felt a strong premonition of further disaster. But Elliot was entirely pig-headed. He was, I think, scared himself, but would not admit it. He went off fully armed with determination to get to the bottom of the mystery.

'It was a very dreadful night, none of us could sleep, or attempt to do so. The police, when they arrived, were frankly incredulous of the whole thing. They evinced a strong desire to cross-examine Miss Ashley, but there they had to reckon with Dr Symonds, who opposed the idea vehemently. Miss Ashley had come out of her faint or trance and he had given her a long sleeping draught. She was on no account to be disturbed until the following day.

'It was not until about seven o'clock in the morning that anyone thought about Elliot Haydon, and then Symonds suddenly asked where he was. I explained what Elliot had done and Symonds's grave face grew a shade graver. "I wish he hadn't. It is - it is foolhardy," he said.

'"You don't think any harm can have happened to him?"

'"I hope not. I think, Padre, that you and I had better go and see."

'I knew he was right, but it took all the courage in my command to nerve myself for the task. We set out together and entered once

more that ill-fated grove of trees. We called him twice and got no reply. In a minute or two we came into the clearing, which looked pale and ghostly in the early morning light. Symonds clutched my arm and I uttered a muttered exclamation. Last night when we had seen it in the moonlight there had been the body of a man lying face downwards on the grass. Now in the early morning light the same sight met our eyes. Elliot Haydon was lying on the exact spot where his cousin had been.

'"My God!" said Symonds. "*It has got him too*!"

'We ran together over the grass. Elliot Haydon was unconscious but breathing feebly and this time there was no doubt of what had caused the tragedy. A long thin bronze weapon remained in the wound.

'"Got him through the shoulder, not through the heart. That is lucky," commented the doctor. "On my soul, I don't know what to think. At any rate he is not dead and he will be able to tell us what happened."

'But that was just what Elliot Haydon was not able to do. His description was vague in the extreme. He had hunted about vainly for the dagger and at last giving up the search had taken up a stand near the Idol House. It was then that he became increasingly certain that someone was watching him from the belt of trees. He fought against this impression but was not able to shake it off. He described a cold strange wind that began to blow. It seemed to come not from the trees but from the interior of the Idol House. He turned round, peering inside it. He saw the small figure of the Goddess and he felt he was under an optical delusion. The figure seemed to grow larger and larger. Then he

suddenly received something that felt like a blow between his temples which sent him reeling back, and as he fell he was conscious of a sharp burning pain in his left shoulder.

'The dagger was identified this time as being the identical one which had been dug up in the barrow on the hill, and which had been bought by Richard Haydon. Where he had kept it, in the house or in the Idol House in the grove, none seemed to know.

'The police were of the opinion, and always will be, that he was deliberately stabbed by Miss Ashley, but in view of our combined evidence that she was never within three yards of him, they could not hope to support the charge against her. So the thing has been and remains a mystery.'

There was a silence.

'There doesn't seem anything to say,' said Joyce Lempriére at length. 'It is all so horrible - and uncanny. Have you no explanation for yourself, Dr Pender?'

The old man nodded. 'Yes.' he said. 'I have an explanation - a kind of explanation, that is. Rather a curious one - but to my mind it still leaves certain factors unaccounted for.'

'I have been to séances,' said Joyce, 'and you may say what you like, very queer things can happen. I suppose one can explain it by some kind of hypnotism. The girl really turned herself into a Priestess of Astarte, and I suppose somehow or other she must have stabbed him. Perhaps she threw the dagger that Miss Mannering saw in her hand.'

'Or it might have been a javelin,' suggested Raymond West 'After all, moonlight is not very strong. She might have had a kind of spear in her hand and stabbed him at a distance, and then I suppose mass hypnotism comes into account. I mean, you were all prepared to see him stricken down by supernatural means and so you saw it like that.'

'I have seen many wonderful things done with weapons and knives at music halls,' said Sir Henry. 'I suppose it is possible that a man could have been concealed in the belt of trees, and that he might from there have thrown a knife or a dagger with sufficient accuracy - agreeing, of course, that he was a professional. I admit that that seems rather far-fetched, but it seems the only really feasible theory. You remember that the other man was distinctly under the impression that there was someone in the grove of trees watching him. As to Miss Mannering saying that Miss Ashley had a dagger in her hand and the others saying she hadn't, that doesn't surprise me. If you had had my experience you would know that five persons' account of the same thing will differ so widely as to be almost incredible.'

Mr Petherick coughed.

'But in all these theories we seem to be overlooking the essential fact,' he remarked. 'What became of the weapon? Miss Ashley could hardly get rid of a javelin standing as she was in the middle of an open space; and if a hidden murderer had thrown a dagger, then the dagger would still have been in the wound when the man was turned over. We must, I think, discard all far-fetched theories and confine ourselves to sober fact.'

'And where does sober fact lead us?'

'Well, one thing seems quite clear. No one was near the man when he was stricken down, so the only person who *could* have stabbed him was he himself. Suicide, in fact.'

'But why on earth should he wish to commit suicide?' asked Raymond West incredulously.

The lawyer coughed again. 'Ah, that is a question of theory once more,' he said. 'At the moment I am not concerned with theories. It seems to me, excluding the supernatural in which I do not for one moment believe, that that was the only way things could have happened. He stabbed himself, and as he fell his arms flew out, wrenching the dagger from the wound and flinging it far into the zone of the trees. That is, I think, although somewhat unlikely, a possible happening.'

'I don't like to say, I am sure,' said Miss Marple. 'It all perplexes me very much indeed. But curious things do happen. At Lady Sharpley's garden party last year the man who was arranging the clock golf tripped over one of the numbers - quite unconscious he was - and didn't come round for about five minutes.'

'Yes, dear Aunt,' said Raymond gently, 'but he wasn't stabbed, was he?'

'Of course not, dear,' said Miss Marple. 'That is what I am telling you. Of course there is only one way that poor Sir Richard could have been stabbed, but I do wish I knew what caused him to stumble in the first place. Of course, it might have been a tree root. He would be looking at the girl, of course, and when it is moonlight one does trip over things.'

'You say that there is only one way that Sir Richard could have been stabbed, Miss Marple,' said the clergyman, looking at her curiously.

'It is very sad and I don't like to think of it. He was a right-handed man, was he not? I mean to stab himself in the left shoulder he must have been. I was always so sorry for poor Jack Baynes in the War. He shot himself in the foot, you remember, after very severe fighting at Arras. He told me about it when I went to see him in hospital, and very ashamed of it he was. I don't expect this poor man, Elliot Haydon, profited much by his wicked crime.'

'Elliot Haydon,' cried Raymond. 'You think he did it?'

'I don't see how anyone else could have done it,' said Miss Marple, opening her eyes in gentle surprise. 'I mean if, as Mr Petherick so wisely says, one looks at the facts and disregards all that atmosphere of heathen goddesses which I don't think is very nice. He went up to him first and turned him over, and of course to do that he would have to have had his back to them all, and being dressed as a brigand chief he would be sure to have a weapon of some kind in his belt. I remember dancing with a man dressed as a brigand chief when I was a young girl. He had five kinds of knives and daggers, and I can't tell you how awkward and uncomfortable it was for his partner.'

All eyes were turned towards Dr Pender.

'I knew the truth,' said he, 'five years after that tragedy occurred. It came in the shape of a letter written to me by Elliot Haydon. He said in it that he fancied that I had always suspected him. He said it was a sudden temptation. He too loved Diana Ashley, but he

was only a poor struggling barrister. With Richard out of the way and inheriting his title and estates, he saw a wonderful prospect opening up before him. The dagger had jerked out of his belt as he knelt down by his cousin, and almost before he had time to think he drove it in and returned it to his belt again. He stabbed himself later in order to divert suspicion. He wrote to me on the eve of starting on an expedition to the South Pole in case, as he said, he should never come back. I do not think that he meant to come back, and I know that, as Miss Marple has said, his crime profited him nothing. "For five years," he wrote, "I have lived in Hell. I hope, at least, that I may expiate my crime by dying honourably."'

There was a pause.

'And he did die honourably,' said Sir Henry. 'You have changed the names in your story, Dr Pender, but I think I recognize the man you mean.'

'As I said,' went on the old clergyman, 'I do not think that explanation quite covers the facts. I still think there was an evil influence in that grove, an influence that directed Elliot Haydon's action. Even to this day I never think without a shudder of The Idol House of Astarte.'

Ingots of Gold

'I do not know that the story that I am going to tell you is a fair one,' said Raymond West, 'because I can't give you the solution of it. Yet the facts were so interesting and so curious that I should

like to propound it to you as a problem. And perhaps between us we may arrive at some logical conclusion.

'The date of these happenings was two years ago, when I went down to spend Whitsuntide with a man called John Newman, in Cornwall.'

'Cornwall?' said Joyce Lemprière sharply.

'Yes. Why?'

'Nothing. Only it's odd. My story is about a place in Cornwall, too - a little fishing village called Rathole. Don't tell me yours is the same?'

'No. My village is called Polperran. It is situated on the west coast of Cornwall; a very wild and rocky spot. I had been introduced to John a few weeks previously and had found him a most interesting companion. A man of intelligence and independent means, he was possessed of a romantic imagination. As a result of his latest hobby he had taken the lease of Pol House. He was an authority on Elizabethan times, and he described to me in vivid and graphic language the rout of the Spanish Armada. So enthusiastic was he that one could almost imagine that he had been an eyewitness at the scene. Is there anything in reincarnation? I wonder - I very much wonder.'

'You are so romantic, Raymond dear,' said Miss Marple, looking benignantly at him.

'Romantic is the last thing that I am,' said Raymond West, slightly annoyed. 'But this fellow Newman was chock-full of it, and he interested me for that reason as a curious survival of the past. It

appears that a certain ship belonging to the Armada, and known to contain a vast amount of treasure in the form of gold from the Spanish Main, was wrecked off the coast of Cornwall on the famous and treacherous Serpent Rocks. For some years, so Newman told me, attempts had been made to salvage the ship and recover the treasure. I believe such stories are not uncommon, though the number of mythical treasure ships is largely in excess of the genuine ones. A company had been formed, but had gone bankrupt, and Newman had been able to buy the rights of the thing - or whatever you call it - for a mere song. He waxed very enthusiastic about it all. According to him it was merely a question of the latest scientific, up-to-date machinery. The gold was there, and he had no doubt whatever that it could be recovered.

'It occurred to me as I listened to him how often things happen that way. A rich man such as Newman succeeds almost without effort, and yet in all probability the actual value in money of his find would mean little to him. I must say that his ardour infected me. I saw galleons drifting up the coast, flying before the storm, beaten and broken on the black rocks. The mere word galleon has a romantic sound. The phrase "Spanish Gold" thrills the schoolboy - and the grown-up man also. Moreover, I was working at the time upon a novel, some scenes of which were laid in the sixteenth century, and I saw the prospect of getting valuable local colour from my host.

'I set off that Friday morning from Paddington in high spirits, and looking forward to my trip. The carriage was empty except for one man, who sat facing me in the opposite corner. He was a tall, soldierly-looking man, and I could not rid myself of the impression

that somewhere or other I had seen him before. I cudgelled my brains for some time in vain; but at last I had it. My travelling companion was Inspector Badgworth, and I had run across him when I was doing a series of articles on the Everson disappearance case.

'I recalled myself to his notice, and we were soon chatting pleasantly enough. When I told him I was going to Polperran he remarked that that was a rum coincidence, because he himself was also bound for that place. I did not like to seem inquisitive, so was careful not to ask him what took him there. Instead, I spoke of my own interest in the place, and mentioned the wrecked Spanish galleon. To my surprise the Inspector seemed to know all about it. "That will be the *Juan Fernandez*," he said. "Your friend won't be the first who has sunk money trying to get money out of her. It is a romantic notion."

'"And probably the whole story is a myth," I said. "No ship was ever wrecked there at all."

'"Oh, the ship was sunk there right enough," said the Inspector, "along with a good company of others. You would be surprised if you knew how many wrecks there are on that pan of the coast. As a matter of fact, that is what takes me down there now. That is where the *Otranto* was wrecked six months ago."

'"I remember reading about it," I said. "No lives were lost, I think?"

'"No lives were lost," said the Inspector, "but something else was lost. It is not generally known, but the *Otranto* was carrying bullion."

'"Yes?" I said, much interested.

'"Naturally we have had divers at work on salvage operations, but - *the gold has gone, Mr West*."

'"Gone!" I said, staring at him. "How can it have gone?"

'"That is the question," said the Inspector. "The rocks tore a gaping hole in her strongroom. It was easy enough for the divers to get in that way, but they found the strongroom empty. The question is, was the gold stolen before the wreck or afterwards? Was it ever in the strongroom at all?"

'"It seems a curious case," I said.

'"It is a very curious case, when you consider what bullion is. Not a diamond necklace that you could put into your pocket. When you think how cumbersome it is and how bulky - well, the whole thing seems absolutely impossible. There may have been some hocus-pocus before the ship sailed; but if not, it must have been removed within the last six months - and I am going down to look into the matter."

'I found Newman waiting to meet me at the station. He apologized for the absence of his car, which had gone to Truro for some necessary repairs. Instead, he met me with a farm lorry belonging to the property.

'I swung myself up beside him, and we wound carefully in and out of the narrow streets of the fishing village. We went up a steep ascent, with a gradient, I should say, of one in five, ran a little distance along a winding lane, and turned in at the granite-pillared gates of Pol House.

'The place was a charming one; it was situated high up the cliffs, with a good view out to sea. Part of it was some three or four hundred years old, and a modern wing had been added. Behind it farming land of about seven or eight acres ran inland.

'"Welcome to Pol House," said Newman. "And to the Sign of the Golden Galleon." And he pointed to where, over the front door, hung a perfect reproduction of a Spanish galleon with all sails set.

'My first evening was a most charming and instructive one. My host showed me the old manuscripts relating to the *Juan Fernandez*. He unrolled charts for me and indicated positions on them with dotted lines, and he produced plans of diving apparatus, which, I may say, mystified me utterly and completely.

'I told him of my meeting with Inspector Badgworth, in which he was much interested.

'"They are a queer people round this coast," he said reflectively. "Smuggling and wrecking is in their blood. When a ship goes down on their coast they cannot help regarding it as lawful plunder meant for their pockets. There is a fellow here I should like you to see. He is an interesting survival."

'Next day dawned bright and clear. I was taken down into Polperran and there introduced to Newman's diver, a man called Higgins. He was a wooden-faced individual, extremely taciturn, and his contributions to the conversation were mostly monosyllables. After a discussion between them on highly technical matters, we adjourned to the Three Anchors. A tankard of beer somewhat loosened the worthy fellow's tongue.

'"Detective gentleman from London has come down," he grunted. "They do say that that ship that went down there last November was carrying a mortal lot of gold. Well, she wasn't the first to go down, and she won't be the last."

'"Hear, hear," chimed in the landlord of the Three Anchors. "That is a true word you say there, Bill Higgins."

'"I reckon it is, Mr Kelvin," said Higgins.

'I looked with some curiosity at the landlord. He was a remarkable-looking man, dark and swarthy, with curiously broad shoulders. His eyes were bloodshot, and he had a curiously furtive way of avoiding one's glance. I suspected that this was the man of whom Newman had spoken, saying he was an interesting survival.

'"We don't want interfering foreigners on this coast," he said, somewhat truculently.

'"Meaning the police?" asked Newman, smiling.

'"Meaning the police - *and others*," said Kelvin significantly. "And don't you forget it, mister."

'"Do you know, Newman, that sounded to me very like a threat," I said as we climbed the hill homewards.

'My friend laughed.

'"Nonsense; I don't do the folk down here any harm."

'I shook my head doubtfully. There was something sinister and uncivilized about Kelvin. I felt that his mind might run in strange, unrecognized channels.

'I think I date the beginning of my uneasiness from that moment. I had slept well enough that first night, but the next night my sleep was troubled and broken. Sunday dawned, dark and sullen, with an overcast sky and the threatenings of thunder in the air. I am always a bad hand at hiding my feelings, and Newman noticed the change in me.

'"What is the matter with you, West? You are a bundle of nerves this morning."

'"I don't know," I confessed, "but I have got a horrible feeling of foreboding."

'"It's the weather."

'"Yes, perhaps."

'I said no more. In the afternoon we went out in Newman's motor boat, but the rain came on with such vigour that we were glad to return to shore and change into dry clothing.

'And that evening my uneasiness increased. Outside the storm howled and roared. Towards ten o'clock the tempest calmed down. Newman looked out of the window.

'"It is clearing," he said. "I shouldn't wonder if it was a perfectly fine night in another half-hour. If so, I shall go out for a stroll."

'I yawned. "I am frightfully sleepy," I said. "I didn't get much sleep last night. I think that tonight I shall turn in early."

'This I did. On the previous night I had slept little. Tonight I slept heavily. Yet my slumbers were not restful. I was still oppressed with an awful foreboding of evil. I had terrible dreams. I dreamt of dreadful abysses and vast chasms, amongst which I was wandering, knowing that a slip of the foot meant death. I waked to find the hands of my clock pointing to eight o'clock. My head was aching badly, and the terror of my night's dreams was still upon me.

'So strongly was this so that when I went to the window and drew it up, I started back with a fresh feeling of terror, for the first thing I saw, or thought I saw - was a man digging an open grave.

'It took me a minute or two to pull myself together; then I realized that the grave-digger was Newman's gardener, and the "grave" was destined to accommodate three new rose trees which were lying on the turf waiting for the moment they should be securely planted in the earth.

'The gardener looked up and saw me and touched his hat.

'"Good morning, sir. Nice morning, sir."

"I suppose it is," I said doubtfully, still unable to shake off completely the depression of my spirits.

'However, as the gardener had said, it was certainly a nice morning. The sun was shining and the sky a clear pale blue that promised fine weather for the day. I went down to breakfast whistling a tune. Newman had no maids living in the house. Two middle-aged sisters, who lived in a farm-house near by, came

daily to attend to his simple wants. One of them was placing the coffee-pot on the table as I entered the room.

'"Good morning, Elizabeth," I said. "Mr Newman not down yet?"

'"He must have been out very early, sir," she replied. "He wasn't in the house when we arrived."

'Instantly my uneasiness returned. On the two previous mornings Newman had come down to breakfast somewhat late; and I didn't fancy that at any time he was an early riser. Moved by those forebodings, I ran up to his bedroom. It was empty, and, moreover, his bed had not been slept in. A brief examination of his room showed me two other things. If Newman had gone out for a stroll he must have gone out in his evening clothes, for they were missing.

'I was sure now that my premonition of evil was justified. Newman had gone, as he had said he would do, for an evening stroll. For some reason or other he had not returned. Why? Had he met with an accident? Fallen over the cliffs? A search must be made at once.

'In a few hours I had collected a large band of helpers, and together we hunted in every direction along the cliffs and on the rocks below. But there was no sign of Newman.

'In the end, in despair, I sought out Inspector Badgworth. His face grew very grave.

'"It looks to me as if there has been foul play," he said. "There are some not over-scrupulous customers in these parts. Have you seen Kelvin, the landlord of the Three Anchors?"

'I said that I had seen him.

'"Did you know he did a turn in gaol four years ago? Assault and battery."

'"It doesn't surprise me," I said.

'"The general opinion in this place seems to be that your friend is a bit too fond of nosing his way into things that do not concern him. I hope he has come to no serious harm."

'The search was continued with redoubled vigour. It was not until late that afternoon that our efforts were rewarded. We discovered Newman in a deep ditch in a corner of his own property. His hands and feet were securely fastened with rope, and a handkerchief had been thrust into his mouth and secured there so as to prevent him crying out.

'He was terribly exhausted and in great pain; but after some frictioning of his wrists and ankles, and a long draught from a whisky flask, he was able to give his account of what had occurred.

'The weather having cleared, he had gone out for a stroll about eleven o'clock. His way had taken him some distance along the cliffs to a spot commonly known as Smugglers' Cove, owing to the large number of caves to be found there. Here he had noticed some men landing something from a small boat, and had strolled down to see what was going on. Whatever the stuff was it seemed to be a great weight, and it was being carried into one of the farthermost caves.

'With no real suspicion of anything being amiss, nevertheless Newman had wondered. He had drawn quite near them without being observed. Suddenly there was a cry of alarm, and immediately two powerful seafaring men had set upon him and rendered him unconscious. When next he came to himself he found himself lying on a motor vehicle of some kind, which was proceeding, with many bumps and bangs, as for as he could guess, up the lane which led from the coast to the village. To his great surprise, the lorry turned in at the gate of his own house. There, after a whispered conversation between the men, they at length drew him forth and flung him into a ditch at a spot where the depth of it rendered discovery unlikely for some time. Then the lorry drove on, and, he thought, passed out through another gate some quarter of a mile nearer the village. He could give no description of his assailants except that they were certainly seafaring men and, by their speech, Cornishmen.

'Inspector Badgworth was very interested.

'"Depend upon it that is where the stuff has been hidden," he cried. "Somehow or other it has been salvaged from the wreck and has been stored in some lonely cave somewhere. It is known that we have searched all the caves in Smugglers' Cove, and that we are now going farther afield, and they have evidently been moving the stuff at night to a cave that has been already searched and is not likely to be searched again. Unfortunately they have had at least eighteen hours to dispose of the stuff. If they got Mr Newman last night I doubt if we will find any of it by now."

'The Inspector hurried off to make a search. He found definite evidence that the bullion had been stored as supposed, but the gold had been once more removed, and there was no clue as to its fresh hiding-place.

'One clue there was, however, and the Inspector himself pointed it out to me the following morning.

'"That lane is very little used by motor vehicles," he said, "and in one or two places we get the traces of the tyres very clearly. There is a three-cornered piece out of one tyre, leaving a mark which is quite unmistakable. It shows going into the gate; here and there is a faint mark of it going out of the other gate, so there is not much doubt that it is the right vehicle we are after. Now, why did they take it out through the farther gate? It seems quite clear to me that the lorry came from the village. Now, there aren't many people who own a lorry in the village - not more than two or three at most. Kelvin, the landlord of the Three Anchors, has one."

'"What was Kelvin's original profession?" asked Newman.

'"It is curious that you should ask me that, Mr Newman. In his young days Kelvin was a professional diver."

'Newman and I looked at each other. The puzzle seemed to be fitting itself together piece by piece.

'"You didn't recognize Kelvin as one of the men on the beach?" asked the Inspector.

'Newman shook his head.

'"I am afraid I can't say anything as to that," he said regretfully. "I really hadn't time to see anything."

'"The Inspector very kindly allowed me to accompany him to the Three Anchors. The garage was up a side street. The big doors were closed, but by going up a little alley at the side we found a small door that led into it and the door was open. A very brief examination of the tyres sufficed for the Inspector. "We have got him, by Jove!" he exclaimed. "Here is the mark as large as life on the rear left wheel. Now, Mr Kelvin, I don't think you will be clever enough to wriggle out of this."'

Raymond West came to a halt.

'Well?' said Joyce. 'So far I don't see anything to make a problem about - unless they never found the gold.'

'They never found the gold certainly,' said Raymond. 'And they never got Kelvin either. I expect he was too clever for them, but I don't quite see how he worked it. He was duly arrested - on the evidence of the tyre mark. But an extraordinary hitch arose. Just opposite the big doors of the garage was a cottage rented for the summer by a lady artist.'

'Oh, these lady artists!' said Joyce, laughing.

'As you say, "Oh, these lady artists!" This particular one had been ill for some weeks, and, in consequence, had two hospital nurses attending her. The nurse who was on night duty had pulled her armchair up to the window, where the blind was up. She declared that the motor lorry could not have left the garage opposite

without her seeing it and she swore that in actual fact it never left the garage that night.'

'I don't think that is much of a problem,' said Joyce. 'The nurse went to sleep, of course. They always do.'

'That has - er - been known to happen,' said Mr Petherick, judiciously; 'but it seems to me that we are accepting facts without sufficient examination. Before accepting the testimony of the hospital nurse, we should inquire very closely into her bona fides. The alibi coming with such suspicious promptness is inclined to raise doubts in one's mind.'

'There is also the lady artist's testimony,' said Raymond. 'She declared that she was in pain, and awake most of the night and that she would certainly have heard the lorry, it being an unusual noise, and the night being very quiet after the storm.'

'H'm,' said the clergyman, 'that is certainly an additional fact. Had Kelvin himself any alibi?'

'He declared that he was at home and in bed from ten o'clock onwards, but he could produce no witnesses in support of that statement.'

'The nurse went to sleep,' said Joyce, 'and so did the patient. Ill people always think they have never slept a wink all night.'

Raymond West looked inquiringly at Dr Pender.

'Do you know, I feel very sorry for that man Kelvin. It seems to me very much a case of "Give a dog a bad name." Kelvin had been in prison. Apart from the tyre mark, which certainly seems too

remarkable to be coincidence, there doesn't seem to be much against him except his unfortunate record.'

'You, Sir Henry?'

Sir Henry shook his head.

'As it happens,' he said, smiling, 'I know something about this case. So clearly I mustn't speak.'

'Well, go on, Aunt Jane; haven't you got anything to say?'

'In a minute, dear,' said Miss Marple. 'I am afraid I have counted wrong. Two purl, three plain, slip one, two purl - yes, that's right. What did you say, dear?'

'What is your opinion?'

'You wouldn't like my opinion, dear. Young people never do, I notice. It is better to say nothing.'

'Nonsense, Aunt Jane; out with it.'

'Well, dear Raymond,' said Miss Marple, laying down her knitting and looking across at her nephew. 'I do think you should be more careful how you choose your friends. You are so credulous, dear, so easily gulled. I suppose it is being a writer and having so much imagination. All that story about a Spanish galleon! If you were older and had more experience of life you would have been on your guard at once. A man you had known only a few weeks, too!'

Sir Henry suddenly gave vent to a great roar of laughter and slapped his knee.

'Got you this time, Raymond,' he said. 'Miss Marple, you are wonderful. Your friend Newman, my boy, has another name - several other names in fact. At the present moment he is not in Cornwall but in Devonshire - Dartmoor, to be exact - a convict in Princetown prison. We didn't catch him over the stolen bullion business, but over the rifling of the strongroom of one of the London banks. Then we looked up his past record and we found a good portion of the gold stolen buried in the garden at Pol House. It was rather a neat idea. All along that Cornish coast there are stories of wrecked galleons full of gold. It accounted for the diver and it would account later for the gold. But a scapegoat was needed, and Kelvin was ideal for the purpose. Newman played his little comedy very well, and our friend Raymond, with his celebrity as a writer, made an unimpeachable witness.'

'But the tyre mark?' objected Joyce.

'Oh, I saw that at once, dear, although I know nothing about motors,' said Miss Marple. 'People change a wheel, you know - I have often seen them doing it - and, of course, they could take a wheel off Kelvin's lorry and take it out through the small door into the alley and put it on to Mr Newman's lorry and take the lorry out of one gate down to the beach, fill it up with the gold and bring it up through the other gate, and then they must have taken the wheel back and put it back on Mr Kelvin's lorry while, I suppose, someone else was tying up Mr Newman in a ditch. Very uncomfortable for him and probably longer before he was found than he expected. I suppose the man who called himself the gardener attended to that side of the business.'

'Why do you say, "called himself the gardener," Aunt Jane?' asked Raymond curiously.

'Well, he can't have been a real gardener, can he?' said Miss Marple. 'Gardeners don't work on Whit Monday. Everybody knows that.'

She smiled and folded up her knitting.

'It was really that little fact that put me on the right scent,' she said. She looked across at Raymond.

'When you are a householder, dear, and have a garden of your own, you will know these little things.'

The Bloodstained Pavement

'It's curious,' said Joyce Lempriére, 'but I hardly like telling you my story. It happened a long time ago - five years ago to be exact - but it's sort of haunted me ever since. The smiling, bright, top part of it - and the hidden gruesomeness underneath. And the queer thing is that the sketch I painted at the time has become tinged with the same atmosphere. When you look at it first it is just a rough sketch of a little steep Cornish street with the sunlight on it. But if you look long enough at it something sinister creeps in. I have never sold it but I never look at it. It lives in the studio in a corner with its face to the wall.

'The name of the place was Rathole. It is a queer little Cornish fishing village, very picturesque - too picturesque perhaps. There

is rather too much of the atmosphere of "Ye Olde Cornish Tea House" about it. It has shops with bobbed-headed girls in smocks doing hand-illuminated mottoes on parchment. It is pretty and it is quaint, but it is very self-consciously so.'

'Don't I know,' said Raymond West, groaning. 'The curse of the charabanc, I suppose. No matter how narrow the lanes leading down to them no picturesque village is safe.'

Joyce nodded.

'They are narrow lanes that lead down to Rathole and very steep, like the side of a house. Well, to get on with my story. I had come down to Cornwall for a fortnight, to sketch. There is an old inn in Rathole, the Polharwith Arms. It was supposed to be the only house left standing by the Spaniards when they shelled the place in fifteen hundred and something.'

'Not shelled,' said Raymond West, frowning. 'Do try to be historically accurate, Joyce.'

'Well, at all events they landed guns somewhere along the coast and they fired them and the houses fell down. Anyway that is not the point. The inn was a wonderful old place with a kind of porch in front built on four pillars. I got a very good pitch and was just settling down to work when a car came creeping and twisting down the hill. Of course, it *would* stop before the inn - just where it was most awkward for me. The people got out - a man and a woman - I didn't notice them particularly. She had a kind of mauve linen dress on and a mauve hat.

'Presently the man came out again and to my great thankfulness drove the car down to the quay and left it there. He strolled back past me towards the inn. Just at that moment another beastly car came twisting down, and a woman got out of it dressed in the brightest chintz frock I have ever seen, scarlet poinsettias, I think they were, and she had on one of those big native straw hats - Cuban, aren't they? - in very bright scarlet.

'This woman didn't stop in front of the inn but drove the car farther down the street towards the other one. Then she got out and the man seeing her gave an astonished shout. "Carol," he cried, "in the name of all that is wonderful. Fancy meeting you in this out-of-the-way spot. I haven't seen you for years. Hello, there's Margery - my wife, you know. You must come and meet her."

'They went up the street towards the inn side by side, and I saw the other woman had just come out of the door and was moving down towards them. I had had just a glimpse of the woman called Carol as she passed by me. Just enough to see a very white powdered chin and a flaming scarlet mouth and I wondered - I just wondered - if Margery would be so very pleased to meet her. I hadn't seen Margery near to, but in the distance she looked dowdy and extra prim and proper.

'Well, of course, it was not any of my business but you get very queer little glimpses of life sometimes, and you can't help speculating about them. From where they were standing I could just catch fragments of their conversation that floated down to me. They were talking about bathing. The husband, whose name seemed to be Denis, wanted to take a boat and row round the

coast. There was a famous cave well worth seeing, so he said, about a mile along. Carol wanted to see the cave too but suggested walking along the cliffs and seeing it from the land side. She said she hated boats. In the end they fixed it that way. Carol was to go along the cliff path and meet them at the cave, and Denis and Margery would take a boat and row round.

'Hearing them talk about bathing made me want to bathe too. It was a very hot morning and I wasn't doing particularly good work. Also, I fancied that the afternoon sunlight would be far more attractive in effect. So I packed up my things and went off to a little beach that I knew of - it was quite the opposite direction from the cave, and was rather a discovery of mine. I had a ripping bathe there and I lunched off a tinned tongue and two tomatoes, and I came back in the afternoon full of confidence and enthusiasm to get on with my sketch.

'The whole of Rathole seemed to be asleep. I had been right about the afternoon sunlight, the shadows were far more telling. The Polharwith Arms was the principal note of my sketch. A ray of sunlight came slanting obliquely down and hit the ground in front of it and had rather a curious effect. I gathered that the bathing party had returned safely, because two bathing dresses, a scarlet one and a dark blue one, were hanging from the balcony, drying in the sun.

'Something had gone a bit wrong with one corner of my sketch and I bent over it for some moments doing something to put it right. When I looked up again there was a figure leaning against one of the pillars of the Polharwith Arms, who seemed to have appeared there by magic. He was dressed in seafaring clothes

and was, I suppose, a fisherman. But he had a long dark beard, and if I had been looking for a model for a wicked Spanish captain I couldn't have imagined anyone better. I got to work with feverish haste before he should move away, though from his attitude he looked as though he was perfectly prepared to prop up the pillars through all eternity.

'He did move, however, but luckily not until I had got what I wanted. He came over to me and he began to talk. Oh, how that man talked.

'"Rathole," he said, "was a very interesting place."

'I knew that already but although I said so that didn't save me. I had the whole history of the shelling - I mean the destroying - of the village, and how the landlord of the Polharwith Arms was the last man to be killed. Run through on his own threshold by a Spanish captain's sword, and of how his blood spurted out on the pavement and no one could wash out the stain for a hundred years.

'It all fitted in very well with the languorous drowsy feeling of the afternoon. The man's voice was very suave and yet at the same time there was an undercurrent in it of something rather frightening. He was very obsequious in his manner, yet I felt underneath he was cruel. He made me understand the Inquisition and the terrors of all the things the Spaniards did better than I have ever done before.

'All the time he was talking to me I went on painting, and suddenly I realized that in the excitement of listening to his story I had painted in something that was not there. On that white square of

pavement where the sun fell before the door of the Polharwith Arms, I had painted in bloodstains. It seemed extraordinary that the mind could play such tricks with the hand, but as I looked over towards the inn again I got a second shock. My hand had only painted what my eyes saw - drops of blood on the white pavement.

'I stared for a minute or two. Then I shut my eyes, said to myself, "Don't be so stupid, there's nothing there, really," then I opened them again, but the bloodstains were still there.

'I suddenly felt I couldn't stand it. I interrupted the fisherman's flood of language.

'"Tell me," I said, "my eyesight is not very good. Are those bloodstains on that pavement over there?"

'He looked at me indulgently and kindly.

'"No bloodstains in these days, lady. What I am telling you about is nearly five hundred years ago."

'"Yes," I said, "but now - on the pavement" - the words died away in my throat. I *knew* - I *knew* that he wouldn't see what I was seeing. I got up and with shaking hands began to put my things together. As I did so the young man who had come in the car that morning came out of the inn door. He looked up and down the street perplexedly. On the balcony above his wife came out and collected the bathing things. He walked down towards the car but suddenly swerved and came across the road towards the fisherman.

'"Tell me, my man," he said. "You don't know whether the lady who came in that second car there has got back yet?"

'"Lady in a dress with flowers all over it? No, sir, I haven't seen her. She went along the cliff towards the cave this morning."

'"I know, I know. We all bathed there together, and then she left us to walk home and I have not seen her since. It can't have taken her all this time. The cliffs round here are not dangerous, are they?"

'"It depends, sir, on the way you go. The best way is to take a man what knows the place with you."

'He very clearly meant himself and was beginning to enlarge on the theme, but the young man cut him short unceremoniously and ran back towards the inn calling up to his wife on the balcony.

'"I say, Margery, Carol hasn't come back yet. Odd, isn't it?"

'I didn't hear Margery's reply, but her husband went on. "Well, we can't wait any longer. We have got to push on to Penrithar. Are you ready? I will turn the car."

'He did as he had said, and presently the two of them drove off together. Meanwhile I had deliberately been nerving myself to prove how ridiculous my fancies were. When the car had gone I went over to the inn and examined the pavement closely. Of course there were no bloodstains there. No, all along it had been the result of my distorted imagination. Yet, somehow, it seemed to make the thing more frightening. It was while I was standing there that I heard the fisherman's voice.

'He was looking at me curiously. "You thought you saw bloodstains here, eh, lady?"

'I nodded.

'"That is very curious, that is very curious. We have got a superstition here, lady. If anyone sees those bloodstains - "

'He paused.

'"Well?" I said.

'He went on in his soft voice, Cornish in intonation, but unconsciously smooth and well-bred in its pronunciation, and completely free from Cornish turns of speech.

'"They do say, lady, that if anyone sees those bloodstains that there will be a death within twenty-four hours."

'Creepy! It gave me a nasty feeling all down my spine.

'He went on persuasively. "There is a very interesting tablet in the church, lady, about a death - "

'"No thanks," I said decisively, and I turned sharply on my heel and walked up the street towards the cottage where I was lodging. Just as I got there I saw in the distance the woman called Carol coming along the cliff path. She was hurrying. Against the grey of the rocks she looked like some poisonous scarlet flower. Her hat was the colour of blood...

'I shook myself. Really, I had blood on the brain.

'Later I heard the sound of her car. I wondered whether she too was going to Penrithar; but she took the road to the left in the opposite direction. I watched the car crawl up the hill and disappear, and I breathed somehow more easily. Rathole seemed its quiet sleepy self once more.'

'If that is all,' said Raymond West as Joyce came to a stop, 'I will give my verdict at once. Indigestion, spots before the eyes after meals.'

'It isn't all,' said Joyce. 'You have got to hear the sequel. I read it in the paper two days later under the heading of "Sea Bathing Fatality". It told how Mrs Dacre, the wife of Captain Denis Dacre, was unfortunately drowned at Landeer Cove, just a little farther along the coast. She and her husband were staying at the time at the hotel there, and had declared their intention of bathing, but a cold wind sprang up. Captain Dacre had declared it was too cold, so he and some other people in the hotel had gone off to the golf links near by. Mrs Dacre, however, had said it was not too cold for her and she went off alone down to the cove. As she didn't return her husband became alarmed, and in company with his friends went down to the beach. They found her clothes lying beside a rock, but no trace of the unfortunate lady. Her body was not found until nearly a week later when it was washed ashore at a point some distance down the coast. There was a bad blow on her head which had occurred before death, and the theory was that she must have dived into the sea and hit her head on a rock. As far as I could make out her death would have occurred just twenty-four hours after the time I saw the bloodstains.'

'I protest,' said Sir Henry. 'This is not a problem - this is a ghost story. Miss Lempriére is evidently a medium.'

Mr Petherick gave his usual cough.

'One point strikes me - ' he said, 'that blow on the head. We must not, I think, exclude the possibility of foul play. But I do not see that we have any data to go upon. Miss Lempriére's hallucination, or vision, is interesting certainly, but I do not see clearly the point on which she wishes us to pronounce.'

'Indigestion and coincidence,' said Raymond, 'and anyway you can't be sure that they were the same people. Besides, the curse, or whatever it was, would only apply to the actual inhabitants of Rathole.'

'I feel,' said Sir Henry, 'that the sinister seafaring man has something to do with this tale. But I agree with Mr Petherick, Miss Lempriére has given us very little data.'

Joyce turned to Dr Pender who smilingly shook his head.

'It is a most interesting story,' he said, 'but I am afraid I agree with Sir Henry and Mr Petherick that there is very little data to go upon.'

Joyce then looked curiously at Miss Marple, who smiled back at her.

'I, too, think you are just a little unfair, Joyce dear,' she said. 'Of course, it is different for me. I mean, we, being women, appreciate the point about clothes. I don't think it is a fair

problem to put to a man. It must have meant a lot of rapid changing. What a wicked woman! And a still more wicked man.'

Joyce stared at her.

'Aunt Jane,' she said. 'Miss Marple, I mean, I believe - I do really believe you know the truth.'

'Well, dear,' said Miss Marple, 'it is much easier for me sitting here quietly than it was for you - and being an artist you are so susceptible to atmosphere, aren't you? Sitting here with one's knitting, one just sees the facts. Bloodstains dropped on the pavement from the bathing dress hanging above, and being a red bathing dress, of course, the criminals themselves did not realize it was bloodstained. Poor thing, poor young thing!'

'Excuse me, Miss Marple,' said Sir Henry, 'but you do know that I am entirely in the dark still. You and Miss Lempriére seem to know what you are talking about, but we men are still in utter darkness.'

'I will tell you the end of the story now,' said Joyce. 'It was a year later. I was at a little east coast seaside resort, and I was sketching, when suddenly I had that queer feeling one has of something having happened before. There were two people, a man and a woman, on the pavement in front of me, and they were greeting a third person, a woman dressed in a scarlet poinsettia chintz dress. "Carol, by all that is wonderful! Fancy meeting you after all these years! You don't know my wife? Joan, this is an old friend of mine, Miss Harding."

'I recognized the man at once. It was the same Denis I had seen at Rathole. The wife was different - that is, she was a Joan instead of a Margery; but she was the same type, young and rather dowdy and very inconspicuous. I thought for a minute I was going mad. They began to talk of going bathing. I will tell you what I did. I marched straight then and there to the police station. I thought they would probably think I was off my head, but I didn't care. And as it happened everything was quite all right. There was a man from Scotland Yard there, and he had come down just about this very thing. It seems - oh, it's horrible to talk about - that the police had got suspicions of Denis Dacre. That wasn't his real name - he took different names on different occasions. He got to know girls, usually quiet inconspicuous girls without many relatives or friends, he married them and insured their lives for large sums and then - oh, it's horrible! The woman called Carol was his real wife, and they always carried out the same plan. That is really how they came to catch him. The insurance companies became suspicious. He would come to some quiet seaside place with his new wife, then the other woman would turn up and they would all go bathing together. Then the wife would be murdered and Carol would put on her clothes and go back in the boat with him. Then they would leave the place, wherever it was, after inquiring for the supposed Carol and when they got outside the village Carol would hastily change back into her own flamboyant clothes and her vivid make-up and would go back there and drive off in her own car. They would find out which way the current was flowing and the supposed death would take place at the next bathing place along the coast that way. Carol would play the part of the wife and would go down to some lonely beach and would leave the wife's clothes there by a rock and

depart in her flowery chintz dress to wait quietly until her husband could rejoin her.

'I suppose when they killed poor Margery some of the blood must have spurted over Carol's bathing suit, and being a red one they didn't notice it, as Miss Marple says. But when they hung it over the balcony it dripped. Ugh!' she gave a shiver. 'I can see it still.'

'Of course,' said Sir Henry, 'I remember very well now. Davis was the man's real name. It had quite slipped my memory that one of his many aliases was Dacre. They were an extraordinarily cunning pair. It always seemed so amazing to me that no one spotted the change of identity. I suppose, as Miss Marple says, clothes are more easily identified than faces; but it was a very clever scheme, for although we suspected Davis it was not easy to bring the crime home to him as he always seemed to have an unimpeachable alibi.'

'Aunt Jane,' said Raymond, looking at her curiously, 'how do you do it? You have lived such a peaceful life and yet nothing seems to surprise you.'

'I always find one thing very like another in this world,' said Miss Marple. 'There was Mrs Green, you know, she buried five children - and every one of them insured. Well, naturally, one began to get suspicious.'

She shook her head.

'There is a great deal of wickedness in village life. I hope you dear young people will never realize how very wicked the world is.'

Motive v. Opportunity

Mr Petherick cleared his throat rather more importantly than usual.

'I am afraid my little problem will seem rather tame to you all,' he said apologetically, 'after the sensational stories we have been hearing. There is no bloodshed in mine, but it seems to me an interesting and rather ingenious little problem, and fortunately I am in the position to know the right answer to it.'

'It isn't terribly legal, is it?' asked Joyce Lempriére. 'I mean points of law and lots of Barnaby *v* Skinner in the year 1881, and things like that.'

Mr Petherick beamed appreciatively at her over his eyeglasses.

'No, no, my dear young lady. You need have no fears on that score. The story I am about to tell is a perfectly simple and straightforward one and can be followed by any layman.'

'No legal quibbles, now,' said Miss Marple, shaking a knitting needle at him.

'Certainly not,' said Mr Petherick.

'Ah well, I am not so sure, but let's hear the story.'

'It concerns a former client of mine. I will call him Mr Clode - Simon Clode. He was a man of considerable wealth and lived in a large house not very far from here. He had had one son killed in

the War and this son had left one child, a little girl. Her mother had died at her birth, and on her father's death she had come to live with her grandfather who at once became passionately attached to her. Little Chris could do anything she liked with her grandfather. I have never seen a man more completely wrapped up in a child, and I cannot describe to you his grief and despair when, at the age of eleven, the child contracted pneumonia and died.

'Poor Simon Clode was inconsolable. A brother of his had recently died in poor circumstances and Simon Clode had generously offered a home to his brother's children - two girls, Grace and Mary, and a boy, George. But though kind and generous to his nephew and nieces, the old man never expended on them any of the love and devotion he had accorded to his little grandchild. Employment was found for George Clode in a bank near by, and Grace married a clever young research chemist of the name of Philip Garrod. Mary, who was a quiet, self-contained girl, lived at home and looked after her uncle. She was, I think, fond of him in her quiet undemonstrative way. And to all appearances things went on very peacefully. I may say that after the death of little Christobel, Simon Clode came to me and instructed me to draw up a new will. By this will, his fortune, a very considerable one, was divided equally between his nephew and nieces, a third share to each.

'Time went on. Chancing to meet George Clode one day I inquired for his uncle, whom I had not seen for some time. To my surprise George's face clouded over. "I wish you could put some sense into Uncle Simon," he said ruefully. His honest but not very

brilliant countenance looked puzzled and worried. "This spirit business is getting worse and worse."

'"What spirit business?" I asked, very much surprised.

'Then George told me the whole story. How Mr Clode had gradually got interested in the subject and how on the top of this interest he had chanced to meet an American medium, a Mrs Eurydice Spragg. This woman, whom George did not hesitate to characterize as an out and out swindler, had gained an immense ascendency over Simon Clode. She was practically always in the house and many séances were held in which the spirit of Christobel manifested itself to the doting grandfather.

'I may say here and now that I do not belong to the ranks of those who cover spiritualism with ridicule and scorn. I am, as I have told you, a believer in evidence. And I think that when we have an impartial mind and weigh the evidence in favour of spiritualism there remains much that cannot be put down to fraud or lightly set aside. Therefore, as I say, I am neither a believer nor an unbeliever. There is certain testimony with which one cannot afford to disagree.

'On the other hand, spiritualism lends itself very easily to fraud and imposture, and from all young George Clode told me about this Mrs Eurydice Spragg I felt more and more convinced that Simon Clode was in bad hands and that Mrs Spragg was probably an impostor of the worst type. The old man, shrewd as he was in practical matters, would be easily imposed on where his love for his dead grandchild was concerned.

'Turning things over in my mind I felt more and more uneasy. I was fond of the young Clodes, Mary and George, and I realized that this Mrs Spragg and her influence over their uncle might lead to trouble in the future.

'At the earliest opportunity I made a pretext for calling on Simon Clode. I found Mrs Spragg installed as an honoured and friendly guest As soon as I saw her my worst apprehensions were fulfilled. She was a stout woman of middle age, dressed in a flamboyant style. Very full of cant phrases about "Our dear ones who have passed over", and other things of the kind.

'Her husband was also staying in the house, Mr Absalom Spragg, a thin lank man with a melancholy expression and extremely furtive eyes. As soon as I could, I got Simon Clode to myself and sounded him tactfully on the subject He was full of enthusiasm. Eurydice Spragg was wonderful! She had been sent to him directly in answer to a prayer! She cared nothing for money, the joy of helping a heart in affliction was enough for her. She had quite a mother's feeling for little Chris. He was beginning to regard her almost as a daughter. Then he went on to give me details - how he had heard his Chris's voice speaking - how she was well and happy with her father and mother. He went on to tell other sentiments expressed by the child, which in my remembrance of little Christobel seemed to me highly unlikely. She laid stress on the fact that "Father and Mother loved dear Mrs Spragg".

'"But, of course," he broke off, "you are a scoffer, Petherick."

'"No, I am not a scoffer. Very far from it. Some of the men who have written on the subject are men whose testimony I would

accept unhesitatingly, and I should accord any medium recommended by them respect and credence. I presume that this Mrs Spragg is well vouched for?"

'Simon went into ecstasies over Mrs Spragg. She had been sent to him by Heaven. He had come across her at the watering place where he had spent two months in the summer. A chance meeting, with what a wonderful result!

'I went away very dissatisfied. My worst fears were realized, but I did not see what I could do. After a good deal of thought and deliberation I wrote to Philip Garrod who had, as I mentioned, just married the eldest Clode girl, Grace. I set the case before him - of course, in the most carefully guarded language. I pointed out the danger of such a woman gaining ascendency over the old man's mind. And I suggested that Mr Clode should be brought into contact if possible with some reputable spiritualistic circles. This, I thought, would not be a difficult matter for Philip Garrod to arrange.

'Garrod was prompt to act. He realized, which I did not, that Simon Clode's health was in a very precarious condition, and as a practical man he had no intention of letting his wife or her sister and brother be despoiled of the inheritance which was so rightly theirs. He came down the following week, bringing with him as a guest no other than the famous Professor Longman. Longman was a scientist of the first order, a man whose association with spiritualism compelled the latter to be treated with respect. Not only a brilliant scientist; he was a man of the utmost uprightness and probity.

'The result of the visit was most unfortunate. Longman, it seemed, had said very little while he was there. Two séances were held - under what conditions I do not know. Longman was non-committal all the time he was in the house, but after his departure he wrote a letter to Philip Garrod. In it he admitted that he had not been able to detect Mrs Spragg in fraud, nevertheless his private opinion was that the phenomena were not genuine. Mr Garrod, he said, was at liberty to show this letter to his uncle if he thought fit, and he suggested that he himself should put Mr Clode in touch with a medium of perfect integrity.

'Philip Garrod had taken this letter straight to his uncle, but the result was not what he had anticipated. The old man flew into a towering rage. It was all a plot to discredit Mrs Spragg who was a maligned and injured saint! She had told him already what bitter jealousy there was of her in this country. He pointed out that Longman was forced to say he had not detected fraud. Eurydice Spragg had come to him in the darkest hour of his life, had given him help and comfort, and he was prepared to espouse her cause even if it meant quarrelling with every member of his family. She was more to him than anyone else in the world.

'Philip Garrod was turned out of the house with scant ceremony; but as a result of his rage Clode's own health took a decided turn for the worse. For the last month he had kept to his bed pretty continuously, and now there seemed every possibility of his being a bedridden invalid until such time as death should release him. Two days after Philip's departure I received an urgent summons and went hurriedly over. Clode was in bed and looked even to my layman's eye very ill indeed. He was gasping for breath.

'"This is the end of me," he said. "I feel it. Don't argue with me, Petherick. But before I die I am going to do my duty by the one human being who has done more for me than anyone else in the world. I want to make a fresh will."

'"Certainly," I said, "if you will give me your instructions now I will draft out a will and send it to you."

'"That won't do," he said. "Why, man, I might not live through the night. I have written out what I want here," he fumbled under his pillow, "and you can tell me if it is right."

'He produced a sheet of paper with a few words roughly scribbled on it in pencil. It was quite simple and clear. He left J5000 to each of his nieces and nephew, and the residue of his vast property outright to Eurydice Spragg "in gratitude and admiration".

'I didn't like it, but there it was. There was no question of unsound mind, the old man was as sane as anybody.

'He rang the bell for two of the servants. They came promptly. The housemaid, Emma Gaunt, was a tall middle-aged woman who had been in service there for many years and who had nursed Clode devotedly. With her came the cook, a fresh buxom young woman of thirty. Simon Clode glared at them both from under his bushy eyebrows.

'"I want you to witness my will. Emma, get me my fountain pen."

'Emma went over obediently to the desk.

'"Not that left-hand drawer, girl," said old Simon irritably. "Don't you know it is in the right-hand one?"

'"No, it is here, sir," said Emma, producing it.

'"Then you must have put it away wrong last time," grumbled the old man. "I can't stand things not being kept in their proper places."

'Still grumbling he took the pen from her and copied his own rough draught, amended by me, on to a fresh piece of paper. Then he signed his name. Emma Gaunt and the cook, Lucy David, also signed. I folded the will up and put it into a long blue envelope. It was necessarily, you understand, written on an ordinary piece of paper.

'Just as the servants were turning to leave the room Clode lay back on the pillows with a gasp and a distorted face. I bent over him anxiously and Emma Gaunt came quickly back. However, the old man recovered and smiled weakly.

'"It is all right, Petherick, don't be alarmed. At any rate I shall die easy now having done what I wanted to."

'Emma Gaunt looked inquiringly at me as if to know whether she could leave the room. I nodded reassuringly and she went out - first stopping to pick up the blue envelope which I had let slip to the ground in my moment of anxiety. She handed it to me and I slipped it into my coat pocket and then she went out.

'"You are annoyed, Petherick," said Simon Clode. "You are prejudiced, like everybody else."

'"It is not a question of prejudice," I said. "Mrs Spragg may be all that she claims to be. I should see no objection to you leaving her a small legacy as a memento of gratitude; but I tell you frankly, Clode, that to disinherit your own flesh and blood in favour of a stranger is wrong."

'With that I turned to depart. I had done what I could and made my protest.

'Mary Clode came out of the drawing-room and met me in the hall.

'"You will have tea before you go, won't you? Come in here," and she led me into the drawing-room.

'A fire was burning on the hearth and the room looked cosy and cheerful. She relieved me of my overcoat just as her brother, George, came into the room. He took it from her and laid it across a chair at the far end of the room, then he came back to the fireside where we drank tea. During the meal a question arose about some point concerning the estate. Simon Clode said he didn't want to be bothered with it and had left it to George to decide. George was rather nervous about trusting to his own judgment. At my suggestion, we adjourned to the study after tea and I looked over the papers in question. Mary Clode accompanied us.

'A quarter of an hour later I prepared to take my departure. Remembering that I had left my overcoat in the drawing-room, I went there to fetch it. The only occupant of the room was Mrs Spragg, who was kneeling by the chair on which the overcoat lay. She seemed to be doing something rather unnecessary to the cretonne cover. She rose with a very red face as we entered.

'"That cover never did sit right," she complained. "My! I could make a better fit myself."

'I took up my overcoat and put it on. As I did so I noticed that the envelope containing the will had fallen out of the pocket and was lying on the floor. I replaced it in my pocket, said goodbye, and took my departure.

'On arrival at my office, I will describe my next actions carefully. I removed my overcoat and took the will from the pocket. I had it in my hand and was standing by the table when my clerk came in. Somebody wished to speak to me on the telephone, and the extension to my desk was out of order. I accordingly accompanied him to the outer office and remained there for about five minutes engaged in conversation over the telephone.

'When I emerged, I found my clerk waiting for me.

'"Mr Spragg has called to see you, sir. I showed him into your office.'

'I went there to find Mr Spragg sitting by the table. He rose and greeted me in a somewhat unctuous manner, then proceeded to a long discursive speech. In the main it seemed to be an uneasy justification of himself and his wife. He was afraid people were saying etc., etc. His wife had been known from her babyhood upwards for the pureness of her heart and her motives... and so on and so on. I was, I am afraid, rather curt with him. In the end I think he realized that his visit was not being a success and he left somewhat abruptly. I then remembered that I had left the will lying on the table. I took it, sealed the envelope, and wrote on it and put it away in the safe.

'Now I come to the crux of my story. Two months later Mr Simon Clode died. I will not go into long-winded discussions, I will just state the bare facts. *When the sealed envelope containing the will was opened it was found to contain a sheet of blank paper*.'

He paused, looking round the circle of interested faces. He smiled himself with a certain enjoyment.

'You appreciate the point, of course? For two months the sealed envelope had lain in my safe. It could not have been tampered with then. No, the time limit was a very short one. Between the moment the will was signed and my locking it away in the safe. Now who had had the opportunity, and to whose interests would it be to do so?

'I will recapitulate the vital points in a brief summary: The will was signed by Mr Clode, placed by me in an envelope - so far so good. It was then put by me in my overcoat pocket. That overcoat was taken from me by Mary and handed by her to George, who was in full sight of me whilst handling the coat. During the time that I was in the study Mrs Eurydice Spragg would have had plenty of time to extract the envelope from the coat pocket and read its contents and, as a matter of fact, finding the envelope on the ground and not in the pocket seemed to point to her having done so. But here we come to a curious point: she had the *opportunity* of substituting the blank paper, but no *motive*. The will was in her favour, and by substituting a blank piece of paper she despoiled herself of the heritage she had been so anxious to gain. The same applied to Mr Spragg. He, too, had the opportunity. He was left alone with the document in question for some two or three minutes in my office. But again, it was not to his advantage to do

so. So we are faced with this curious problem: the two people who had the *opportunity* of substituting a blank piece of paper had no *motive* for doing so, and the two people who had a *motive* had no *opportunity*. By the way, I would not exclude the housemaid, Emma Gaunt, from suspicion. She was devoted to her young master and mistress and detested the Spraggs. She would, I feel sure, have been quite equal to attempting the substitution if she had thought of it. But although she actually handled the envelope when she picked it up from the floor and handed it to me, she certainly had no opportunity of tampering with its contents and she could not have substituted another envelope by some sleight of hand (of which anyway she would not be capable) because the envelope in question was brought into the house by me and no one there would be likely to have a duplicate.'

He looked round, beaming on the assembly.

'Now, there is my little problem. I have, I hope, stated it clearly. I should be interested to hear your views.'

To everyone's astonishment Miss Marple gave vent to a long and prolonged chuckle. Something seemed to be amusing her immensely.

'What *is* the matter, Aunt Jane? Can't we share the joke?' said Raymond.

'I was thinking of little Tommy Symonds, a naughty little boy, I am afraid, but sometimes very amusing. One of those children with innocent childlike faces who are always up to some mischief or other. I was thinking how last week in Sunday School he said,

"Teacher, do you say yolk of eggs *is* white or yolk of eggs *are* white?" And Miss Durston explained that anyone would say "yolks of eggs *are* white, or yolk of egg *is* white" - and naughty Tommy said: "Well, *I* should say yolk of egg is yellow!" Very naughty of him, of course, and as old as the hills. I knew that one as a child.'

'Very funny, my dear Aunt Jane,' Raymond said gently, 'but surely that has nothing to do with the very interesting story that Mr Petherick has been telling us.'

'Oh yes, it has,' said Miss Marple. 'It is a catch! And so is Mr Petherick's story a catch. So like a lawyer! Ah, my dear old friend!' She shook a reproving head at him.

'I wonder if you really know,' said the lawyer with a twinkle.

Miss Marple wrote a few words on a piece of paper, folded them up and passed them across to him.

Mr Petherick unfolded the paper, read what was written on it and looked across at her appreciatively.

'My dear friend,' he said, 'is there anything you do not know?'

'I knew that as a child,' said Miss Marple. 'Played with it too.'

'I feel rather out of this,' said Sir Henry. 'I feel sure that Mr Petherick has some clever legerdemain up his sleeve.'

'Not at all,' said Mr Petherick. 'Not at all. It is a perfectly fair straightforward proposition. You must not pay any attention to Miss Marple. She has her own way of looking at things.'

'We *should* be able to arrive at the truth.' said Raymond West a trifle vexedly. 'The facts certainly seem plain enough. Five persons actually touched that envelope. The Spraggs clearly could have meddled with it but equally clearly they did not do so. There remains the other three. Now, when one sees the marvellous ways that conjurers have of doing a thing before one's eyes, it seems to me that the paper could have been extracted and another substituted by George Clode during the time he was carrying the overcoat to the far end of the room.'

'Well, *I* think it was the girl,' said Joyce. 'I think the housemaid ran down and told her what was happening and she got hold of another blue envelope and just substituted the one for the other.'

Sir Henry shook his head. 'I disagree with you both,' he said slowly. 'These sort of things are done by conjurers, and they are done on the stage and in novels, but I think they would be impossible to do in real life, especially under the shrewd eyes of a man like my friend Mr Petherick here. But I have an idea - it is only an idea and nothing more. We know that Professor Longman had just been down for a visit and that he said very little. It is only reasonable to suppose that the Spraggs may have been very anxious as to the result of that visit. If Simon Clode did not take them into his confidence, which is quite probable, they may have viewed his sending for Mr Petherick from quite another angle. They may have believed that Mr Clode had already made a will which benefited Eurydice Spragg and that this new one might be made for the express purpose of cutting her out as a result of Professor Longman's revelations, or alternatively, as you lawyers say, Philip Garrod had impressed on his uncle the claims of his own flesh and blood. In that case, suppose Mrs Spragg prepared

to effect a substitution. This she does, but Mr Petherick coming in at an unfortunate moment she had no time to read the real document and hastily destroys it by fire in case the lawyer should discover his loss.'

Joyce shook her head very decidedly.

'She would never burn it without reading it.'

'The solution is rather a weak one,' admitted Sir Henry. 'I suppose - er - Mr Petherick did not assist Providence himself.'

The suggestion was only a laughing one, but the little lawyer drew himself up in offended dignity.

'A most improper suggestion,' he said with some asperity.

'What does Dr Pender say?' asked Sir Henry.

'I cannot say I have any very clear ideas. I think the substitution must have been effected by either Mrs Spragg or her husband, possibly for the motive that Sir Henry suggests. If she did not read the will until after Mr Petherick had departed, she would then be in somewhat of a dilemma, since she could not own up to her action in the matter. Possibly she would place it among Mr Clode's papers where she thought it would be found after his death. But why it wasn't found I don't know. It *might* be a mere speculation this - that Emma Gaunt came across it - and out of misplaced devotion to her employers deliberately destroyed it.'

'I think Dr Pender's solution is the best of all,' said Joyce. 'Is it right, Mr Petherick?'

The lawyer shook his head.

'I will go on where I left off. I was dumbfounded and quite as much at sea as all of you are. I don't think I should ever have guessed the truth - probably not - but I was enlightened. It was cleverly done too.

'I went and dined with Philip Garrod about a month later and in the course of our after-dinner conversation he mentioned an interesting case that had recently come to his notice.'

'"I should like to tell you about it, Petherick, in confidence, of course."

'"Quite so," I replied.

'"A friend of mine who had expectations from one of his relatives was greatly distressed to find that that relative had thoughts of benefiting a totally unworthy person. My friend, I am afraid, is a trifle unscrupulous in his methods. There was a maid in the house who was greatly devoted to the interests of what I may call the legitimate party. My friend gave her very simple instructions. He gave her a fountain pen, duly filled. She was to place this in a drawer in the writing table in her master's room, but not the usual drawer where the pen was generally kept. If her master asked her to witness his signature to any document and asked her to bring him his pen, she was to bring him not the right one, but this one which was an exact duplicate of it. That was all she had to do. He gave her no other information. She was a devoted creature and she carried out his instructions faithfully."

'He broke off and said:

'"I hope I am not boring you, Petherick."

'"Not at all," I said. "I am keenly interested."

'Our eyes met.

'"My friend is, of course, not known to you," he said.

'"Of course not," I replied.

'"Then that is all right," said Philip Garrod.

'He paused then said smilingly, "You see the point? The pen was filled with what is commonly known as Evanescent Ink - a solution of starch in water to which a few drops of iodine has been added. This makes a deep blue-black fluid, but the writing disappears entirely in four or five days."'

Miss Marple chuckled.

'Disappearing ink,' she said. 'I know it. Many is the time I have played with it as a child.'

And she beamed round on them all, pausing to shake a finger once more at Mr Petherick.

'But all the same it's a catch, Mr Petherick,' she said. 'Just like a lawyer.'

The Thumbmark of St. Peter

'And now, Aunt Jane, it is up to you,' said Raymond West.

'Yes, Aunt Jane, we are expecting something really spicy,' chimed in Joyce Lempriére.

'Now, you are laughing at me, my dears,' said Miss Marple placidly. 'You think that because I have lived in this out-of-the-way spot all my life I am not likely to have had any very interesting experiences.'

'God forbid that I should ever regard village life as peaceful and uneventful,' said Raymond with fervour. 'Not after the horrible revelations we have heard from you! The cosmopolitan world seems a mild and peaceful place compared with St Mary Mead.'

'Well, my dear,' said Miss Marple, 'human nature is much the same everywhere, and, of course, one has opportunities of observing it at close quarters in a village.'

'You really are unique, Aunt Jane,' cried Joyce. 'I hope you don't mind me calling you Aunt Jane?' she added. 'I don't know why I do it.'

'Don't you, my dear?' said Miss Marple.

She looked up for a moment or two with something quizzical in her glance, which made the blood flame to the girl's cheeks. Raymond West fidgeted and cleared his throat in a somewhat embarrassed manner.

Miss Marple looked at them both and smiled again, and bent her attention once more to her knitting.

'It is true, of course, that I have lived what is called a very uneventful life, but I have had a lot of experience in solving

different little problems that have arisen. Some of them have been really quite ingenious, but it would be no good telling them to you, because they are about such unimportant things that you would not be interested - just things like: Who cut the meshes of Mrs Jones's string bag? and why Mrs Sims only wore her new fur coat once. Very interesting things, really, to any student of human nature. No, the only experience I can remember that would be of interest to you is the one about my poor niece Mabel's husband.

'It is about ten or fifteen years ago now, and happily it is all over and done with, and everyone has forgotten about it. People's memories are very short - a lucky thing, I always think.'

Miss Marple paused and murmured to herself:

'I must just count this row. The decreasing is a little awkward. One, two, three, four, five, and then three purl; that is right. Now, what was I saying? Oh, yes, about poor Mabel.

'Mabel was my niece. A nice girl, really a very nice girl, but just a trifle what one might call *silly*. Rather fond of being melodramatic and of saying a great deal more than she meant whenever she was upset. She married a Mr Denman when she was twenty-two, and I am afraid it was not a very happy marriage. I had hoped very much that the attachment would not come to anything, for Mr Denman was a man of very violent temper - not the kind of man who would be patient with Mabel's foibles - and I also learned that there was insanity in his family. However, girls were just as obstinate then as they are now, and as they always will be. And Mabel married him.

'I didn't see very much of her after her marriage. She came to stay with me once or twice, and they asked me there several times, but, as a matter of fact, I am not very fond of staying in other people's houses, and I always managed to make some excuse. They had been married ten years when Mr Denman died suddenly. There were no children, and he left all his money to Mabel. I wrote, of course, and offered to come to Mabel if she wanted me; but she wrote back a very sensible letter, and I gathered that she was not altogether overwhelmed by grief. I thought that was only natural, because I knew they had not been getting on together for some time. It was not until about three months afterwards that I got a most hysterical letter from Mabel, begging me to come to her, and saying that things were going from bad to worse, and she couldn't stand it much longer.

'So, of course,' continued Miss Marple, 'I put Clara on board wages and sent the plate and the King Charles tankard to the bank, and I went off at once. I found Mabel in a very nervous state. The house, Myrtle Dene, was a fairly large one, very comfortably furnished. There was a cook and a house-parlourmaid as well as a nurse-attendant to look after old Mr Denman, Mabel's husband's father, who was what is called "not quite right in the head". Quite peaceful and well behaved, but distinctly odd at times. As I say, there was insanity in the family.

'I was really shocked to see the change in Mabel. She was a mass of nerves, twitching all over, yet I had the greatest difficulty in making her tell me what the trouble was. I got at it, as one always does get at these things, indirectly. I asked her about some friends of hers she was always mentioning in her letters, the Gallaghers. She said, to my surprise, that she hardly ever saw

them nowadays. Other friends whom I mentioned elicited the same remark. I spoke to her then of the folly of shutting herself up and brooding, and especially of the silliness of cutting herself adrift from her friends. Then she came bursting out with the truth.

'"It is not my doing, it is theirs. There is not a soul in the place who will speak to me now. When I go down the High Street they all get out of the way so that they shan't have to meet me or speak to me. I am like a kind of leper. It is awful, and I can't bear it any longer. I shall have to sell the house and go abroad. Yet why should I be driven away from a home like this? I have done nothing."

'I was more disturbed than I can tell you. I was knitting a comforter for old Mrs Hay at the time, and in my perturbation I dropped two stitches and never discovered it until long after.

'"My dear Mabel," I said, "you amaze me. But what is the cause of all this?"

'Even as a child Mabel was always difficult. I had the greatest difficulty in getting her to give me a straightforward answer to my question. She would only say vague things about wicked talk and idle people who had nothing better to do than gossip, and people who put ideas into other people's heads.

'"That is all quite clear to me," I said. "There is evidently some story being circulated about you. But what that story is you must know as well as anyone. And you are going to tell me."

'"It is so wicked," moaned Mabel.

'"Of course it is wicked," I said briskly. "There is nothing that you can tell me about people's minds that would astonish or surprise me. Now, Mabel, will you tell me in plain English what people are saying about you?"

'Then it all came out.

'It seemed that Geoffrey Denman's death, being quite sudden and unexpected, gave rise to various rumours. In fact - and in plain English as I had put it to her - people were saying that she had poisoned her husband.

'Now, as I expect you know, there is nothing more cruel than talk, and there is nothing more difficult to combat When people say things behind your back there is nothing you can refute or deny, and the rumours go on growing and growing, and no one can stop them. I was quite certain of one thing: Mabel was quite incapable of poisoning anyone. And I didn't see why life should be ruined for her and her home made unbearable just because in all probability she had been doing something silly and foolish.

'"There is no smoke without fire," I said. "Now, Mabel, you have got to tell me what started people off on this tack. There must have been something."

'Mabel was very incoherent, and declared there was nothing - nothing at all, except, of course, that Geoffrey's death had been very sudden. He had seemed quite well at supper that evening, and had taken violently ill in the night. The doctor had been sent for, but the poor man had died a few minutes after the doctor's arrival. Death had been thought to be the result of eating poisoned mushrooms.

'"Well," I said, "I suppose a sudden death of that kind might start tongues wagging, but surely not without some additional facts. Did you have a quarrel with Geoffrey or anything of that kind?"

'She admitted that she had had a quarrel with him on the preceding morning at breakfast time.

'"And the servants heard it, I suppose?" I asked.

'"They weren't in the room."

'"No, my dear," I said, "but they probably were fairly near the door outside."

'I knew the carrying power of Mabel's high-pitched hysterical voice only too well. Geoffrey Denman, too, was a man given to raising his voice loudly when angry.

'"What did you quarrel about?" I asked.

'"Oh, the usual things. It was always the same things over and over again. Some little thing would start us off, and then Geoffrey became impossible and said abominable things, and I told him what I thought of him."

'"There had been a lot of quarrelling, then?" I asked.

'"It wasn't my fault - "

'"My dear child," I said, "it doesn't matter whose fault it was. That is not what we are discussing. In a place like this everybody's private affairs are more or less public property. You and your husband were always quarrelling. You had a particularly bad

quarrel one morning, and that night your husband died suddenly and mysteriously. Is that all, or is there anything else?"

'"I don't know what you mean by anything else," said Mabel sullenly.

'"Just what I say, my dear. If you have done anything silly, don't for Heaven's sake keep it back now. I only want to do what I can to help you."

'"Nothing and nobody can help me." said Mabel wildly, "except death."

'"Have a little more faith in Providence, dear," I said. "Now then, Mabel, I know perfectly well there *is* something else that you are keeping back."

'I always did know, even when she was a child, when she was not telling me the whole truth. It took a long time, but I got it out at last. She had gone down to the chemist's that morning and had bought some arsenic. She had had, of course, to sign the book for it. Naturally, the chemist had talked.

'"Who is your doctor?" I asked.

'"Dr Rawlinson."

'I knew him by sight. Mabel had pointed him out to me the other day. To put it in perfectly plain language he was what I would describe as an old dodderer. I have had too much experience of life to believe in the infallibility of doctors. Some of them are clever men and some of them are not, and half the time the best

of them don't know what is the matter with you. I have no truck with doctors and their medicines myself.

'I thought things over, and then I put my bonnet on and went to call on Dr Rawlinson. He was just what I had thought him - a nice old man, kindly, vague, and so short-sighted as to be pitiful, slightly deaf, and, withal, touchy and sensitive to the last degree. He was on his high horse at once when I mentioned Geoffrey Denman's death, talked for a long time about various kinds of fungi, edible and otherwise. He had questioned the cook, and she had admitted that one or two of the mushrooms cooked had been "a little queer", but as the shop had sent them she thought they must be all right. The more she had thought about them since, the more she was convinced that their appearance was unusual.

'"She would be," I said. "They would start by being quite like mushrooms in appearance, and they would end by being orange with purple spots. There is nothing that class cannot remember if it tries."

'I gathered that Denman had been past speech when the doctor got to him. He was incapable of swallowing, and had died within a few minutes. The doctor seemed perfectly satisfied with the certificate he had given. But how much of that was obstinacy and how much of it was genuine belief I could not be sure.

'I went straight home and asked Mabel quite frankly why she had bought arsenic.

'"You must have had some idea in your mind," I pointed out.

'Mabel burst into tears. "I wanted to make away with myself," she moaned. "I was too unhappy. I thought I would end it all."

'"Have you the arsenic still?" I asked.

'"No, I threw it away."

'I sat there turning things over and over in my mind.

'"What happened when he was taken ill? Did he call you?"

'"No." She shook her head. "He rang the bell violently. He must have rung several times. At last Dorothy, the house-parlourmaid, heard it, and she waked the cook up, and they came down. When Dorothy saw him she was frightened. He was rambling and delirious. She left the cook with him and came rushing to me. I got up and went to him. Of course I saw at once he was dreadfully ill. Unfortunately Brewster, who looks after old Mr Denman, was away for the night, so there was no one who knew what to do. I sent Dorothy off for the doctor, and cook and I stayed with him, but after a few minutes I couldn't bear it any longer; it was too dreadful. I ran away back to my room and locked the door."

'"Very selfish and unkind of you," I said; "and no doubt that conduct of yours has done nothing to help you since, you may be sure of that. Cook will have repeated it everywhere. Well, well, this is a bad business."

'Next I spoke to the servants. The cook wanted to tell me about the mushrooms, but I stopped her. I was tired of these mushrooms. Instead, I questioned both of them very closely about their master's condition on that night. They both agreed that he seemed to be in great agony, that he was unable to

swallow, and he could only speak in a strangled voice, and when he did speak it was only rambling - nothing sensible.

'"What did he say when he was rambling?" I asked curiously.

'"Something about some fish, wasn't it?" said the cook turning to the other.

'Dorothy agreed.

'"A heap of fish," she said; "some nonsense like that. I could see at once he wasn't in his right mind, poor gentleman."

'There didn't seem to be any sense to be made out of that. As a last resource I went up to see Brewster, who was a gaunt, middle-aged woman of about fifty.

'"It is a pity that I wasn't here that night," she said, "Nobody seems to have tried to do anything for him until the doctor came."

'"I suppose he was delirious," I said doubtfully, "but that is not a symptom of ptomaine poisoning, is it?"

'"It depends," said Brewster.

'I asked her how her patient was getting on.

'She shook her head.

'"He is pretty bad," she said.

'"Weak?"

'"Oh no, he is strong enough physically - all but his eyesight. That is failing badly. He may outlive all of us, but his mind is failing very

fast now. I have already told both Mr and Mrs Denman that he ought to be in an institution, but Mrs Denman wouldn't hear of it at any price."

'I will say for Mabel that she always had a kindly heart.

'Well, there the thing was. I thought it over in every aspect, and at last I decided that there was only one thing to be done. In view of the rumours that were going about, permission must be applied for to exhume the body, and a proper post-mortem must be made and lying tongues quietened once and for all. Mabel, of course, made a fuss, mostly on sentimental grounds - disturbing the dead man in his peaceful grave, etc., etc. - but I was firm.

'I won't make a long story of this part of it. We got the order and they did the autopsy, or whatever they call it, but the result was not so satisfactory as it might have been. There was no trace of arsenic - that was all to the good - but the actual words of the report were that *there was nothing to show by what means deceased had come to his death.*

'So, you see, that didn't lead us out of trouble altogether. People went on talking - about rare poisons impossible to detect, and rubbish of that sort. I had seen the pathologist who had done the post-mortem, and I had asked him several questions, though he tried his best to get out of answering most of them; but I got out of him that he considered it highly unlikely that the poisoned mushrooms were the cause of death. An idea was simmering in my mind, and I asked him what poison, if any, could have been employed to obtain that result. He made a long explanation to me, most of which, I must admit, I did not follow, but it amounted to

this: That death might have been due to some strong vegetable alkaloid.

'The idea I had was this: Supposing the taint of insanity was in Geoffrey Denman's blood also, might he not have made away with himself? He had, at one period of his life, studied medicine, and he would have a good knowledge of poisons and their effects.

'I didn't think it sounded very likely, but it was the only thing I could think of. And I was nearly at my wits' end, I can tell you. Now, I dare say you modern young people will laugh, but when I am in really bad trouble I always say a little prayer to myself - anywhere, when I am walking along the street, or at a bazaar. And I always get an answer. It may be some trifling thing, apparently quite unconnected with the subject, but there it is. I had that text pinned over my bed when I was a little girl: *Ask and you shall receive.* On the morning that I am telling you about, I was walking along the High Street, and I was praying hard. I shut my eyes, and when I opened them, what do you think was the first thing that I saw?'

Five faces with varying degrees of interest were turned to Miss Marple. It may be safely assumed, however, that no one would have guessed the answer to the question right.

'I saw,' said Miss Marple impressively, '*the window of the fishmonger's shop.* There was only one thing in it, a *fresh haddock*.'

She looked round triumphantly.

'Oh, my God!' said Raymond West. 'An answer to prayer - a fresh haddock!'

'Yes, Raymond,' said Miss Marple severely, 'and there is no need to be profane about it. The hand of God is everywhere. The first thing I saw were the black spots - the marks of St Peter's thumb. That is the legend, you know. St Peter's thumb. And that brought things home to me. I needed faith, the ever true faith of St Peter. I connected the two things together, faith - and fish.'

Sir Henry blew his nose rather hurriedly. Joyce bit her lip.

'Now what did that bring to my mind? Of course, both the cook and house-parlourmaid mentioned fish as being one of the things spoken of by the dying man. I was convinced, absolutely convinced, that there was some solution of the mystery to be found in these words. I went home determined to get to the bottom of the matter.'

She paused.

'Has it ever occurred to you,' the old lady went on, 'how much we go by what is called, I believe, the context? There is a place on Dartmoor called Grey Wethers. If you were talking to a farmer there and mentioned Grey Wethers, he would probably conclude that you were speaking of these stone circles, yet it is possible that you might be speaking of the atmosphere; and in the same way, if you were meaning the stone circles, an outsider, hearing a fragment of the conversation, might think you meant the weather. So when we repeat a conversation, we don't, as a rule, repeat the actual words; we put in some other words that seem to us to mean exactly the same thing.

'I saw both the cook and Dorothy separately. I asked the cook if she was quite sure that her master had really mentioned a heap of fish. She said she was quite sure.

'"Were these his exact words," I asked, "or did he mention some particular kind of fish?"

'"That's it," said the cook; "it was some particular kind of fish, but I can't remember what now. A heap of - now what was it? Not any of the fish you send to table. Would it be a perch now - or pike? No. It didn't begin with a P."

'Dorothy also recalled that her master had mentioned some special kind of fish. "Some outlandish kind of fish it was," she said.

'"A pile of - now what was it?"

'"Did he say heap or pile?" I asked.

'"I think he said pile. But there, I really can't be sure - it's so hard to remember the actual words, isn't it, Miss, especially when they don't seem to make sense. But now I come to think of it, I am pretty sure that it was a pile, and the fish began with C; but it wasn't a cod or a crayfish."

'The next part is where I am really proud of myself,' said Miss Marple, 'because, of course, I don't know anything about drugs - nasty, dangerous things I call them. I have got an old recipe of my grandmother's for tansy tea that is worth any amount of your drugs. But I knew that there were several medical volumes in the house, and in one of them there was an index of drugs. You see,

my idea was that Geoffrey had taken some particular poison, and was trying to say the name of it.

'Well, I looked down the list of H's, beginning He. Nothing there that sounded likely; then I began on the P's, and almost at once I came to - what do you think?'

She looked round, postponing her moment of triumph.

'Pilocarpine. Can't you understand a man who could hardly speak trying to drag that word out? What would that sound like to a cook who had never heard the word? Wouldn't it convey the impression "pile of carp"?'

'By Jove!' said Sir Henry.

'I should never have hit upon that,' said Dr Pender.

'Most interesting,' said Mr Petherick. 'Really most interesting.'

'I turned quickly to the page indicated in the index. I read about pilocarpine and its effect on the eyes and other things that didn't seem to have any bearing on the case, but at last I came to a most significant phrase: *Has been tried with success as an antidote for atropine poisoning.*

'I can't tell you the light that dawned upon me then. I never had thought it likely that Geoffrey Denman would commit suicide. No, this new solution was not only possible, but I was absolutely sure it was the correct one, because all the pieces fitted in logically.'

'I am not going to try to guess,' said Raymond. 'Go on. Aunt Jane, and tell us what was so startlingly clear to you.'

'I don't know anything about medicine, of course,' said Miss Marple, 'but I did happen to know this, that when my eyesight was failing, the doctor ordered me drops with atropine sulphate in them. I went straight upstairs to old Mr Denman's room. I didn't beat about the bush.

'"Mr Denman," I said, "I know everything. Why did you poison your son?"

'He looked at me for a minute or two - rather a handsome old man he was, in his way - and then he burst out laughing. It was one of the most vicious laughs I have ever heard. I can assure you it made my flesh creep. I had only heard anything like it once before, when poor Mrs Jones went off her head.

'"Yes," he said, "I got even with Geoffrey. I was too clever for Geoffrey. He was going to put me away, was he? Have me shut up in an asylum? I heard them talking about it. Mabel is a good girl - Mabel stuck up for me, but I knew she wouldn't be able to stand up against Geoffrey. In the end he would have his own way; he always did. But I settled him - I settled my kind, loving son! Ha, ha! I crept down in the night. It was quite easy. Brewster was away. My dear son was asleep; he had a glass of water by the side of his bed; he always woke up in the middle of the night and drank it off. I poured it away - ha, ha! - and I emptied the bottle of eyedrops into the glass. He would wake up and swill it down before he knew what it was. There was only a table-spoonful of it - quite enough, quite enough. And so he did! They came to me in the morning and broke it to me very gently. They were afraid it would upset me. Ha! Ha! Ha! Ha! Ha!"

'Well,' said Miss Marple, 'that is the end of the story. Of course, the poor old man was put in an asylum. He wasn't really responsible for what he had done, and the truth was known, and everyone was sorry for Mabel and could not do enough to make up to her for the unjust suspicions they had had. But if it hadn't been for Geoffrey realizing what the stuff was he had swallowed and trying to get everybody to get hold of the antidote without delay, it might never have been found out. I believe there are very definite symptoms with atropine - dilated pupils of the eyes, and all that; but, of course, as I have said, Dr Rawlinson was very shortsighted, poor old man. And in the same medical book which I went on reading - and some of it was most interesting - it gave the symptoms of ptomaine poisoning and atropine, and they are not unlike. But I can assure you I have never seen a pile of fresh haddock without thinking of the thumb mark of St Peter.'

There was a very long pause.

'My dear friend,' said Mr Petherick. 'My very dear friend, you really are amazing.'

'I shall recommend Scotland Yard to come to you for advice,' said Sir Henry.

'Well, at all events, Aunt Jane,' said Raymond, 'there is one thing that you don't know.'

'Oh, yes, I do, dear,' said Miss Marple. 'It happened just before dinner, didn't it? When you took Joyce out to admire the sunset. It is a very favourite place, that. There by the jasmine hedge. That is where the milkman asked Annie if he could put up the banns.'

'Dash it all, Aunt Jane,' said Raymond, 'don't spoil all the romance. Joyce and I aren't like the milkman and Annie.'

'That is where you make a mistake, dear,' said Miss Marple. 'Everybody is very much alike, really. But fortunately, perhaps, they don't realize it.'

The Blue Geranium

'When I was down here last year -' said Sir Henry Clithering, and stopped.

His hostess, Mrs Bantry, looked at him curiously.

The Ex-Commissioner of Scotland Yard was staying with old friends of his, Colonel and Mrs Bantry, who lived near St Mary Mead.

Mrs Bantry, pen in hand, had just asked his advice as to who should be invited to make a sixth guest at dinner that evening.

'Yes?' said Mrs Bantry encouragingly. 'When you were here last year?'

'Tell me,' said Sir Henry, 'do you know a Miss Marple?'

Mrs Bantry was surprised. It was the last thing she had expected.

'Know Miss Marple? Who doesn't! The typical old maid of fiction. Quite a dear, but hopelessly behind the times. Do you mean you would like me to ask *her* to dinner?'

'You are surprised?'

'A little, I must confess. I should hardly have thought you - but perhaps there's an explanation?'

'The explanation is simple enough. When I was down here last year we got into the habit of discussing unsolved mysteries - there were five or six of us - Raymond West, the novelist, started it. We each supplied a story to which we knew the answer, but nobody else did. It was supposed to be an exercise in the deductive faculties - to see who could get nearest the truth.'

'Well?'

'Like in the old story - we hardly realized that Miss Marple was playing; but we were very polite about it - didn't want to hurt the old dear's feelings. And now comes the cream of the jest. The old lady outdid us every time!'

'What?'

'I assure you - straight to the truth like a homing pigeon.'

'But how extraordinary! Why, dear old Miss Marple has hardly ever been out of St Mary Mead.'

'Ah! But according to her, that has given her unlimited opportunities of observing human nature - under the microscope as it were.'

'I suppose there's something in that,' conceded Mrs Bantry. 'One would at least know the petty side of people. But I don't think we have any really exciting criminals in our midst. I think we must try

her with Arthur's ghost story after dinner. I'd be thankful if she'd find a solution to that.'

'I didn't know that Arthur believed in ghosts?'

'Oh! he doesn't. That's what worries him so. And it happened to a friend of his, George Pritchard - a most prosaic person. It's really rather tragic for poor George. Either this extraordinary story is true - or else - '

'Or else what?'

Mrs Bantry did not answer. After a minute or two she said irrelevantly:

'You know, I like George - everyone does. One can't believe that he - but people do do such extraordinary things.'

Sir Henry nodded. He knew, better than Mrs Bantry, the extraordinary things that people did.

So it came about that that evening Mrs Bantry looked round her dinner table (shivering a little as she did so, because the dining-room, like most English dining-rooms, was extremely cold) and fixed her gaze on the very upright old lady sitting on her husband's right. Miss Marple wore black lace mittens; an old lace fichu was draped round her shoulders and another piece of lace surmounted her white hair. She was talking animatedly to the elderly doctor, Dr Lloyd, about the Workhouse and the suspected shortcomings of the District Nurse.

Mrs Bantry marvelled anew. She even wondered whether Sir Henry had been making an elaborate joke - but there seemed no

point in that. Incredible that what he had said could be really true.

Her glance went on and rested affectionately on her red-faced, broad-shouldered husband as he sat talking horses to Jane Helier, the beautiful and popular actress. Jane, more beautiful (if that were possible) off the stage than on, opened enormous blue eyes and murmured at discreet intervals: 'Really?' 'Oh fancy!' 'How extraordinary!' She knew nothing whatever about horses and cared less.

'Arthur,' said Mrs Bantry, 'you're boring poor Jane to distraction. Leave horses alone and tell her your ghost story instead. You know... George Pritchard.'

'Eh, Dolly? Oh! but I don't know- '

'Sir Henry wants to hear it too. I was telling him something about it this morning. It would be interesting to hear what everyone has to say about it.'

'Oh do!' said Jane. 'I love ghost stories.'

'Well - ' Colonel Bantry hesitated. 'I've never believed much in the supernatural. But this -

'I don't think any of you know George Pritchard. He's one of the best. His wife - well, she's dead now, poor woman. I'll just say this much: she didn't give George any too easy a time when she was alive. She was one of those semi-invalids - I believe she had really something wrong with her, but whatever it was she played it for all it was worth. She was capricious, exacting, unreasonable. She complained from morning to night. George was expected to wait

on her hand and foot and everything he did was always wrong and he got cursed for it. Most men, I'm fully convinced, would have hit her over the head with a hatchet long ago. Eh, Dolly, isn't that so?'

'She was a dreadful woman,' said Mrs Bantry with conviction. 'If George Pritchard had brained her with a hatchet and there had been any woman on the jury, he would have been triumphantly acquitted.'

'I don't quite know how this business started. George was rather vague about it. I gather Mrs Pritchard had always had a weakness for fortune tellers, palmists, clairvoyants - anything of that sort. George didn't mind. If she found amusement in it, well and good. But he refused to go into rhapsodies himself, and that was another grievance.

'A succession of hospital nurses was always passing through the house, Mrs Pritchard usually becoming dissatisfied with them after a few weeks. One young nurse had been very keen on this fortune telling stunt, and for a time Mrs Pritchard had been very fond of her. Then she suddenly fell out with her and insisted on her going. She had back another nurse who had been with her previously - an older woman, experienced and tactful in dealing with a neurotic patient. Nurse Copling, according to George, was a very good sort - a sensible woman to talk to. She put up with Mrs Pritchard's tantrums and nervestorms with complete indifference.

'Mrs Pritchard always lunched upstairs, and it was usual at lunch time for George and the nurse to come to some arrangement for the afternoon. Strictly speaking, the nurse went off from two to

four, but 'to oblige' as the phrase goes, she would sometimes take her time off after tea if George wanted to be free for the afternoon. On this occasion, she mentioned that she was going to see a sister at Golders Green and might be a little late returning. George's face fell, for he had arranged to play a round of golf. Nurse Copling, however, reassured him.

'"We'll neither of us be missed, Mr Pritchard." A twinkle came into her eye. "Mrs Pritchard's going to have more exciting company than ours."

'"Who's that?"

'"Wait a minute," Nurse Copling's eyes twinkled more than ever. "Let me get it right. *Zarida, Psychic Reader of the Future*."

'"Oh Lord!" groaned George. "That's a new one, isn't it?"

'"Quite new. I believe my predecessor, Nurse Carstairs, sent her along. Mrs Pritchard hasn't seen her yet. She made me write, fixing an appointment for this afternoon."

'"Well, at any rate, I shall get my golf," said George, and he went off with the kindliest feelings towards Zarida, the Reader of the Future.

'On his return to the house, he found Mrs Pritchard in a state of great agitation. She was, as usual, lying on her invalid couch, and she had a bottle of smelling salts in her hand which she sniffed at frequent intervals.

'"George," she exclaimed. "What did I tell you about this house? The moment I came into it, I *felt* there was something wrong! Didn't I tell you so at the time?"

'Repressing his desire to reply, "You always do," George said, "No, I can't say I remember it."

'"You never do remember anything that has to do with me. Men are all extraordinarily callous - but I really believe that you are even more insensitive than most."

'"Oh, come now, Mary dear, that's not fair."

'"Well, as I was telling you, this woman *knew* at once! She - she actually blenched - if you know what I mean - as she came in at the door, and she said: "There is evil here - evil and danger. I feel it.'"

'Very unwisely George laughed.

'"Well, you have had your money's worth this afternoon."

'His wife closed her eyes and took a long sniff from her smelling bottle.

'"How you hate me! You would jeer and laugh if I were dying."

"George protested and after a minute or two she went on.

'"You may laugh, but I shall tell you the whole thing. This house is definitely dangerous to me - the woman said so."

'George's formerly kind feeling towards Zarida underwent a change. He knew his wife was perfectly capable of insisting on moving to a new house if the caprice got hold of her.

'"What else did she say?" he asked.

'"She couldn't tell me very much. She was so upset. One thing she did say. I had some violets in a glass. She pointed at them and cried out:

'"Take those away. No blue flowers - never have blue flowers. Blue *flowers are fatal to you - remember that.*"'

'"And you know," added Mrs Pritchard, "I always have told you that blue as a colour is repellent to me. I feel a natural instinctive sort of warning against it."

'George was much too wise to remark that he had never heard her say so before. Instead he asked what the mysterious Zarida was like. Mrs Pritchard entered with gusto upon a description.

'"Black hair in coiled knobs over her ears - her eyes were half closed - great black rims round them - she had a black veil over her mouth and chin - and she spoke in a kind of singing voice with a marked foreign accent - Spanish, I think - "

'"In fact all the usual stock-in-trade," said George cheerfully.

'His wife immediately closed her eyes.

'"I feel extremely ill," she said. "Ring for nurse. Unkindness upsets me, as you know only too well."

'It was two days later that Nurse Copling came to George with a grave face.

'"Will you come to Mrs Pritchard, please. She has had a letter which upsets her greatly."

'He found his wife with the letter in her hand. She held it out to him.

'"Read it," she said.

'George read it. It was on heavily scented paper, and the writing was big and black.

'*I have seen the future. Be warned before it is too late. Beware of the Full Moon. The Blue Primrose means Warning; the Blue Hollyhock means Danger; the Blue Geranium means Death...*

'Just about to burst out laughing, George caught Nurse Copling's eye. She made a quick warning gesture. He said rather awkwardly, "The woman's probably trying to frighten you, Mary. Anyway there aren't such things as blue primroses and blue geraniums."

'But Mrs Pritchard began to cry and say her days were numbered. Nurse Copling came out with George upon the landing.

'"Of all the silly tomfoolery," he burst out.

'"I suppose it is."

'Something in the nurse's tone struck him, and he stared at her in amazement.

'"Surely, nurse, you don't believe - "

'"No, no, Mr Pritchard. I don't believe in reading the future - that's nonsense. What puzzles me is the *meaning* of this. Fortune-tellers are usually out for what they can get. But this woman seems to be frightening Mrs Pritchard with no advantage to herself. I can't see the point. There's another thing - "

'"Yes?"

'"Mrs Prichard says that something about Zarida was faintly familiar to her."

'"Well?"

'"Well, I don't like it, Mr Pritchard, that's all."

'"I didn't know you were so superstitious, nurse."

'"I'm not superstitious; but I know when a thing is fishy."

'It was about four days after this that the first incident happened. To explain it to you, I shall have to describe Mrs Pritchard's room - '

'You'd better let me do that,' interrupted Mrs Bantry. 'It was papered with one of those new wallpapers where you apply clumps of flowers to make a kind of herbaceous border. The effect is almost like being in a garden - though, of course, the flowers are all wrong. I mean they simply couldn't be in bloom all at the same time - '

'Don't let a passion for horticultural accuracy run away with you, Dolly,' said her husband. 'We all know you're an enthusiastic gardener.'

'Well, it *is* absurd,' protested Mrs Bantry. 'To have bluebells and daffodils and lupins and hollyhocks and Michaelmas daisies all grouped together.'

'Most unscientific,' said Sir Henry. 'But to proceed with the story.'

'Well, among these massed flowers were primroses, clumps of yellow and pink primroses and - oh go on, Arthur, this is your story - '

Colonel Bantry took up the tale.

'Mrs Pritchard rang her bell violently one morning. The household came running - thought she was in extremis; not at all. She was violently excited and pointing at the wallpaper; and there sure enough was *one blue primrose* in the midst of the others... '

'Oh!' said Miss Helier, 'how creepy!'

'The question was: Hadn't the blue primrose always been there? That was George's suggestion and the nurse's. But Mrs Pritchard wouldn't have it at any price. She had never noticed it till that very morning and the night before had been full moon. She was very upset about it.'

'I met George Pritchard that same day and he told me about it,' said Mrs Bantry. 'I went to see Mrs Pritchard and did my best to ridicule the whole thing; but without success. I came away really concerned, and I remember I met Jean Instow and told her about

it. Jean is a queer girl. She said, "So she's really upset about it?" I told her that I thought the woman was perfectly capable of dying of fright - she was really abnormally superstitious.

'I remember Jean rather startled me with what she said next. She said, "Well, that might be all for the best, mightn't it?" And she said it so coolly, in so matter-of-fact a tone that I was really - well, shocked. Of course I know it's done nowadays - to be brutal and outspoken; but I never get used to it. Jean smiled at me rather oddly and said, "You don't like my saying that - but it's true. What use is Mrs Pritchard's life to her? None at all; and it's hell for George Pritchard. To have his wife frightened out of existence would be the best thing that could happen to him." I said, "George is most awfully good to her always." And she said, "Yes, he deserves a reward, poor dear. He's a very attractive person, George Pritchard. The last nurse thought so - the pretty one - what was her name? Carstairs. That was the cause of the row between her and Mrs P."

'Now I didn't like hearing Jean say that. Of course one had *wondered* - '

Mrs Bantry paused significantly.

'Yes, dear,' said Miss Marple placidly. 'One always does. Is Miss Instow a pretty girl? I suppose she plays golf?'

'Yes. She's good at all games. And she's nice looking, attractive-looking, very fair with a healthy skin, and nice steady blue eyes. Of course we always have felt that she and George Pritchard - I mean if things had been different - they are so well suited to one another.'

'And they were friends?' asked Miss Marple.

'Oh yes. Great friends.'

'Do you think, Dolly,' said Colonel Bantry plaintively, 'that I might be allowed to go on with my story?'

'Arthur,' said Mrs Bantry resignedly, 'wants to get back to his ghosts.'

'I had the rest of the story from George himself,' went on the colonel. 'There's no doubt that Mrs Pritchard got the wind up badly towards the end of the next month. She marked off on a calendar the day when the moon would be full, and on that night she had both the nurse and then George into her room and made them study the wallpaper carefully. There were pink hollyhocks and red ones, but there were no blue amongst them. Then when George left the room she locked the door - '

'And in the morning there was a large blue hollyhock,' said Miss Helier joyfully.

'Quite right,' said Colonel Bantry. 'Or at any rate, nearly right. One flower of a hollyhock just above her head had turned blue. It staggered George; and of course the more it staggered him the more he refused to take the thing seriously. He insisted that the whole thing was some kind of practical joke. He ignored the evidence of the locked door and the fact that Mrs Pritchard discovered the change before anyone - even Nurse Copling - was admitted.

'It staggered George; and it made him unreasonable. His wife wanted to leave the house, and he wouldn't let her. He was

inclined to believe in the supernatural for the first time, but he wasn't going to admit it. He usually gave in to his wife, but this time he wouldn't. Mary was not to make a fool of herself, he said. The whole thing was the most infernal nonsense.

'And so the next month sped away. Mrs Pritchard made less protest than one would have imagined. I think she was superstitious enough to believe that she couldn't escape her fate. She repeated again and again: "The blue primrose - warning. The blue hollyhock - danger. The blue geranium - *death*." And she would lie looking at the clump of pinky-red geraniums nearest her bed.

'The whole business was pretty nervy. Even the nurse caught the infection. She came to George two days before full moon and begged him to take Mrs Pritchard away. George was angry.

'"If all the flowers on that damned wall turned into blue devils it couldn't kill anyone!" he shouted.

'"It might. Shock has killed people before now."

'"Nonsense," said George.

George has always been a shade pig-headed. You can't drive him. I believe he had a secret idea that his wife worked the changes herself and that it was all some morbid hysterical plan of hers.

'Well, the fatal night came. Mrs Pritchard locked the door as usual. She was very calm - in almost an exalted state of mind. The nurse was worried by her state - wanted to give her a stimulant,

an injection of strychnine, but Mrs Pritchard refused. In a way, I believe, she was enjoying herself. George said she was.'

'I think that's quite possible,' said Mrs Bantry. 'There must have been a strange sort of glamour about the whole thing.'

'There was no violent ringing of a bell the next morning. Mrs Pritchard usually woke about eight. When, at eight-thirty, there was no sign from her, nurse rapped loudly on the door. Getting no reply, she fetched George, and insisted on the door being broken open. They did so with the help of a chisel.

'One look at the still figure on the bed was enough for Nurse Copling. She sent George to telephone for the doctor, but it was too late. Mrs Pritchard, he said, must have been dead at least eight hours. Her smelling salts lay by her hand on the bed, *and on the wall beside her one of the pinky-red geraniums was a bright deep blue*.'

'Horrible,' said Miss Helier with a shiver.

Sir Henry was frowning.

'No additional details?'

Colonel Bantry shook his head, but Mrs Bantry spoke quickly.

'The gas.'

'What about the gas?' asked Sir Henry.

'When the doctor arrived there was a slight smell of gas, and sure enough he found the gas ring in the fireplace very slightly turned on; but so little it couldn't have mattered.'

'Did Mr Pritchard and the nurse not notice it when they first went in?'

'The nurse said she did notice a slight smell. George said he didn't notice gas, but something made him feel very queer and overcome; but he put that down to shock - and probably it was. At any rate there was no question of gas poisoning. The smell was scarcely noticeable.'

'And that's the end of the story?'

'No, it isn't. One way and another, there was a lot of talk. The servants, you see, had overheard things - had heard, for instance, Mrs Pritchard telling her husband that he hated her and would jeer if she were dying. And also more recent remarks. She had said one day, apropos of his refusing to leave the house: "Very well, when I am dead, I hope everyone will realize that you have killed me." And as ill luck would have it, he had been mixing some weed killer for the garden paths the day before. One of the younger servants had seen him and had afterwards seen him taking up a glass of hot milk for his wife.

'The talk spread and grew. The doctor had given a certificate - I don't know exactly in what terms - shock, syncope, heart failure, probably some medical terms meaning nothing much. However the poor lady had not been a month in her grave before an exhumation order was applied for and granted.'

'And the result of the autopsy was nil, I remember,' said Sir Henry gravely. 'A case, for once, of smoke without fire.'

'The whole thing is really very curious,' said Mrs Bantry. 'That fortune-teller, for instance - Zarida. At the address where she was supposed to be, no one had ever heard of any such person!'

'She appeared once - out of the blue,' said her husband. 'and then utterly vanished. Out of the *blue* - that's rather good!'

'And what is more,' continued Mrs Bantry, 'little Nurse Carstairs, who was supposed to have recommended her, had never even heard of her.'

They looked at each other.

'It's a mysterious story,' said Dr Lloyd. 'One can make guesses; but to guess - '

He shook his head.

'Has Mr Pritchard married Miss Instow?' asked Miss Marple in her gentle voice.

'Now why do you ask that?' inquired Sir Henry.

Miss Marple opened gentle blue eyes.

'It seems to me so important,' she said. 'Have they married?'

Colonel Bantry shook his head.

'We - well, we expected something of the kind - but it's eighteen months now. I don't believe they even see much of each other.'

'That is important,' said Miss Marple. 'Very important.'

'Then you think the same as I do,' said Mrs Bantry. 'You think - '

'Now, Dolly,' said her husband. 'It's unjustifiable - what you're going to say. You can't go about accusing people without a shadow of proof .'

'Don't be so - so manly, Arthur. Men are always afraid to say *anything*. Anyway, this is all between ourselves. It's just a wild fantastic idea of mine that possibly - only *possibly* - Jean Instow disguised herself as a fortune-teller. Mind you, she may have done it for a joke. I don't for a minute think that she meant any harm; but if she did do it, and if Mrs Pritchard was foolish enough to die of fright - well, that's what Miss Marple meant, wasn't it?'

'No, dear, not quite,' said Miss Marple. 'You see, if I were going to kill anyone - which, of course, I wouldn't dream of doing for a minute, because it would be very wicked, and besides I don't like killing - not even wasps, though I know it has to be, and I'm sure the gardener does it as humanely as possible. Let me see, what was I saying?'

'If you wished to kill anyone,' prompted Sir Henry.

'Oh yes. Well, if I did, I shouldn't be at all satisfied to trust to *fright*. I know one reads of people dying of it, but it seems a very uncertain sort of thing, and the most nervous people are far more brave than one really thinks they are. I should like something definite and certain, and make a thoroughly good plan about it.'

'Miss Marple,' said Sir Henry, 'you frighten me. I hope you will never wish to remove me. Your plans would be too good.'

Miss Marple looked at him reproachfully.

'I thought I had made it clear that I would never contemplate such wickedness,' she said. 'No, I was trying to put myself in the place of - er - a certain person.'

'Do you mean George Pritchard?' asked Colonel Bantry. 'I'll never believe it of George - though - mind you, even the nurse believes it. I went and saw her about a month afterwards, at the time of the exhumation. She didn't know how it was done - in fact, she wouldn't say anything at all - but it was clear enough that she believed George to be in some way responsible for his wife's death. She was convinced of it.'

'Well,' said Dr Lloyd, 'perhaps she wasn't so far wrong. And mind you, a nurse often *knows*. She can't say - she's got no proof - but she *knows*.'

Sir Henry leant forward.

'Come now, Miss Marple,' he said persuasively. 'You're lost in a daydream. Won't you tell us all about it?'

Miss Marple started and turned pink.

'I beg your pardon,' she said. 'I was just thinking about our District Nurse. A most difficult problem.'

'More difficult than the problem of the blue geranium?'

'It really depends on the primroses,' said Miss Marple. 'I mean, Mrs Bantry said they were yellow and pink. If it was a pink primrose that turned blue, of course, that fits in perfectly. But if it happened to be a yellow one - '

'It was a pink one,' said Mrs Bantry.

She stared. They all stared at Miss Marple.

'Then that seems to settle it,' said Miss Marple. She shook her head regretfully. 'And the wasp season and everything. And of course the gas.'

'It reminds you, I suppose, of countless village tragedies?' said Sir Henry.

'Not tragedies,' said Miss Marple. 'And certainly nothing criminal. But it does remind me a little of the trouble we are having with the District Nurse. After all, nurses are human beings, and what with having to be so correct in their behaviour and wearing those uncomfortable collars and being so thrown with the family - well, can you wonder that things sometimes happen?'

A glimmer of light broke upon Sir Henry.

'You mean Nurse Carstairs?'

'Oh no. Not Nurse Carstairs. Nurse *Copling*. You see, she had been there before, and very much thrown with Mr Pritchard, who you say is an attractive man. I daresay she thought, poor thing - well, we needn't go into that. I don't suppose she knew about Miss Instow, and of course afterwards, when she found out, it turned her against him and she tried to do all the harm she could. Of course the letter really gave her away, didn't it?'

'What letter?'

'Well, she wrote to the fortune-teller at Mrs Pritchard's request, and the fortune-teller came, apparently in answer to the letter. But later it was discovered that there never had been such a

person at that address. So that shows that Nurse Copling was in it. She only pretended to write - so what could be more likely than that *she* was the fortune teller herself?'

'I never saw the point about the letter,' said Sir Henry. 'That's a most important point, of course.'

'Rather a bold step to take,' said Miss Marple, 'because Mrs Pritchard might have recognized her in spite of the disguise - though of course if she had, the nurse could have pretended it was a joke.'

'What did you mean,' said Sir Henry, 'when you said that if you were a certain person you would not have trusted to fright?'

'One couldn't be *sure* that way,' said Miss Marple. 'No, I think that the warnings and the blue flowers were, if I may use a military term,' she laughed self-consciously - '*just camouflage*.'

'And the real thing?'

'I know,' said Miss Marple apologetically, 'that I've got wasps on the brain. Poor things, destroyed in their thousands - and usually on such a beautiful summer's day. But I remember thinking, when I saw the gardener shaking up the cyanide of potassium in a bottle with water, how like smelling-salts it looked. And if it were put in a smelling-salts bottle and substituted for the real one - well, the poor lady was in the habit of using her smelling-salts. Indeed you said they were found by her hand. Then, of course, while Mr Pritchard went to telephone to the doctor, the nurse would change it for the real bottle, and she'd just turn on the gas a little bit to mask any smell of almonds and in case anyone felt

queer, and I always have heard that cyanide leaves no trace if you wait long enough. But, of course I may be wrong, and it may have been something entirely different in the bottle; but that doesn't really matter, does it?'

Miss Marple paused, a little out of breath.

Jane Helier leant forward and said, 'But the blue geranium, and the other flowers?'

'Nurses always have litmus paper, don't they?' said Miss Marple, 'for - well, for testing. Not a very pleasant subject. We won't dwell on it. I have done a little nursing myself.' She grew delicately pink. 'Blue turns red with acids, and red turns blue with alkalis. So easy to paste some red litmus over a red flower - near the bed, of course. And then, when the poor lady used her smelling-salts, the strong ammonia fumes would turn it blue. Really most ingenious. Of course, the geranium wasn't blue when they first broke into the room - nobody noticed it till afterwards. When nurse changed the bottles, she held the sal ammoniac against the wallpaper for a minute, I expect.'

'You might have been there, Miss Marple,' said Sir Henry.

'What worries me,' said Miss Marple, 'is poor Mr Pritchard and that nice girl, Miss Instow. Probably both suspecting each other and keeping apart - and life so very short.'

She shook her head.

'You needn't worry,' said Sir Henry. 'As a matter of fact I have something up my sleeve. A nurse has been arrested on a charge of murdering an elderly patient who had left her a legacy. It was

done with cyanide of potassium substituted for smelling-salts. Nurse Copling trying the same trick again. Miss Instow and Mr Pritchard need have no doubts as to the truth.'

'Now isn't that nice?' cried Miss Marple. 'I don't mean about the new murder, of course. That's very sad, and shows how much wickedness there is in the world, and that if once you give way - which reminds me I *must* finish my little conversation with Dr Lloyd about the village nurse.'

The Companion

'Now, Dr Lloyd,' said Miss Helier. 'Don't *you* know any creepy stories?'

She smiled at him - the smile that nightly bewitched the theatre-going public. Jane Helier was sometimes called the most beautiful woman in England, and jealous members of her own profession were in the habit of saying to each other: 'Of course Jane's not an *artist*. She can't *act* - if you know what I mean. It's those eyes!'

And those 'eyes' were at this minute fixed appealingly on the grizzled elderly bachelor doctor, who, for the last five years, had ministered to the ailments of the village of St Mary Mead.

With an unconscious gesture, the doctor pulled down his waistcoat (inclined of late to be uncomfortably tight) and racked

his brains hastily, so as not to disappoint the lovely creature who addressed him so confidently.

'I feel,' said Jane dreamily, 'that I would like to wallow in crime this evening.'

'Splendid,' said Colonel Bantry, her host. 'Splendid, splendid.' And he laughed a loud hearty military laugh. 'Eh, Dolly?'

His wife, hastily recalled to the exigencies of social life (she had been planning her spring border) agreed enthusiastically.

'Of course it's splendid,' she said heartily but vaguely. 'I always thought so.'

'Did you, my dear?' said old Miss Marple, and her eyes twinkled a little.

'We don't get much in the creepy line - and still less in the criminal line - in St Mary Mead, you know, Miss Helier,' said Dr Lloyd.

'You surprise me,' said Sir Henry Clithering. The ex-Commissioner of Scotland Yard turned to Miss Marple. 'I always understood from our friend here that St Mary Mead is a positive hotbed of crime and vice.'

'Oh, Sir Henry!' protested Miss Marple, a spot of colour coming into her cheeks. 'I'm sure I never said anything of the kind. The only thing I ever said was that human nature is much the same in a village as anywhere else, only one has opportunities and leisure for seeing it at closer quarters.'

'But *you* haven't always lived here,' said Jane Helier, still addressing the doctor. 'You've been in all sorts of queer places all over the world - places where things *happen*!'

'That is so, of course,' said Dr Lloyd, still thinking desperately. 'Yes, of course... Yes... Ah! I have it!'

He sank back with a sigh of relief.

'It is some years ago now - I had almost forgotten. But the facts were really very strange - very strange indeed. And the final coincidence which put the clue into my hand was strange also.'

Miss Helier drew her chair a little nearer to him, applied some lipstick and waited expectantly. The others also turned interested faces towards him.

'I don't know whether any of you know the Canary Islands,' began the doctor.

'They must be wonderful,' said Jane Helier. 'They're in the South Seas, aren't they? Or is it the Mediterranean?'

'I've called in there on my way to South Africa,' said the colonel. 'The Peak of Tenerife is a fine sight with the setting sun on it.'

'The incident I am describing happened in the island of Grand Canary, not Tenerife. It is a good many years ago now. I had had a breakdown in health and was forced to give up my practice in England and go abroad. I practised in Las Palmas, which is the principal town of Grand Canary. In many ways I enjoyed the life out there very much. The climate was mild and sunny, there was excellent surf bathing (and I am an enthusiastic bather) and the

sea life of the port attracted me. Ships from all over the world put in at Las Palmas. I used to walk along the mole every morning far more interested than any member of the fair sex could be in a street of hat shops.

'As I say, ships from all over the world put in at Las Palmas. Sometimes they stay a few hours, sometimes a day or two. In the principal hotel there, the Metropole, you will see people of all races and nationalities - birds of passage. Even the people going to Tenerife usually come here and stay a few days before crossing to the other island.

'My story begins there, in the Metropole Hotel, one Thursday evening in January. There was a dance going on and I and a friend had been sitting at a small table watching the scene. There were a fair sprinkling of English and other nationalities, but the majority of the dancers were Spanish; and when the orchestra struck up a tango, only half a dozen couples of the latter nationality took the floor. They all danced well and we looked on and admired. One woman in particular excited our lively admiration. Tall, beautiful and sinuous, she moved with the grace of a half-tamed leopardess. There was something dangerous about her. I said as much to my friend and he agreed.

'"Women like that," he said, 'are bound to have a history. Life will not pass them by.'

'"Beauty is perhaps a dangerous possession," I said.

'"It's not only beauty," he insisted. "There is something else. Look at her again. Things are bound to happen to that woman, or because of her. As I said, life will not pass her by. Strange and

exciting events will surround her. You've only got to look at her to know it."

'He paused and then added with a smile:

'"Just as you've only got to look at those two women over there, and know that nothing out of the way could ever happen to either of them! They are made for a safe and uneventful existence."

'I followed his eyes. The two women he referred to were travellers who had just arrived - a Holland Lloyd boat had put into port that evening, and the passengers were just beginning to arrive.

'As I looked at them I saw at once what my friend meant. They were two English ladies - the thoroughly nice travelling English that you do find abroad. Their ages, I should say, were round about forty. One was fair and a little - just a little - too plump; the other was dark and a little - again just a little - inclined to scragginess. They were what is called well-preserved, quietly and inconspicuously dressed in well-cut tweeds, and innocent of any kind of make-up. They had that air of quiet assurance which is the birthright of well-bred Englishwomen. There was nothing remarkable about either of them. They were like thousands of their sisters. They would doubtless see what they wished to see, assisted by Baedeker, and be blind to everything else. They would use the English library and attend the English Church in any place they happened to be, and it was quite likely that one or both of them sketched a little. And, as my friend said, nothing exciting or remarkable would ever happen to either of them, though they might quite likely travel half over the world. I looked

from them back to our sinuous Spanish woman with her half-closed smouldering eyes and I smiled.'

'Poor things,' said Jane Helier with a sigh. 'But I do think it's so silly of people not to make the most of themselves. That woman in Bond Street - Valentine - is really wonderful. Audrey Denman goes to her; and have you seen her in "The Downward Step"? As the schoolgirl in the first act she's really marvellous. And yet Audrey is fifty if she's a day. As a matter of fact I happen to know she's really nearer sixty.'

'Go on,' said Mrs Bantry to Dr Lloyd. 'I love stories about sinuous Spanish dancers. It makes me forget how old and fat I am.'

'I'm sorry,' said Dr Lloyd apologetically. 'But you see, as a matter of fact, this story isn't about the Spanish woman.'

'It isn't?'

'No. As it happens my friend and I were wrong. Nothing in the least exciting happened to the Spanish beauty. She married a clerk in a shipping office, and by the time I left the island she had had five children and was getting very fat.'

'Just like that girl of Israel Peters,' commented Miss Marple. 'The one who went on the stage and had such good legs that they made her principal boy in the pantomime. Everyone said she'd come to no good, but she married a commercial traveller and settled down splendidly.'

'The village parallel,' murmured Sir Henry softly.

'No,' went on the doctor. 'My story is about the two English ladies.'

'Something happened to them?' breathed Miss Helier.

'Something happened to them - and the very next day, too.'

'Yes?' said Mrs Bantry encouragingly.

'Just for curiosity, as I went out that evening I glanced at the hotel register. I found the names easily enough. Miss Mary Barton and Miss Amy Durrant of Little Paddocks, Caughton Weir, Bucks. I little thought then how soon I was to encounter the owners of those names again - and under what tragic circumstances.

'The following day I had arranged to go for a picnic with some friends. We were to motor across the island, taking our lunch, to a place called (as far as I remember - it is so long ago) Las Nieves, a well-sheltered bay where we could bathe if we felt inclined. This programme we duly carried out, except that we were somewhat late in starting, so that we stopped on the way and picnicked, going on to Las Nieves afterwards for a bathe before tea.

'As we approached the beach, we were at once aware of a tremendous commotion. The whole population of the small village seemed to be gathered on the shore. As soon as they saw us they rushed towards the car and began explaining excitedly. Our Spanish not being very good, it took me a few minutes to understand, but at last I got it.

'Two of the mad English ladies had gone in to bathe, and one had swum out too far and got into difficulties. The other had gone

after her and had tried to bring her in, but her strength in turn had failed and she too would have drowned had not a man rowed out in a boat and brought in rescuer and rescued - the latter beyond help.

'As soon as I got the hang of things I pushed the crowd aside and hurried down the beach. I did not at first recognize the two women. The plump figure in the black stockinet costume and the tight green rubber bathing cap awoke no chord of recognition as she looked up anxiously. She was kneeling beside the body of her friend, making somewhat amateurish attempts at artificial respiration. When I told her that I was a doctor she gave a sigh of relief, and I ordered her off at once to one of the cottages for a rub down and dry clothing. One of the ladies in my party went with her. I myself worked unavailingly on the body of the drowned woman. Life was only too clearly extinct, and in the end I had reluctantly to give in.

'I rejoined the others in the small fisherman's cottage and there I had to break the sad news. The survivor was attired now in her own clothes, and I immediately recognized her as one of the two arrivals of the night before. She received the sad news fairly calmly, and it was evidently the horror of the whole thing that struck her more than any great personal feeling.

'"Poor Amy," she said. "Poor, poor Amy. She had been looking forward to the bathing here so much. And she was a good swimmer too. I can't understand it. What do you think it can have been, doctor?"

'"Possibly cramp. Will you tell me exactly what happened?"

'"We had both been swimming about for some time - twenty minutes, I should say. Then I thought I would go in, but Amy said she was going to swim out once more. She did so, and suddenly I heard her call and realized she was crying for help. I swam out as fast as I could. She was still afloat when I got to her, but she clutched at me wildly and we both went under. If it hadn't been for that man coming out with his boat I should have been drowned too.'

'"That has happened fairly often," I said. "To save anyone from drowning is not an easy affair."

'"It seems so awful," continued Miss Barton. "We only arrived yesterday, and were so delighting in the sunshine and our little holiday. And now this - this terrible tragedy occurs."

'I asked her then for particulars about the dead woman, explaining that I would do everything I could for her, but that the Spanish authorities would require full information. This she gave me readily enough.

'The dead woman, Miss Amy Durrant, was her companion and had come to her about five months previously. They had got on very well together, but Miss Durrant had spoken very little about her people. She had been left an orphan at an early age and had been brought up by an uncle and had earned her own living since she was twenty-one.

'And so that was that,' went on the doctor. He paused and said again, but this time with a certain finality in his voice, 'And so that was that.'

'I don't understand,' said Jane Helier. 'Is that all? I mean, it's very tragic. I suppose, but it isn't - well, it isn't what I call *creepy*.'

'I think there's more to follow,' said Sir Henry.

'Yes,' said Dr Lloyd, 'there's more to follow. You see, right at the time there was one queer thing. Of course I asked questions of the fishermen, etc., as to what they'd seen. They were eye-witnesses. And one woman had rather a funny story. I didn't pay any attention to it at the time, but it came back to me afterwards. She insisted, you see, that Miss Durrant wasn't in difficulties when she called out. The other swam out to her and, according to this woman, deliberately held Miss Durrant's head under water. I didn't, as I say, pay much attention. It was such a fantastic story, and these things look so differently from the shore. Miss Barton might have tried to make her friend lose consciousness, realizing that the latter's panic-stricken clutching would drown them both. You see, according to the Spanish woman's story, it looked as though - well, as though Miss Barton was deliberately trying to drown her companion.

'As I say, I paid very little attention to this story at the time. It came back to me later. Our great difficulty was to find out anything about this woman, Amy Durrant. She didn't seem to have any relations. Miss Barton and I went through her things together. We found one address and wrote there, but it proved to be simply a room she had taken in which to keep her things. The landlady knew nothing, had only seen her when she took the room. Miss Durrant had remarked at the time that she always liked to have one place she could call her own to which she could return at any moment. There were one or two nice pieces of old

furniture and some bound numbers of Academy pictures, and a trunk full of pieces of material bought at sales, but no personal belongings. She had mentioned to the landlady that her father and mother had died in India when she was a child and that she had been brought up by an uncle who was a clergyman, but she did not say if he was her father's or her mother's brother, so the name was no guide.

'It wasn't exactly mysterious, it was just unsatisfactory. There must be many lonely women, proud and reticent, in just that position. There were a couple of photographs amongst her belongings in Las Palmas - rather old and faded and they had been cut to fit the frames they were in, so that there was no photographer's name upon them, and there was an old daguerreotype which might have been her mother or more probably her grandmother.

'Miss Barton had had two references with her. One she had forgotten, the other name she recollected after an effort. It proved to be that of a lady who was now abroad, having gone to Australia. She was written to. Her answer, of course, was a long time in coming, and I may say that when it did arrive there was no particular help to be gained from it. She said Miss Durrant had been with her as companion and had been most efficient and that she was a very charming woman, but that she knew nothing of her private affairs or relations.

'So there it was - as I say, nothing unusual, really. It was just the two things together that aroused my uneasiness. This Amy Durrant of whom no one knew anything, and the Spanish woman's queer story. Yes, and I'll add a third thing: When I was

first bending over the body and Miss Barton was walking away towards the huts, she looked back. Looked back with an expression on her face that I can only describe as one of poignant anxiety - a kind of anguished uncertainty that imprinted itself on my brain.

'It didn't strike me as anything unusual at the time. I put it down to her terrible distress over her friend. But, you see, later I realized that they weren't on those terms. There was no devoted attachment between them, no terrible grief. Miss Barton was fond of Amy Durrant and shocked by her death - that was all.

'But, then, why that terrible poignant anxiety? That was the question that kept coming back to me. I had not been mistaken in that look. And almost against my will, an answer began to shape itself in my mind. Supposing the Spanish woman's story were true; supposing that Mary Barton wilfully and in cold blood tried to drown Amy Durrant. She succeeds in holding her under water whilst pretending to be saving her. She is rescued by a boat. They are on a lonely beach far from anywhere. And then I appear - the last thing she expects. A doctor! And an English doctor! She knows well enough that people who have been under water far longer than Amy Durrant have been revived by artificial respiration. But she has to play her part - to go off leaving me alone with her victim. And as she turns for one last look, a terrible poignant anxiety shows in her face. Will Amy Durrant come back to life *and tell what she knows*?'

'Oh!' said Jane Helier. 'I'm thrilled now.'

'Viewed in that aspect the whole business seemed more sinister, and the personality of Amy Durrant became more mysterious.

Who was Amy Durrant? Why should she, an insignificant paid companion, be murdered by her employer? What story lay behind that fatal bathing expedition? She had entered Mary Barton's employment only a few months before. Mary Barton had brought her abroad, and the very day after they landed the tragedy had occurred. And they were both nice, commonplace, refined Englishwomen! The whole thing was fantastic, and I told myself so. I had been letting my imagination run away with me.'

'You didn't do anything, then?' asked Miss Helier.

'My dear young lady, what could I do? There was no evidence. The majority of the eye-witnesses told the same story as Miss Barton. I had built up my own suspicions out of a fleeting expression which I might possibly have imagined. The only thing I could and did do was to see that the widest inquiries were made for the relations of Amy Durrant. The next time I was in England I even went and saw the landlady of her room, with the results I have told you.'

'But you felt there was something wrong,' said Miss Marple.

Dr Lloyd nodded.

'Half the time I was ashamed of myself for thinking so. Who was I to go suspecting this nice, pleasant-mannered English lady of a foul and cold-blooded crime? I did my best to be as cordial as possible to her during the short time she stayed on the island. I helped her with the Spanish authorities. I did everything I could do as an Englishman to help a compatriot in a foreign country; and yet I am convinced that she knew I suspected and disliked her.'

'How long did she stay out there?' asked Miss Marple.

'I think it was about a fortnight. Miss Durrant was buried there, and it must have been about ten days later when she took a boat back to England. The shock had upset her so much that she felt she couldn't spend the winter there as she had planned. That's what she said.'

'Did it seem to have upset her?' asked Miss Marple.

The doctor hesitated.

'Well, I don't know that it affected her appearance at all,' he said cautiously.

'She didn't, for instance, grow fatter?' asked Miss Marple.

'Do you know - it's a curious thing your saying that. Now I come to think back, I believe you're right. She - yes, she did seem, if anything, to be putting on weight.'

'How horrible,' said Jane Helier with a shudder. 'It's like - it's like fattening on your victim's blood.'

'And yet, in another way, I may be doing her an injustice,' went on Dr Lloyd. 'She certainly said something before she left, which pointed in an entirely different direction. There may be, I think there are, consciences which work very slowly - which take some time to awaken to the enormity of the deed committed.

'It was the evening before her departure from the Canaries. She had asked me to go and see her, and had thanked me very warmly for all I had done to help her. I, of course, made light of the matter, said I had only done what was natural under the

circumstances, and so on. There was a pause after that, and then she suddenly asked me a question.

'"Do you think," she asked, "that one is ever justified in taking the law into one's own hands?"

'I replied that that was rather a difficult question, but that on the whole, I thought not. The law was the law, and we had to abide by it.

'"Even when it is powerless?"

'"I don't quite understand."

'"It's difficult to explain; but one might do something that is considered definitely wrong - that is considered a crime, even, for a good and sufficient reason."

'I replied drily that possibly several criminals had thought that in their time, and she shrank back.

'"But that's horrible," she murmured. "Horrible."

'And then with a change of tone she asked me to give her something to make her sleep. She had not been able to sleep properly since - she hesitated - since that terrible shock.

'"You're sure it is that? There is nothing worrying you? Nothing on your mind?"

'"On my mind? What should be on my mind?"

'She spoke fiercely and suspiciously.

'"Worry is a cause of sleeplessness sometimes,' I said lightly.

'She seemed to brood for a moment.

'"Do you mean worrying over the future, or worrying over the past, which can't be altered?"

'"Either."

'"Only it wouldn't be any good worrying over the past. You couldn't bring back - Oh! what's the use! One mustn't think. One must not think."

'I prescribed her a mild sleeping draught and made my adieu. As I went away I wondered not a little over the words she had spoken. "You couldn't bring back - " What? Or *who*?

'I think that last interview prepared me in a way for what was to come. I didn't expect it, of course, but when it happened, I wasn't surprised. Because, you see, Mary Barton struck me all along as a conscientious woman - not a weak sinner, but a woman with convictions, who would act up to them, and who would not relent as long as she still believed in them. I fancied that in the last conversation we had she was beginning to doubt her own convictions. I know her words suggested to me that she was feeling the first faint beginnings of that terrible soul-searcher - remorse.

'The thing happened in Cornwall, in a small watering-place, rather deserted at that season of the year. It must have been - let me see - late March. I read about it in the papers. A lady had been staying at a small hotel there - a Miss Barton. She had been very odd and peculiar in her manner. That had been noticed by all. At night she would walk up and down her room, muttering to herself,

and not allowing the people on either side of her to sleep. She had called on the vicar one day and had told him that she had a communication of the gravest importance to make to him. She had, she said, committed a crime. Then, instead of proceeding, she had stood up abruptly and said she would call another day. The vicar put her down as being slightly mental, and did not take her self-accusation seriously.

'The very next morning she was found to be missing from her room. A note was left addressed to the coroner. It ran as follows:

'I tried to speak to the vicar yesterday, to confess all, but was not allowed. She would not let me. I can make amends only one way - a life for a life; and my life must go the same way as hers did. I, too, must drown in the deep sea. I believed I was justified. I see now that that was not so. If I desire Amy's forgiveness I must go to her. Let no one be blamed for my death - Mary Barton

'Her clothes were found lying on the beach in a secluded cove nearby, and it seemed clear that she had undressed there and swum resolutely out to sea where the current was known to be dangerous, sweeping one down the coast.

'The body was not recovered, but after a time leave was given to presume death. She was a rich woman, her estate being proved at a hundred thousand pounds. Since she died intestate it all went to her next of kin - a family of cousins in Australia. The

papers made discreet references to the tragedy in the Canary Islands, putting forward the theory that the death of Miss Durrant had unhinged her friend's brain. At the inquest the usual verdict of *Suicide whilst temporarily insane* was returned.

'And so the curtain falls on the tragedy of Amy Durrant and Mary Barton.'

There was a long pause and then Jane Helier gave a great gasp.

'Oh, but you mustn't stop there - just at the most interesting part. Go on.'

'But you see, Miss Helier, this isn't a serial story. This is real life; and real life stops just where it chooses.'

'But I don't want it to,' said Jane. 'I want to know.'

'This is where we use our brains, Miss Helier,' explained Sir Henry. 'Why did Mary Barton kill her companion? That's the problem Dr Lloyd has set us.'

'Oh, well,' said Miss Helier, 'she might have killed her for lots of reasons. I mean - oh, I don't know. She might have got on her nerves, or else she got jealous, although Dr Lloyd doesn't mention any men, but still on the boat out - well, you know what everyone says about boats and sea voyages.'

Miss Helier paused, slightly out of breath, and it was borne in upon her audience that the outside of Jane's charming head was distinctly superior to the inside.

'I would like to have a lot of guesses,' said Mrs Bantry. 'But I suppose I must confine myself to one. Well, I think that Miss

Barton's father made all his money out of ruining Amy Durrant's father, so Amy determined to have her revenge. Oh, no, that's the wrong way round. How tiresome! Why does the rich employer kill the humble companion? I've got it! Miss Barton had a young brother who shot himself for love of Amy Durrant. Miss Barton waits her time. Amy comes down in the world. Miss B. engages her as companion and takes her to the Canaries and accomplishes her revenge. How's that?'

'Excellent,' said Sir Henry. 'Only we don't know that Miss Barton ever had a young brother.'

'We deduce that,' said Mrs Bantry. 'Unless she had a young brother there's no motive. So she must have had a young brother. Do you see, Watson?'

'That's all very fine, Dolly,' said her husband. 'But it's only a guess.'

'Of course it is,' said Mrs Bantry. 'That's all we can do - guess. We haven't got any clues. Go on, dear, have a guess yourself.'

'Upon my word, I don't know what to say. But I think there's something in Miss Heller's suggestion that they fell out about a man. Look here, Dolly, it was probably some high church parson. They both embroidered him a cope or something, and he wore the Durrant woman's first. Depend upon it, it was something like that. Look how she went off to a parson at the end. These women all lose their heads over a good-looking clergyman. You hear of it over and over again.'

'I think I must try to make my explanation a little more subtle,' said Sir Henry, 'though I admit it's only a guess. I suggest that Miss Barton was always mentally unhinged. There are more cases like that than you would imagine. Her mania grew stronger and she began to believe it her duty to rid the world of certain persons - possibly what is termed unfortunate females. Nothing much is known about Miss Durrant's past. So very possibly she *had* a past - an "unfortunate" one. Miss Barton learns of this and decides on extermination. Later, the righteousness of her act begins to trouble her and she is overcome by remorse. Her end shows her to be completely unhinged. Now, do say you agree with me, Miss Marple.'

'I'm afraid I don't, Sir Henry,' said Miss Marple, smiling apologetically. 'I think her end shows her to have been a very clever and resourceful woman.'

Jane Helier interrupted with a little scream.

'Oh! I've been so stupid. May I guess again? Of course it must have been that Blackmail! The companion woman was blackmailing her. Only I don't see why Miss Marple says it was clever of her to kill herself. I can't see that at all.'

'Ah!' said Sir Henry. 'You see, Miss Marple knew a case just like it in St Mary Mead.'

'You always laugh at me, Sir Henry,' said Miss Marple reproachfully. 'I must confess it does remind me, just a little, of old Mrs Trout. She drew the old age pension, you know, for three old women who were dead, in different parishes.'

'It sounds a most complicated and resourceful crime,' said Sir Henry. 'But it doesn't seem to me to throw any light upon our present problem.'

'Of course not,' said Miss Marple. 'It wouldn't - to you. But some of the families were very poor, and the old age pension was a great boon to the children. I know it's difficult for anyone outside to understand. But what I really meant was that the whole thing hinged upon one old woman being so like any other old woman.'

'Eh?' said Sir Henry, mystified.

'I always explain things so badly. What I mean is that when Dr Lloyd described the two ladies first, he didn't know which was which, and I don't suppose anyone else in the hotel did. They would have, of course, after a day or so, but the very next day one of the two was drowned, and if the one who was left said she was Miss Barton, I don't suppose it would ever occur to anyone that she mightn't be.'

'You think - Oh! I see,' said Sir Henry slowly.

'It's the only natural way of thinking of it. Dear Mrs Bantry began that way just now. Why *should* the rich employer kill the humble companion? It's so much more likely to be the other way about I mean - that's the way things happen.'

'Is it?' said Sir Henry. 'You shock me.'

'But of course,' went on Miss Marple, 'she would have to wear Miss Barton's clothes, and they would probably be a little tight on her, so that her general appearance would look as though she had got a little fatter. That's why I asked that question. A

gentleman would be sure to think it was the lady who had got fatter, and not the clothes that had got smaller - though that isn't quite the right way of putting it.'

'But if Amy Durrant killed Miss Barton, what did she gain by it?' asked Mrs Bantry. 'She couldn't keep up the deception for ever.'

'She only kept it up for another month or so,' pointed out Miss Marple. 'And during that time I expect she travelled, keeping away from anyone who might know her. That's what I meant by saying that one lady of a certain age looks so like another. I don't suppose the different photograph on her passport was ever noticed - you know what passports are. And then in March, she went down to this Cornish place and began to act queerly and draw attention to herself so that when people found her clothes on the beach and read her last letter they shouldn't think of the commonsense conclusion.'

'Which was?' asked Sir Henry.

'No *body*,' said Miss Marple firmly. 'That's the thing that would stare you in the face, if there weren't such a lot of red herrings to draw you off the trail - including the suggestion of foul play and remorse. *No body*. That was the real significant fact.'

'Do you mean - ' said Mrs Bantry - 'do you mean that there wasn't any remorse? That there wasn't - that she didn't drown herself?'

'Not she!' said Miss Marple. 'It's just Mrs Trout over again. Mrs Trout was very good at red herrings, but she met her match in me. And I can see through your remorse-driven Miss Barton. Drown herself? Went off to Australia, if I'm any good at guessing.'

'You are, Miss Marple,' said Dr Lloyd. 'Undoubtedly you are. Now it again took me quite by surprise. Why, you could have knocked me down with a feather that day in Melbourne.'

'Was that what you spoke of as a final coincidence?'

Dr Lloyd nodded.

'Yes, it was rather rough luck on Miss Barton - or Miss Amy Durrant - whatever you like to call her. I became a ship's doctor for a while, and landing in Melbourne, the first person I saw as I walked down the street was the lady I thought had been drowned in Cornwall. She saw the game was up as far as I was concerned, and she did the bold thing - took me into her confidence. A curious woman, completely lacking, I suppose, in some moral sense. She was the eldest of a family of nine, all wretchedly poor. They had applied once for help to their rich cousin in England and been repulsed, Miss Barton having quarrelled with their father. Money was wanted desperately, for the three youngest children were delicate and wanted expensive medical treatment. Amy Barton then and there seems to have decided on her plan of cold-blooded murder. She set out for England, working her passage over as a children's nurse. She obtained the situation of companion to Miss Barton, calling herself Amy Durrant. She engaged a room and put some furniture into it so as to create more of a personality for herself. The drowning plan was a sudden inspiration. She had been waiting for some opportunity to present itself. Then she staged the final scene of the drama and returned to Australia, and in due time she and her brothers and sisters inherited Miss Barton's money as next of kin.'

'A very bold and perfect crime,' said Sir Henry. 'Almost *the* perfect crime. If it had been Miss Barton who had died in the Canaries, suspicion might attach to Amy Durrant and her connection with the Barton family might have been discovered; but the change of identity and the double crime, as you may call it, effectually did away with that. Yes, almost the perfect crime.'

'What happened to her?' asked Mrs Bantry. 'What did you do in the matter, Dr Lloyd?'

'I was in a very curious position, Mrs Bantry. Of evidence as the law understands it, I still have very little. Also, there were certain signs, plain to me as a medical man, that though strong and vigorous in appearance, the lady was not long for this world. I went home with her and saw the rest of the family - a charming family, devoted to their eldest sister and without an idea in their heads that she might prove to have committed a crime. Why bring sorrow on them when I could prove nothing? The lady's admission to me was unheard by anyone else. I let Nature take its course. Miss Amy Barton died six months after my meeting with her. I have often wondered if she was cheerful and unrepentant up to the last.'

'Surely not,' said Mrs Bantry.

'I expect so,' said Miss Marple. 'Mrs Trout was.'

Jane Helier gave herself a little shake.

'Well,' she said. 'It's very, very thrilling. I don't quite understand now who drowned which. And how does this Mrs Trout come into it?'

'She doesn't, my dear.' said Miss Marple. 'She was only a person - not a very nice person - in the village.'

'Oh!' said Jane. 'In the village. But nothing ever happens in a village, does it?' She sighed. 'I'm sure I shouldn't have any brains at all if I lived in a village.'

The Four Suspects

The conversation hovered round undiscovered and unpunished crimes. Everyone in turn vouchsafed their opinion: Colonel Bantry, his plump amiable wife, Jane Helier, Dr Lloyd, and even old Miss Marple. The one person who did not speak was the one best fitted in most people's opinion to do so. Sir Henry Clithering, ex-Commissioner of Scotland Yard, sat silent, twisting his moustache - or rather stroking it - and half smiling, as though at some inward thought that amused him.

'Sir Henry,' said Mrs Bantry at last. 'If you don't say something I shall scream. Are there a lot of crimes that go unpunished, or are there not?'

'You're thinking of newspaper headlines, Mrs Bantry. SCOTLAND YARD AT FAULT AGAIN. And a list of unsolved mysteries to follow.'

'Which really, I suppose, form a very small percentage of the whole?' said Dr Lloyd.

'Yes; that is so. The hundreds of crimes that are solved and the perpetrators punished are seldom heralded and sung. But that isn't quite the point at issue, is it? When you talk of *undiscovered* crimes and *unsolved* crimes, you are talking of two different things. In the first category come all the crimes that Scotland Yard never hears about, the crimes that no one even knows have been committed.'

'But I suppose there aren't very many of those?' said Mrs Bantry.

'Aren't there?'

'Sir Henry! You don't mean there *are*?'

'I should think,' said Miss Marple thoughtfully, 'that there must be a very large number.'

The charming old lady, with her old-world unruffled air, made her statement in a tone of the utmost placidity.

'My dear Miss Marple,' said Colonel Bantry.

'Of course,' said Miss Marple, 'a lot of people are stupid. And stupid people get found out, whatever they do. But there are quite a number of people who aren't stupid, and one shudders to think of what they might accomplish unless they had very strongly rooted principles.'

'Yes,' said Sir Henry, 'there are a lot of people who aren't stupid. How often does some crime come to light simply by reason of a bit of unmitigated bungling, and each time one asks oneself the question: If this hadn't been bungled, would anyone ever have known?'

'But that's very serious, Clithering,' said Colonel Bantry. 'Very serious, indeed.'

'Is it?'

'What do you mean! It is! Of course it's serious.'

'You say crime goes unpunished; but does it? Unpunished by the law perhaps; but cause and effect works outside the law. To say that every crime brings its own punishment is by way of being a platitude, and yet in my opinion nothing can be truer.'

'Perhaps, perhaps,' said Colonel Bantry. 'But that doesn't alter the seriousness - the - er - seriousness - ' He paused, rather at a loss.

Sir Henry Clithering smiled.

'Ninety-nine people out of a hundred are doubtless of your way of thinking,' he said. 'But you know, it isn't really guilt that is important - it's innocence. That's the thing that nobody will realize.'

'I don't understand,' said Jane Helier.

'I do,' said Miss Marple. 'When Mrs Trent found half a crown missing from her bag, the person it affected most was the daily woman, Mrs Arthur. Of course the Trents thought it was her, but being kindly people and knowing she had a large family and a husband who drinks, well - they naturally didn't want to go to extremes. But they felt differently towards her, and they didn't leave her in charge of the house when they went away, which made a great difference to her; and other people began to get a

feeling about her too. And then it suddenly came out that it was the governess. Mrs Trent saw her through a door reflected in a mirror. The purest chance - though I prefer to call it Providence. And that, I think, is what Sir Henry means. Most people would be only interested in who took the money, and it turned out to be the most unlikely person - just like in detective stories! But the real person it was life and death to was poor Mrs Arthur, who had done nothing. That's what you mean, isn't it, Sir Henry?'

'Yes, Miss Marple, you've hit off my meaning exactly. Your charwoman person was lucky in the instance you relate. Her innocence was shown. But some people may go through a lifetime crushed by the weight of a suspicion that is really unjustified.'

'Are you thinking of some particular instance, Sir Henry?' asked Mrs Bantry shrewdly.

'As a matter of fact, Mrs Bantry, I am. A very curious case. A case where we believe murder to have been committed, but with no possible chance of ever proving it.'

'Poison, I suppose,' breathed Jane. 'Something untraceable.'

Dr Lloyd moved restlessly and Sir Henry shook his head.

'No, dear lady. *Not* the secret arrow poison of the South American Indians! I wish it *were* something of that kind. We have to deal with something much more prosaic - so prosaic, in fact, that there is no hope of bringing the deed home to its perpetrator. An old gentleman who fell downstairs and broke his neck; one of those regrettable accidents which happen every day.'

'But what happened really?'

'Who can say?' Sir Henry shrugged his shoulders. 'A push from behind? A piece of cotton or string tied across the top of the stairs and carefully removed afterwards? That we shall never know.'

'But you do think that it - well, wasn't an accident? Now why?' asked the doctor.

'That's rather a long story, but - well, yes, we're pretty sure. As I said there's no chance of being able to bring the deed home to anyone - the evidence would be too flimsy. But there's the other aspect of the case - the one I was speaking about. You see, there were four people who might have done the trick. One's guilty; *but the other three are innocent*. And unless the truth is found out, those three are going to remain under the terrible shadow of doubt.'

'I think,' said Mrs Bantry, 'that you'd better tell us your long story.'

'I needn't make it so very long after all,' said Sir Henry. 'I can at any rate condense the beginning. That deals with a German secret society - the Schwartze Hand - something after the lines of the Camorra or what is most people's idea of the Camorra. A scheme of blackmail and terrorization. The thing started quite suddenly after the War, and spread to an amazing extent. Numberless people were victimized by it. The authorities were not successful in coping with it, for its secrets were jealously guarded, and it was almost impossible to find anyone who could be induced to betray them.

'Nothing much was ever known about it in England, but in Germany it was having a most paralysing effect. It was finally broken up and dispersed through the efforts of one man, a Dr Rosen, who had at one time been very prominent in Secret Service work. He became a member, penetrated its inmost circle, and was, as I say, instrumental in bringing about its downfall.

'But he was, in consequence, a marked man, and it was deemed wise that he should leave Germany - at any rate for a time. He came to England, and we had letters about him from the police in Berlin. He came and had a personal interview with me. His point of view was both dispassionate and resigned. He had no doubts of what the future held for him.

'"They will get me, Sir Henry," he said. "Not a doubt of it." He was a big man with a fine head, and a very deep voice, with only a slight guttural intonation to tell of his nationality. "That is a foregone conclusion. It does not matter, I am prepared. I faced the risk when I undertook this business. I have done what I set out to do. The organization can never be got together again. But there are many members of it at liberty, and they will take the only revenge they can - my life. It is simply a question of time; but I am anxious that that time should be as long as possible. You see, I am collecting and editing some very interesting material - the result of my life's work. I should like, if possible, to be able to complete my task."

'He spoke very simply, with a certain grandeur which I could not but admire. I told him we would take all precautions, but he waved my words aside.

'"Some day, sooner or later, they will get me," he repeated. "When that day comes, do not distress yourself. You will, I have no doubt, have done all that is possible."

'He then proceeded to outline his plans which were simple enough. He proposed to take a small cottage in the country where he could live quietly and go on with his work. In the end he selected a village in Somerset - King's Gnaton, which was seven miles from a railway station, and singularly untouched by civilization. He bought a very charming cottage, had various improvements and alterations made, and settled down there most contentedly. His household consisted of his niece, Greta, a secretary, an old German servant who had served him faithfully for nearly forty years, and an outside handyman and gardener who was a native of King's Gnaton.'

'The four suspects,' said Dr Lloyd softly.

'Exactly. The four suspects. There is not much more to tell. Life went on peacefully at King's Gnaton for five months and then the blow fell. Dr Rosen fell down the stairs one morning and was found dead about half an hour later. At the time the accident must have taken place, Gertrud was in her kitchen with the door closed and heard nothing - so *she* says. Fräulein Greta was in the garden planting some bulbs - again, so *she* says. The gardener, Dobbs, was in the small potting shed having his elevenses - so *he* says; and the secretary was out for a walk, and once more there is only his own word for it. No one has an alibi - no one can corroborate anyone else's story. But one thing is certain. No one from outside could have done it, for a stranger in the little village of King's Gnaton would be noticed without fail. Both the back and

the front doors were locked, each member of the household having their own key. So you see it narrows down to those four. And yet each one seems to be above suspicion. Greta, his own brother's child. Gertrud, with forty years of faithful service. Dobbs, who has never been out of King's Gnaton. And Charles Templeton, the secretary - '

'Yes,' said Colonel Bantry, 'what about him? He seems the suspicious person to my mind. What do you know about him?'

'It is what I knew about him that put him completely out of court - at any rate at the time,' said Sir Henry gravely. 'you see, Charles Templeton was one of my own men.'

'Oh!' said Colonel Bantry, considerably taken aback.

'Yes. I wanted to have someone on the spot, and at the same time I didn't want to cause talk in the village. Rosen really needed a secretary. I put Templeton on the job. He's a gentleman, he speaks German fluently, and he's altogether a very able fellow.'

'But, then, which do you suspect?' asked Mrs Bantry in a bewildered tone. 'They all seem so - well, impossible.'

'Yes, so it appears. But you can look at the thing from another angle. Fräulein Greta was his niece and a very lovely girl, but the War has shown us time and again that brother can turn against sister, or father against son and so on, and the loveliest and gentlest of young girls did some of the most amazing things. The same thing applies to Gertrud, and who knows what other forces might be at work in her case. A quarrel, perhaps, with her master, a growing resentment all the more lasting because of the

long faithful years behind her. Elderly women of that class can be amazingly bitter sometimes. And Dobbs? Was he right outside it because he had no connection with the family? Money will do much. In some way Dobbs might have been approached and bought.

'For one thing seems certain: Some message or some order must have come from outside. Otherwise why five months immunity? No, the agents of the society must have been at work. Not yet sure of Rosen's perfidy, they delayed till the betrayal had been traced to him beyond any possible doubt. And then, all doubts set aside, they must have sent their message to the spy within the gates - the message that said, "Kill".'

'How nasty!' said Jane Helier, and shuddered.

'But how did the message come? That was the point I tried to elucidate - the one hope of solving my problem. One of those four people must have been approached or communicated with in some way. There would be no delay - I knew that - as soon as the command came, it would be carried out. That was a peculiarity of the Schwartze Hand.

'I went into the question, went into it in a way that will probably strike you as being ridiculously meticulous. Who had come to the cottage that morning? I eliminated nobody. Here is the list.'

He took an envelope from his pocket and selected a paper from its contents.

'*The butcher*, bringing some neck of mutton. Investigated and found correct.

'*The grocer's assistant*, bringing a packet of cornflour, two pounds of sugar, a pound of butter, and a pound of coffee. Also investigated and found correct.

'*The postman*, bringing two circulars for Fräulein Rosen, a local letter for Gertrud, three letters for Dr Rosen, one with a foreign stamp, and two letters for Mr Templeton, one also with a foreign stamp.'

Sir Henry paused and then took a sheaf of documents from the envelope.

'It may interest you to see these for yourself. They were handed me by the various people concerned, or collected from the waste-paper basket. I need hardly say they've been tested by experts for invisible ink, etc. No excitement of that kind is possible.'

Everyone crowded round to look. The catalogues were respectively from a nurseryman and from a prominent London fur establishment. The two bills addressed to Dr Rosen were a local one for seeds for the garden and one from a London stationery firm. The letter addressed to him ran as follows:

My Dear Rosen - Just back from Dr Helmuth Spath's. I saw Edgar Jackson the other day. He and Amos Perry have just come back from Tsingtau. In all Honesty I can't say I envy them the trip. Let me have news of you soon. As I said before: Beware of a certain person. You know who I mean, though you don't agree. –

Yours, Georgine.

'Mr Templeton's mail consisted of this bill, which as you see, is an account rendered from his tailor, and a letter from a friend in Germany,' went on Sir Henry. 'The latter, unfortunately, he tore up whilst out on his walk. Finally we have the letter received by Gertrud.'

Dear Mrs Swartz, - We're hoping as how you be able to come the social on friday evening, the vicar says has he hopes you will - one and all being welcome. The resipy for the ham was very good, and I thanks you for it. Hoping as this finds you well and that we shall see you friday I remain. - Yours faithfully, Emma Greene.

Dr Lloyd smiled a little over this and so did Mrs Bantry.

'I think the last letter can be put out of court.' said Dr Lloyd.

'I thought the same,' said Sir Henry; 'but I took the precaution of verifying that there was a Mrs Greene and a church social. One can't be too careful, you know.'

'That's what our friend Miss Marple always says,' said Dr Lloyd, smiling. 'You're lost in a daydream. Miss Marple. What are you thinking out?'

Miss Marple gave a start.

'So stupid of me,' she said. 'I was just wondering why the word Honesty in Dr Rosen's letter was spelt with a capital H.'

Mrs Bantry picked it up.

'So it is,' she said. '*Oh!*'

'Yes, dear,' said Miss Marple. 'I thought you'd notice!'

'There's a definite warning in that letter,' said Colonel Bantry. 'That's the first thing caught my attention. I notice more than you'd think. Yes, a definite warning - against whom?'

'There's rather a curious point about that letter,' said Sir Henry. 'According to Templeton, Dr Rosen opened the letter at breakfast and tossed it across to him saying he didn't know who the fellow was from Adam.'

'But it wasn't a fellow,' said Jane Helier. 'It was signed "Georgina".'

'It's difficult to say which it is,' said Dr Lloyd. 'It might be Georgey; but it certainly looks more like Georgina. Only it strikes me that the writing is a man's.'

'You know, that's interesting,' said Colonel Bantry. 'His tossing it across the table like that and pretending he knew nothing about it. Wanted to watch somebody's face. Whose face - the girl's? or the man's?'

'Or even the cook's?' suggested Mrs Bantry. 'She might have been in the room bringing in the breakfast. But what I don't see is... it's most peculiar - '

She frowned over the letter. Miss Marple drew closer to her. Miss Marple's finger went out and touched the sheet of paper. They murmured together.

'But why did the secretary tear up the other letter?' asked Jane Holier suddenly. 'It seems - oh! I don't know - it seems queer. Why should he have letters from Germany? Although, of course, if he's above suspicion, as you say - '

'But Sir Henry didn't say that,' said Miss Marple quickly, looking up from her murmured conference with Mrs Bantry. 'He said *four* suspects. So that shows that he includes Mr Templeton. I'm right, am I not, Sir Henry?'

'Yes, Miss Marple. I have learned one thing through bitter experience. Never say to yourself that *anyone* is above suspicion. I gave you reasons just now why three of these people might after all be guilty, unlikely as it seemed. I did not at that time apply the same process to Charles Templeton. But I came to it at last through pursuing the rule I have just mentioned. And I was forced to recognize this: That every army and every navy and every police force has a certain number of traitors within its ranks, much as we hate to admit the idea. And I examined dispassionately the case against Charles Templeton.

'I asked myself very much the same questions as Miss Helier has just asked. Why should he, alone of all the house, not be able to produce the letter he had received - a letter, moreover, with a German stamp on it. Why should he have letters from Germany?

'The last question was an innocent one, and I actually put it to him. His reply came simply enough. His mother's sister was

married to a German. The letter had been from a German girl cousin. So I learned something I did not know before - that Charles Templeton had relations with people in Germany. And that put him definitely on the list of suspects - very much so. He is my own man - a lad I have always liked and trusted; but in common justice and fairness I must admit that he heads that list.

'But there it is - I do not know! I do not *know...* And in all probability I never shall know. It is not a question of punishing a murderer. It is a question that to me seems a hundred times more important. It is the blighting, perhaps, of an honourable man's whole career... because of suspicion - a suspicion that I dare not disregard.'

Miss Marple coughed and said gently:

'Then, Sir Henry, if I understand you rightly, it is this young Mr Templeton only who is so much on your mind?'

'Yes, in a sense. It should, in theory, be the same for all four, but that is not actually the case. Dobbs, for instance - suspicion may attach to him in my mind, but it will not actually affect his career. Nobody in the village has ever had any idea that old Dr Rosen's death was anything but an accident. Gertrud is slightly more affected. It must make, for instance, a difference in Fräulein Rosen's attitude toward her. But that, possibly, is not of great importance to her.

'As for Greta Rosen - well, here we come to the crux of the matter. Greta is a very pretty girl and Charles Templeton is a good-looking young man, and for five months they were thrown together with no outer distractions. The inevitable happened.

They fell in love with each other - even if they did not come to the point of admitting the fact in words.

'And then the catastrophe happens. It is three months ago now and a day or two after I returned, Greta Rosen came to see me. She had sold the cottage and was returning to Germany, having finally settled up her uncle's affairs. She came to me personally, although she knew I had retired, because it was really about a personal matter she wanted to see me. She beat about the bush a little, but at last it all came out. What did I think? That letter with the German stamp - she had worried about it and worried about it - the one Charles had torn up. Was it all right? Surely it *must* be all right. Of course she believed his story, but - oh! if she only *knew*! If she knew - for certain.

'You see? The same feeling: the wish to trust - but the horrible lurking suspicion, thrust resolutely to the back of the mind, but persisting nevertheless. I spoke to her with absolute frankness, and asked her to do the same. I asked her whether she had been on the point of caring for Charles, and he for her.

'"I think so," she said. "Oh, yes, I know it was so. We were so happy. Every day passed so contentedly. We knew - we both knew. There was no hurry - there was all the time in the world. Some day he would tell me he loved me, and I should tell him that I too - Ah! But you can guess! And now it is all changed. A black cloud has come between us - we are constrained, when we meet we do not know what to say. It is, perhaps, the same with him as with me... We are each saying to ourselves, 'If I were *sure*!' That is why, Sir Henry, I beg of you to say to me, 'You may be sure,

whoever killed your uncle, it was not Charles Templeton!' Say it to me! Oh, say it to me! I beg - I beg!"

'And, damn it all,' said Sir Henry, bringing down his fist with a bang on the table, 'I couldn't say it to her. They'll drift farther and farther apart, those two - with suspicion like a ghost between them - a ghost that can't be laid.'

He leant back in his chair, his face looked tired and grey. He shook his head once or twice despondently.

'And there's nothing more can be done, unless - ' He sat up straight again and a tiny whimsical smile crossed his face - 'unless Miss Marple can help us. Can't you, Miss Marple? I've a feeling that letter might be in your line, you know. The one about the church social. Doesn't it remind you of something or someone that makes everything perfectly plain? Can't you do something to help two helpless young people who want to be happy?'

Behind the whimsicality there was something earnest in his appeal. He had come to think very highly of the mental powers of this frail old-fashioned maiden lady. He looked across at her with something very like hope in his eyes.

Miss Marple coughed and smoothed her lace.

'It does remind me a little of Annie Poultny,' she admitted. 'Of course the letter is perfectly plain - both to Mrs Bantry and myself. I don't mean the church social letter, but the other one. You living so much in London and not being a gardener, Sir Henry, would not have been likely to notice.'

'Eh?' said Sir Henry. 'Notice what?'

Mrs Bantry reached out a hand and selected a catalogue. She opened it and read aloud with gusto:

'Dr Helmuth Spath. Pure lilac, a wonderfully fine flower, carried on exceptionally long and stiff stem. Splendid for cutting and garden decoration. A novelty of striking beauty.

'Edgar Jackson. Beautifully shaped chrysanthemum-like flower of a distinct brick-red colour.

'Amos Perry. Brilliant red, highly decorative.

'Tsingtau. Brilliant orange-red, showy garden plant and lasting cut flower.

'Honesty - '

'With a capital H, you remember,' murmured Miss Marple.

'Honesty. Rose and white shades, enormous perfect shaped flower.'

Mrs Bantry flung down the catalogue, and said with immense explosive force:

'*Dahlias!*'

'And their initial letters spell "DEATH",' explained Miss Marple.

'But the letter came to Dr Rosen himself,' objected Sir Henry.

'That was the clever part of it,' said Miss Marple. 'That and the warning in it. What would he do, getting a letter from someone he didn't know, full of names he didn't know. Why, of course, toss it over to his secretary.'

'Then, after all - '

'Oh, *no!*' said Miss Marple. '*Not* the secretary. Why, that's what makes it so perfectly clear that it *wasn't* him. He'd never have let that letter be found if so. And equally he'd never have destroyed a letter to himself with a German stamp on it. Really, his innocence is - if you'll allow me to use the word - just *shining*.'

'Then who - '

'Well, it seems almost certain - as certain as anything can be in this world. There was another person at the breakfast table, and she would - quite naturally under the circumstances - put out her hand for the letter and read it. And that would be that. You remember that she got a gardening catalogue by the same post - '

'Greta Rosen,' said Sir Henry, slowly. 'Then her visit to me - '

'Gentlemen never see through these things,' said Miss Marple. 'And I'm afraid they often think we old women are - well, cats, to see things the way we do. But there it is. One does know a great deal about one's own sex, unfortunately. I've no doubt there was a barrier between them. The young man felt a sudden inexplicable repulsion. He suspected, purely through instinct, and couldn't hide the suspicion. And I really think that the girl's visit to you was just pure *spite*. She was safe enough really, but she just went out of her way to fix your suspicions definitely on poor Mr Templeton. You weren't nearly so sure about him until after her visit.'

'I'm sure it was nothing that she said - ' began Sir Henry.

'Gentlemen,' said Miss Marple calmly, 'never see through these things.'

'And that girl - ' he stopped. 'She commits a cold-blooded murder and gets off scot-free!'

'Oh! no, Sir Henry,' said Miss Marple. 'Not Scot free. Neither you nor I believe that. Remember what you said not long ago. No. Greta Rosen will not escape punishment. To begin with, she must be in with a very queer set of people - blackmailers and terrorists - associates who will do her no good, and will probably bring her to a miserable end. As you say, one mustn't waste thoughts on the guilty - it's the innocent who matter. Mr Templeton, who I daresay will marry that German cousin, his tearing up her letter looks - well, it looks *suspicious* - using the word in quite a different sense from the one we've been using all the evening. A little as though he were afraid of the other girl noticing or asking to see it? Yes, I think there must have been some little romance there. And then there's Dobbs - though, as you say, I daresay it won't matter much to him. His elevenses are probably all he thinks about. And then there's that poor old Gertrud - the one who reminded me of Annie Poultny. Poor Annie Poultny. Fifty years faithful service and suspected of making away with Miss Lamb's will, though nothing could be proved. Almost broke the poor creature's faithful heart; and then after she was dead it came to light in the secret drawer of the tea caddy where old Miss Lamb had put it herself for safety. But too late then for poor Annie.

'That's what worries me so about that poor old German woman. When one is old, one becomes embittered very easily. I felt much

more sorry for her than for Mr Templeton, who is young and good looking and evidently a favourite with the ladies. You will write to her, won't you, Sir Henry, and just tell her that her innocence is established beyond doubt? Her dear old master dead, and she no doubt brooding and feeling herself suspected of... Oh! It won't bear thinking about!'

'I will write, Miss Marple,' said Sir Henry. He looked at her curiously. 'You know, I shall never quite understand you. Your outlook is always a different one from what I expect.'

'My outlook, I am afraid, is a very petty one,' said Miss Marple humbly. 'I hardly ever go out of St Mary Mead.'

'And yet you have solved what may be called an International mystery,' said Sir Henry. 'For you *have* solved it. I am convinced of that.'

Miss Marple blushed, then bridled a little.

'I was, I think, well educated for the standard of my day. My sister and I had a German governess - a Fräulein. A very sentimental creature. She taught us the language of flowers - a forgotten study nowadays, but most charming. A yellow tulip, for instance, means Hopeless Love, whilst a China Aster means I die of Jealousy at your feet. That letter was signed Georgine, which I seem to remember is Dahlia in German, and that of course made the whole thing perfectly clear. I wish I could remember the meaning of Dahlia, but alas, that eludes me. My memory is not what it was.'

'At any rate it didn't mean DEATH.'

'No, indeed. Horrible, is it not! There are very sad things in the world.'

'There are,' said Mrs Bantry with a sigh. 'It's lucky one has flowers and one's friends.'

'She puts us last, you observe,' said Dr Lloyd.

'A man used to send me purple orchids every night to the theatre,' said Jane dreamily.

'"I await your favours," - that's what that means,' said Miss Marple brightly.

Sir Henry gave a peculiar sort of cough and turned his head away.

Miss Marple gave a sudden exclamation.

'I've remembered. Dahlias mean "Treachery and Misrepresentation. "'

'Wonderful,' said Sir Henry. 'Absolutely wonderful.'

And he sighed.

A Christmas Tragedy

'I have a complaint to make,' said Sir Henry Clithering. His eyes twinkled gently as he looked round at the assembled company. Colonel Bantry, his legs stretched out, was frowning at the

mantelpiece as though it were a delinquent soldier on parade, his wife was surreptitiously glancing at a catalogue of bulbs which had come by the late post, Dr Lloyd was gazing with frank admiration at Jane Helier, and that beautiful young actress herself was thoughtfully regarding her pink polished nails. Only that elderly, spinster lady, Miss Marple, was sitting bolt upright, and her faded blue eyes met Sir Henry's with an answering twinkle.

'A complaint?' she murmured.

'A very serious complaint. We are a company of six, three representatives of each sex, and I protest on behalf of the downtrodden males. We have had three stories told tonight - and told by the three men! I protest that the ladies have not done their fair share.'

'Oh!' said Mrs Bantry with indignation. 'I'm sure we have. We've listened with the most intelligent appreciation. We've displayed the true womanly attitude - not wishing to thrust ourselves in the limelight!'

'It's an excellent excuse,' said Sir Henry; 'but it won't do. And there's a very good precedent in the Arabian Nights! So, forward, Scheherazade.'

'Meaning me?' said Mrs Bantry. 'But I don't know anything to tell. I've never been surrounded by blood or mystery.'

'I don't absolutely insist upon blood,' said Sir Henry. 'But I'm sure one of you three ladies has got a pet mystery. Come now, Miss Marple - the "Curious Coincidence of the Charwoman" or the

"Mystery of the Mothers' Meeting". Don't disappoint me in St Mary Mead.'

Miss Marple shook her head.

'Nothing that would interest you, Sir Henry. We have our little mysteries, of course - there was that gill of picked shrimps that disappeared so incomprehensibly; but that wouldn't interest you because it all turned out to be so trivial, though throwing a considerable light on human nature.'

'You have taught me to dote on human nature,' said Sir Henry solemnly.

'What about you, Miss Helier?' asked Colonel Bantry. 'You must have had some interesting experiences.'

'Yes, indeed,' said Dr Lloyd.

'Me?' said Jane. 'You mean - you want me to tell you something that happened to me?'

'Or to one of your friends,' amended Sir Henry.

'Oh!' said Jane vaguely. 'I don't think anything has ever happened to me - I mean not that kind of thing. Flowers, of course, and queer messages - but that's just men, isn't it? I don't think - ' she paused and appeared lost in thought.

'I see we shall have to have that epic of the shrimps,' said Sir Henry. 'Now then, Miss Marple.'

'You're so fond of your joke, Sir Henry. The shrimps are only nonsense; but now I come to think of it, I *do* remember one

incident - at least not exactly an incident, something very much more serious - a tragedy. And I was, in a way, mixed up in it; and for what I did, I have never had any regrets - no, no regrets at all. But it didn't happen in St Mary Mead.'

'That disappoints me,' said Sir Henry. 'But I will endeavour to bear up. I knew we should not rely upon you in vain.'

He settled himself in the attitude of a listener. Miss Marple grew slightly pink.

'I hope I shall be able to tell it properly,' she said anxiously. 'I fear I am very inclined to become *rambling*. One wanders from the point - altogether without knowing that one is doing so. And it is so hard to remember each fact in its proper order. You must all bear with me if I tell my story badly. It happened a very long time ago now.

'As I say, it was not connected with St Mary Mead. As a matter of fact, it had to do with a Hydro - '

'Do you mean a seaplane?' asked Jane with wide eyes.

'You wouldn't know, dear,' said Mrs Bantry, and explained. Her husband added his quota:

'Beastly places - absolutely beastly! Got to get up early and drink filthy-tasting water. Lot of old women sitting about. Ill-natured tittle tattle. God, when I think - '

'Now, Arthur,' said Mrs Bantry placidly. 'You know it did you all the good in the world.'

'Lot of old women sitting round talking scandal,' grunted Colonel Bantry.

'That I am afraid is true,' said Miss Marple. 'I myself - '

'My dear Miss Marple,' cried the colonel, horrified. 'I didn't mean for one moment - '

With pink cheeks and a little gesture of the hand, Miss Marple stopped him.

'But it is *true*, Colonel Bantry. Only I should just like to say this. Let me recollect my thoughts. Yes. Talking scandal, as you say - well, it is done a good deal. And people are very down on it - especially young people. My nephew, who writes books - and very clever ones, I believe - has said some most *scathing* things about taking people's characters away without any kind of proof - and how wicked it is, and all that. But what I say is that none of these young people ever stop to *think*. They really don't examine the facts. Surely the whole crux of the matter is this: *How often is tittle tattle*, as you call it, *true*! And I think if, as I say, they really examined the facts they would find that it was true nine times out of ten! That's really just what makes people so annoyed about it.'

'The inspired guess,' said Sir Henry.

'No, not that, not that at all! It's really a matter of practice and experience. An Egyptologist, so I've heard, if you show him one of those curious little beetles, can tell you by the look and the feel of the thing what date BC it is, or if it's a Birmingham imitation. And he can't always give a definite rule for doing so. He just knows. His life has been spent handling such things.

'And that's what I'm trying to say (very badly, I know). What my nephew calls "superfluous women" have a lot of time on their hands, and their chief interest is usually *people*. And so, you see, they get to be what one might call *experts*. Now young people nowadays - they talk very freely about things that weren't mentioned in my young days, but on the other hand their minds are terribly innocent. They believe in everyone and everything. And if one tries to warn them, ever so gently, they tell one that one has a Victorian mind - and that, they say, is like a *sink*.'

'After all,' said Sir Henry, 'what is wrong with a *sink*?'

'Exactly,' said Miss Marple eagerly. 'It's the most necessary thing in any house; but, of course, not romantic. Now I must confess that I have my *feelings*, like everyone else, and I have sometimes been cruelly hurt by unthinking remarks. I know gentlemen are not interested in domestic matters, but I must just mention my maid Ethel - a very good-looking girl and obliging in every way. Now I realized as soon as I saw her that she was the same type as Annie Webb and poor Mrs Bruitt's girl. If the opportunity arose *mine* and *thine* would mean nothing to her. So I let her go at the month and I gave her a written reference saying she was honest and sober, but privately I warned old Mrs Edwards against taking her, and my nephew, Raymond, was exceedingly angry and said he had never heard of anything so wicked - yes, *wicked*. Well, she went to Lady Ashton, whom I felt no obligation to warn - and what happened? All the lace cut off her underclothes and two diamond brooches taken - and the girl departed in the middle of the night and never heard of since!'

Miss Marple paused, drew a long breath, and then went on.

'You'll be saying this has nothing to do with what went on at Keston Spa Hydro - but it has in a way. It explains why I felt no doubt in my mind the first moment I saw the Sanders together that he meant to do away with her.'

'Eh?' said Sir Henry, leaning forward.

Miss Marple turned a placid face to him.

'As I say, Sir Henry, I felt no doubt in my own mind. Mr Sanders was a big, good-looking, florid-faced man, very hearty in his manner and popular with all. And nobody could have been pleasanter to his wife than he was. But I knew! He meant to make away with her.'

'My dear Miss Marple - '

'Yes, I know. That's what my nephew Raymond West would say. He'd tell me I hadn't a shadow of proof. But I remember Walter Hones, who kept the Green Man. Walking home with his wife one night she fell into the river - and *he* collected the insurance money! And one or two other people that are walking about scot free to this day - one indeed in our own class of life. Went to Switzerland for a summer holiday climbing with his wife. I warned her not to go - the poor dear didn't get angry with me as she might have done - she only laughed. It seemed to her funny that a queer old thing like me should say such things about her Harry. Well, well, there was an accident - and Harry is married to another woman now. But what could I *do*? I *knew*, but there was no proof.'

'Oh! Miss Marple,' cried Mrs Bantry. 'You don't really mean - '

'My dear, these things are very common - very common indeed. And gentlemen are especially tempted, being so much the stronger. So easy if a thing looks like an accident. As I say, I knew at once with the Sanders. It was on a tram. It was full inside and I had had to go on top. We all three got up to get off and Mr Sanders lost his balance and fell right against his wife, sending her headfirst down the stairs. Fortunately the conductor was a very strong young man and caught her.'

'But surely that must have been an accident.'

'Of course it was an accident - nothing could have looked more accidental! But Mr Saunders had been in the Merchant Service, so he told me, and a man who can keep his balance on a nasty tilting boat doesn't lose it on top of a tram if an old woman like me doesn't. Don't tell me!'

'At any rate we can take it that you made up your mind, Miss Marple,' said Sir Henry. 'Made it up then and there.'

The old lady nodded.

'I was sure enough, and another incident in crossing the street not long afterwards made me surer still. Now I ask you, what could I do, Sir Henry? Here was a nice contented happy little married woman shortly going to be murdered.'

'My dear lady, you take my breath away.'

'That's because, like most people nowadays, you won't face facts. You prefer to think such a thing couldn't be. But it was so, and I knew it. But one is so sadly handicapped! I couldn't, for instance, go to the police. And to warn the young woman would, I

could see, be useless. She was devoted to the man. I just made it my business to find out as much as I could about them. One has a lot of opportunities doing one's needlework round the fire. Mrs Sanders (Gladys, her name was) was only too willing to talk. It seems they had not been married very long. Her husband had some property that was coming to him, but for the moment they were very badly off. In fact, they were living on her little income. One has heard that tale before. She bemoaned the fact that she could not touch the capital. It seems that somebody had had some sense somewhere! But the money was hers to will away - I found that out And she and her husband had made wills in favour of each other directly after their marriage. Very touching. Of course, when Jack's affairs came right - that was the burden all day long, and in the meantime they were very hard up indeed - actually had a room on the top floor, all among the servants - and so dangerous in case of fire, though, as it happened, there was a fire escape just outside their window. I inquired carefully if there was a balcony - dangerous things, balconies. One push - you know!

'I made her promise not to go out on the balcony; I said I'd had a dream. That impressed her - one can do a lot with superstition sometimes. She was a fair girl, rather washed-out complexion, and an untidy roll of hair on her neck. Very credulous. She repeated what I had said to her husband, and I noticed him looking at me in a curious way once or twice. *He* wasn't credulous; and he knew I'd been on that tram.

'But I was very worried - terribly worried - because I couldn't see how to circumvent him. I could prevent anything happening at the Hydro, just by saying a few words to show him I suspected. But

that only meant his putting off his plan till later. No, I began to believe that the only policy was a bold one - somehow or other to lay a trap for him. If I could induce him to attempt her life in a way of my own choosing - well, then he would be unmasked, and she would be forced to face the truth however much of a shock it was to her.'

'You take my breath away,' said Dr Lloyd. 'What conceivable plan could you adopt?'

'I'd have found one - never fear,' said Miss Marple. 'But the man was too clever for me. He didn't wait. He thought I might suspect, and so he struck before I could be sure. He knew I would suspect an accident. So he made it murder.'

A little gasp went round the circle. Miss Marple nodded and set her lips grimly together.

'I'm afraid I've put that rather abruptly. I must try and tell you exactly what occurred. I've always felt very bitterly about it - it seems to me that I ought, somehow, to have prevented it. But doubtless Providence knew best. I did what I could at all events.

'There was what I can only describe as a curiously eerie feeling in the air. There seemed to be something weighing on us all. A feeling of misfortune. To begin with, there was George, the hall porter. Had been there for years and knew everybody. Bronchitis and pneumonia, and passed away on the fourth day. Terribly sad. A real blow to everybody. And four days before Christmas too. And then one of the housemaids - such a nice girl - a septic finger, actually died in twenty-four hours.

'I was in the drawing-room with Miss Trollope and old Mrs Carpenter, and Mrs Carpenter was being positively ghoulish - relishing it all, you know.

'"Mark my words," she said. '*This isn't the end.* You know the saying? *Never two without three*. I've proved it true time and again. There'll be another death. Not a doubt of it. And we shan't have long to wait. *Never two without three*.'

'As she said the last words, nodding her head and clicking her knitting needles, I just chanced to look up and there was Mr Sanders standing in the doorway. Just for a minute he was off guard, and I saw the look in his face as plain as plain. I shall believe till my dying day that it was that ghoulish Mrs Carpenter's words that put the whole thing into his head. I saw his mind working.

'He came forward into the room smiling in his genial way.

'"Any Christmas shopping I can do for you ladies?" he asked. "I'm going down to Keston presently."

'He stayed a minute or two, laughing and talking, and then went out. As I tell you, I was troubled, and I said straight away:

'"Where's Mrs Sanders? Does anyone know?"

'Mrs Trollope said she'd gone out to some friends of hers, the Mortimers, to play bridge, and that eased my mind for the moment. But I was still very worried and most uncertain as to what to do. About half an hour later I went up to my room. I met Dr Coles, my doctor, there, coming down the stairs as I was going up, and as I happened to want to consult him about my

rheumatism, I took him into my room with me then and there. He mentioned to me then (in confidence, he said) about the death of the poor girl Mary. The manager didn't want the news to get about, he said, so would I keep it to myself. Of course I didn't tell him that we'd all been discussing nothing else for the last hour - ever since the poor girl breathed her last. These things are always known at once, and a man of his experience should know that well enough; but Dr Coles always was a simple unsuspicious fellow who believed what he wanted to believe and that's just what alarmed me a minute later. He said as he was leaving that Sanders had asked him to have a look at his wife. It seemed she'd been seedy of late - indigestion, etc.

'Now that very self-same day Gladys Sanders had said to me that she'd got a wonderful digestion and was thankful for it.

'You see? All my suspicions of that man came back a hundredfold. He was preparing the way - for what? Dr Coles left before I could make up my mind whether to speak to him or not - though really if I had spoken I shouldn't have known what to say. As I came out of my room, the man himself - Sanders - came down the stairs from the floor above. He was dressed to go out and he asked me again if he could do anything for me in the town. It was all I could do to be civil to the man! I went straight into the lounge and ordered tea. It was just on half past five, I remember.

'Now I'm very anxious to put clearly what happened next. I was still in the lounge at a quarter to seven when Mr Sanders came in. There were two gentlemen with him and all three of them were inclined to be a little on the lively side. Mr Sanders left his two friends and came right over to where I was sitting with Miss

Trollope. He explained that he wanted our advice about a Christmas present he was giving his wife. It was an evening bag.

'"And you see, ladies," he said, "I'm only a rough sailorman. What do I know about such things? I've had three sent to me on approval and I want an expert opinion on them."

'We said, of course, that we would be delighted to help him, and he asked if we'd mind coming upstairs, as his wife might come in any minute if he brought the things down. So we went up with him. I shall never forget what happened next - I can feel my little fingers tingling now.

'Mr Sanders opened the door of the bedroom and switched on the light. I don't know which of us saw it first...

'Mrs Sanders was lying on the floor, face downwards - dead.

'I got to her first. I knelt down and took her hand and felt for the pulse, but it was useless, the arm itself was cold and stiff. Just by her head was a stocking filled with sand - the weapon she had been struck down with. Miss Trollope, silly creature, was moaning and moaning by the door and holding her head. Sanders gave a great cry of "My wife, my wife," and rushed to her. I stopped him touching her. You see, I was sure at the moment he had done it, and there might have been something that he wanted to take away or hide.

'"Nothing must be touched," I said. "Pull yourself together, Mr Sanders. Miss Trollope, please go down and fetch the manager."

'I stayed there, kneeling by the body. I wasn't going to leave Sanders alone with it. And yet I was forced to admit that if the

man was acting, he was acting marvellously. He looked dazed and bewildered and scared out of his wits.

'The manager was with us in no time. He made a quick inspection of the room then turned us all out and locked the door, the key of which he took. Then he went off and telephoned to the police. It seemed a positive age before they came (we learnt afterwards that the line was out of order). The manager had to send a messenger to the police station, and the Hydro is right out of the town, up on the edge of the moor, and Mrs Carpenter tried us all very severely. She was so pleased at her prophecy of "Never two without three" coming true so quickly. Sanders, I hear, wandered out into the grounds, clutching his head and groaning and displaying every sign of grief.

'However, the police came at last. They went upstairs with the manager and Mr Sanders. Later they sent down for me. I went up. The Inspector was there, sitting at a table writing. He was an intelligent-looking man and I liked him.

'"Miss Jane Marple?" he said.

'"Yes."

'"I understand, madam, that you were present when the body of the deceased was found?"

'I said I was and I described exactly what had occurred. I think it was a relief to the poor man to find someone who could answer his questions coherently, having previously had to deal with Sanders and Emily Trollope, who, I gather, was completely demoralized - she would be, the silly creature! I remember my

dear mother teaching me that a gentlewoman should always be able to control herself in public, however much she may give way in private.'

'An admirable maxim,' said Sir Henry gravely.

'When I had finished the Inspector said:

'"Thank you, madam. Now I'm afraid I must ask you just to look at the body once more. Is that exactly the position in which it was lying when you entered the room? It hasn't been moved in any way?"

'I explained that I had prevented Mr Sanders from doing so, and the Inspector nodded approval.

'"The gentleman seems terribly upset," he remarked.

'"He seems so - yes," I replied.

'I don't think I put any special emphasis on the "seems", but the Inspector looked at me rather keenly.

'"So we can take it that the body is exactly as it was when found?" he said.

'"Except for the hat, yes," I replied.

The Inspector looked up sharply.

'"What do you mean - the hat?"

'I explained that the hat had been on poor Gladys's head, whereas now it was lying beside her. I thought, of course, that the police had done this. The Inspector, however, denied it

emphatically. Nothing had, as yet, been moved or touched. He stood looking down at that poor prone figure with a puzzled frown. Gladys was dressed in her outdoor clothes - a big dark-red tweed coat with a grey fur collar. The hat, a cheap affair of red felt, lay just by her head.

'The Inspector stood for some minutes in silence, frowning to himself. Then an idea struck him.

'"Can you, by any chance, remember, madam, whether there were earrings in the ears, or whether the deceased habitually wore earrings?"

'Now fortunately I am in the habit of observing closely. I remembered that there had been a glint of pearls just below the hat brim, though I had paid no particular notice to it at the time. I was able to answer his first question in the affirmative.

'"Then that settles it. The lady's jewel case was rifled - not that she had anything much of value, I understand - and the rings were taken from her fingers. The murderer must have forgotten the earrings, and come back for them after the murder was discovered. A cool customer! Or perhaps - " He stared round the room and said slowly, "He may have been concealed here in this room - all the time."

'But I negatived that idea. I myself, I explained, looked under the bed. And the manager had opened the doors of the wardrobe. There was nowhere else where a man could hide. It is true the hat cupboard was locked in the middle of the wardrobe, but as that was only a shallow affair with shelves, no one could have been concealed there.

The Inspector nodded his head slowly whilst I explained all this.

'"I'll take your word for it, madam," he said. "In that case, as I said before, he must have come back. A very cool customer."

'"But the manager locked the door and took the key!"

'"That's nothing. The balcony and the fire escape - that's the way the thief came. Why, as likely as not, you actually disturbed him at work. He slips out of the window, and when you've all gone, back he comes and goes on with his business."

'"You are sure," I said, "that there *was* a thief?"

'He said drily:

'"Well, it looks like it, doesn't it?"

'But something in his tone satisfied me. I felt that he wouldn't take Mr Sanders in the rôle of the bereaved widower too seriously.

'You see, I admit it frankly. I was absolutely under the opinion of what I believe our neighbours, the French, call the *ideé fixe*. I knew that that man, Sanders, intended his wife to die. What I didn't allow for was that strange and fantastic thing, coincidence. My views about Mr Sanders were - I was sure of it - absolutely right and *true*. The man was a scoundrel. But although his hypocritical assumptions of grief didn't deceive me for a minute, I do remember feeling at the time that his *surprise* and *bewilderment were marvellously well done. They seemed absolutely natural* - if you know what I mean. I must admit that after my conversation with the inspector, a curious feeling of doubt crept over me. Because if Sanders had done this dreadful

thing, I couldn't imagine any conceivable reason why he should creep back by means of the fire escape and take the earrings from his wife's ears; It wouldn't have been a *sensible* thing to do, and Sanders was such a very sensible man - that's just why I always felt he was so dangerous.'

Miss Marple looked round at her audience.

'You see, perhaps, what I am coming to? It is, so often, the unexpected that happens in this world. I was so sure, and that, I think, was what blinded me. The result came as a shock to me. *For it was proved, beyond any possible doubt, that Mr Sanders could not possibly have committed the crime...* '

A surprised gasp came from Mrs Bantry. Miss Marple turned to her.

'I know, my dear, that isn't what you expected when I began this story. It wasn't what I expected either. But facts are facts, and if one is proved to be wrong, one must just be humble about it and start again. That Mr Sanders was a murderer at heart I knew - and nothing ever occurred to upset that firm conviction of mine.

'And now, I expect, you would like to hear the actual facts themselves. Mrs Sanders, as you know, spent the afternoon playing bridge with some friends, the Mortimers. She left them at about a quarter past six. From her friends' house to the Hydro was about a quarter of an hour's walk - less if one hurried. She must have come in then about six-thirty. No one saw her come in, so she must have entered by the side door and hurried straight up to her room. There she changed (the fawn coat and skirt she wore to the bridge party were hanging up in the cupboard) and

was evidently preparing to go out again, when the blow fell. Quite possibly they say, she never even knew who struck her. The sandbag, I understand, is a very efficient weapon. That looks as though the attackers were concealed in the room, possibly in one of the big wardrobe cupboards - the one she didn't open.

'Now as to the movements of Mr Sanders. He went out, as I have said, at about five-thirty - or a little after. He did some shopping at a couple of shops and at about six o'clock he entered the Grand Spa Hotel where he encountered two friends - the same with whom he returned to the Hydro later. They played billiards and, I gather, had a good many whiskies and sodas together. These two men (Hitchcock and Spender, their names were) were actually with him the whole time from six o'clock onwards. They walked back to the Hydro with him and he only left them to come across to me and Miss Trollope. That, as I told you, was about a quarter to seven -- at which time his wife must have been already dead.

'I must tell you that I talked myself to these two friends of his. I did not like them. They were neither pleasant nor gentlemanly men, but I was quite certain of one thing, that they were speaking the absolute truth when they said that Sanders had been the whole time in their company.

'There was just one other little point that came up. It seems that while bridge was going on Mrs Sanders was called to the telephone. A Mr Littleworth wanted to speak to her. She seemed both excited and pleased about something - and incidentally made one or two bad mistakes. She left rather earlier than they had expected her to do.

'Mr Sanders was asked whether he knew the name of Littleworth as being one of his wife's friends, but he declared he had never heard of anyone of that name. And to me that seems borne out by his wife's attitude - she too, did not seem to know the name of Littleworth. Nevertheless she came back from the telephone smiling and blushing, so it looks as though whoever it was did not give his real name, and that in itself has a suspicious aspect, does it not?

'Anyway, that is the problem that was left. The burglar story, which seems unlikely - or the alternative theory that Mrs Sanders was preparing to go out and meet somebody. Did that somebody come to her room by means of the fire escape? Was there a quarrel? Or did he treacherously attack her?'

Miss Marple stopped.

'Well?' said Sir Henry. 'What is the answer?'

'I wondered if any of you could guess.'

'I'm never good at guessing,' said Mrs Bantry. 'It seems a pity that Sanders had such a wonderful alibi; but if it satisfied you it must have been all right.'

Jane Helier moved her beautiful head and asked a question.

'Why,' she said, 'was the hat cupboard locked?'

'How very clever of you my dear,' said Miss Marple, beaming. 'That's just what I wondered myself. Though the explanation was quite simple. In it were a pair of embroidered slippers and some pocket handkerchiefs that the poor girl was embroidering for her

husband for Christmas. That's why she locked the cupboard. The key was found in her handbag.'

'Oh!' said Jane. 'Then it isn't very interesting after all.'

'Oh! but it is,' said Miss Marple. 'It's just the one really interesting thing - the thing that made all the murderer's plans go wrong.'

Everyone stared at the old lady.

'I didn't see it myself for two days,' said Miss Marple. 'I puzzled and puzzled - and then suddenly there it was, all clear. I went to the inspector and asked him to try something and he did.'

'What did you ask him to try?'

'*I asked him to fit that hat on the poor girl's head* - and of course he couldn't. It wouldn't go on. *It wasn't her hat, you see*.'

Mrs Bantry stared.

'But it was on her head to begin with?'

'Not on *her* head - '

Miss Marple stopped a moment to let her words sink in, and then went on.

'We took it for granted that it was poor Gladys's body there; but we never looked at the face. She was face downwards, remember, and the hat hid everything.'

'But she was killed?'

'Yes, later. At the moment that we were telephoning to the police, Gladys Sanders was alive and well.'

'You mean it was someone pretending to be her? But surely when you touched her - '

'It was a dead body, right enough,' said Miss Marple gravely.

'But, dash it all,' said Colonel Bantry, 'you can't get hold of dead bodies right and left. What did they do with the - the first corpse afterwards?'

'He put it back,' said Miss Marple. 'It was a wicked idea - but a very clever one. It was our talk in the drawing-room that put it into his head. The body of poor Mary, the housemaid - why not use it? Remember, the Sanders' room was up amongst the servants' quarters. Mary's room was two doors off. The undertakers wouldn't come till after dark - he counted on that. He carried the body along the balcony (it was dark at five), dressed it in one of his wife's dresses and her big red coat. And then he found the hat cupboard locked! There was only one thing to be done, he fetched one of the poor girl's own hats. No one would notice. He put the sandbag down beside her. Then he went off to establish his alibi.

'He telephoned to his wife - calling himself Mr Littleworth. I don't know what he said to her - she was a credulous girl, as I said just now. But he got her to leave the bridge party early and not to go back to the Hydro, and arranged with her to meet him in the grounds of the Hydro near the fire escape at seven o'clock. He probably told her he had some surprise for her.

'He returns to the Hydro with his friends and arranges that Miss Trollope and I shall discover the crime with him. He even pretends to turn the body over - and I stop him! Then the police are sent for, and he staggers out into the grounds.

'Nobody asked him for an alibi *after* the crime. He meets his wife, takes her up the fire escape, they enter their room. Perhaps he has already told her some story about the body. She stoops over it, and he picks up his sandbag and strikes... Oh, dear! It makes me sick to think of, even now! Then quickly he strips off her coat and skirt, hangs them up, and dresses her in the clothes from the other body.

'*But the hat won't go on.* Mary's head is shingled - Gladys Sanders, as I say, had a great bun of hair. He is forced to leave it beside the body and hope no one will notice. Then he carries poor Mary's body back to her own room and arranges it decorously once more.'

'It seems incredible,' said Dr Lloyd. 'The risks he took. The police might have arrived too soon.'

'You remember the line was out of order,' said Miss Marple. 'That was a piece of *his* work. He couldn't afford to have the police on the spot too soon. When they did come, they spent some time in the manager's office before going up to the bedroom. That was the weakest point - the chance that someone might notice the difference between a body that had been dead two hours and one that had been dead just over half an hour; but he counted on the fact that the people who first discovered the crime would have no expert knowledge.'

Dr Lloyd nodded.

'The crime would be supposed to have been committed about a quarter to seven or thereabouts, I suppose,' he said. 'It was actually committed at seven or a few minutes after. When the police surgeon examined the body it would be about half past seven at earliest. He couldn't possibly tell.'

'I am the person who should have known,' said Miss Marple. 'I felt the poor girl's hand and it was icy cold. Yet a short time later the Inspector spoke as though the murder must have been committed just before we arrived - and I saw nothing!'

'I think you saw a good deal, Miss Marple,' said Sir Henry. 'The case was before my time. I don't even remember hearing of it. What happened?'

'Sanders was hanged,' said Miss Marple crisply. 'And a good job too. I have never regretted my part in bringing that man to justice. I've no patience with modern humanitarian scruples about capital punishment.'

Her stern face softened.

'But I have often reproached myself bitterly with failing to save the life of that poor girl. But who would have listened to an old woman jumping to conclusions? Well, well - who knows? Perhaps it was better for her to die while life was still happy than it would have been for her to live on, unhappy and disillusioned, in a world that would have seemed suddenly horrible. She loved that scoundrel and trusted him. She never found him out.'

'Well, then,' said Jane Helier, 'she was all right. Quite all right. I wish - ' she stopped.

Miss Marple looked at the famous, the beautiful, the successful Jane Helier and nodded her head gently.

'I see, my dear,' she said very gently. 'I see.'

The Herb of Death

'Now then, Mrs B,' said Sir Henry Clithering encouragingly.

Mrs Bantry, his hostess, looked at him in cold reproof.

'I've told you before that I will *not* be called Mrs B. It's not dignified.'

'Scheherazade, then.'

'And even less am I Sche - what's her name? I never can tell a story properly, ask Arthur if you don't believe me.'

'You're quite good at the facts, Dolly,' said Colonel Bantry, 'but poor at the embroidery.'

'That's just it,' said Mrs Bantry. She flapped the bulb catalogue she was holding on the table in front of her. 'I've been listening to you all and I don't know how you do it. "He said, she said, you wondered, they thought, everyone implied" - well, I just couldn't and there it is! And besides I don't know anything to tell a story about.'

'We can't believe that Mrs Bantry,' said Dr Lloyd. He shook his grey head in mocking disbelief.

Old Miss Marple said in her gentle voice: 'Surely dear - '

Mrs Bantry continued obstinately to shake her head.

'You don't know how banal my life is. What with the servants and the difficulties of getting scullery maids, and just going to town for clothes, and dentists, and Ascot (which Arthur hates) and then the garden - '

'Ah!' said Dr Lloyd. 'The garden. We all know where your heart lies, Mrs Bantry.'

'It must be nice to have a garden.' said Jane Helier, the beautiful young actress. 'That is, if you hadn't got to dig, or to get your hands messed up. I'm ever so fond of flowers.'

'The garden,' said Sir Henry. 'Can't we take that as a starting point? Come, Mrs B. The poisoned bulb, the deadly daffodils, the herb of death?'

'Now it's odd your saying that,' said Mrs Bantry. 'You've just reminded me. Arthur, do you remember that business at Clodderham Court? You know. Old Sir Ambrose Bercy. Do you remember what a courtly charming old man we thought him?'

'Why, of course. Yes, that *was* a strange business. Go ahead. Dolly.'

'You'd better tell it, dear.'

'Nonsense. Go ahead. Must paddle your own canoe. I did my bit just now.'

Mrs Bantry drew a deep breath. She clasped her hands and her face registered complete mental anguish. She spoke rapidly and fluently.

'Well, there's really not much to tell. The Herb of Death - that's what put it into my head, though in my own mind I call it *sage and onions*.'

'Sage and onions?' asked Dr Lloyd.

Mrs Bantry nodded.

'That was how it happened you see,' she explained. 'We were staying, Arthur and I, with Sir Ambrose Bercy at Clodderham Court, and one day, by mistake (though very stupidly, I've always thought) a lot of foxglove leaves were picked with the sage. The ducks for dinner that night were stuffed with it and everyone was very ill, and one poor girl - Sir Ambrose's ward - died of it.'

She stopped.

'Dear, dear,' said Miss Marple, 'how very tragic.'

'Wasn't it?'

'Well,' said Sir Henry, 'what next?'

'There isn't any next,' said Mrs Bantry, 'that's all.'

Everyone gasped. Though warned beforehand, they had not expected quite such brevity as this.

'But, my dear lady,' remonstrated Sir Henry, 'it can't be all. What you have related is a tragic occurrence, but not in any sense of the word a problem.'

'Well, of course there's some more,' said Mrs Bantry. 'But if I were to tell you it, you'd know what it was.'

She looked defiantly round the assembly and said plaintively:

'I told you I couldn't dress things up and make it sound properly like a story ought to do.'

'Ah ha!' said Sir Henry. He sat up in his chair and adjusted an eyeglass. 'Really, you know, Scheherazade, this is most refreshing. Our ingenuity is challenged. I'm not so sure you haven't done it on purpose - to stimulate our curiosity. A few brisk rounds of "Twenty Questions" is indicated, I think. Miss Marple, will you begin?'

'I'd like to know something about the cook,' said Miss Marple. 'She must have been a very stupid woman, or else very inexperienced.'

'She was just very stupid,' said Mrs Bantry. 'She cried a great deal afterwards and said the leaves had been picked and brought in to her as sage, and how was she to know?'

'Not one who thought for herself,' said Miss Marple.

'Probably an elderly woman and, I daresay, a very good cook?'

'Oh! excellent,' said Mrs Bantry.

'Your turn, Miss Helier,' said Sir Henry.

'Oh! You mean - to ask a question?' there was a pause while Jane pondered. Finally she said helplessly, 'Really - I don't know what to ask.'

Her beautiful eyes looked appealingly at Sir Henry.

'Why not dramatis personae, Miss Helier?' he suggested smiling.

Jane still looked puzzled.

'Characters in order of their appearance,' said Sir Henry gently.

'Oh, yes,' said Jane. 'That's a good idea.'

Mrs Bantry began briskly to tick people off on her fingers.

'Sir Ambrose - Sylvia Keene (that's the girl who died) - a friend of hers who was staying there, Maud Wye, one of those dark ugly girls who manage to make an effort somehow - I never know how they do it. Then there was a Mr Curie who had come down to discuss books with Sir Ambrose - you know, rare books - queer old things in Latin - all musty parchment. There was Jerry Lorimer - he was a kind of next door neighbour. His place, Fairlies, joined Sir Ambrose's estate. And there was Mrs Carpenter, one of those middle-aged pussies who always seem to manage to dig themselves in comfortably somewhere. She was by way of being *dame de compagnie* to Sylvia, I suppose.'

'If it is my turn,' said Sir Henry, 'and I suppose it is, as I'm sitting next to Miss Holier, I want a good deal. I want a short verbal portrait, please, Mrs Bantry, of all the foregoing.'

'Oh!' Mrs Bantry hesitated.

'Sir Ambrose now,' continued Sir Henry. 'Start with him. What was he like?'

'Oh! he was a very distinguished-looking old man - and not so very old really - not more than sixty, I suppose. But he was very delicate - he had a weak heart, could never go upstairs - he had to have a lift put in, and so that made him seem older than he was. Very charming manners - *courtly* - that's the word that describes him best. You never saw him ruffled or upset. He had beautiful white hair and a particularly charming voice.'

'Good,' said Sir Henry. 'I see Sir Ambrose. Now the girl Sylvia - what did you say her name was?'

'Sylvia Keene. She was pretty - really *very* pretty. Fair-haired, you know, and a lovely skin. Not, perhaps, very clever. In fact, rather stupid.'

'Oh! come, Dolly,' protested her husband.

'Arthur, of course, wouldn't think so,' said Mrs Bantry drily. 'But she *was* stupid - she really never said anything worth listening to.'

'One of the most graceful creatures I ever saw,' said Colonel Bantry warmly. 'See her playing tennis - charming, simply charming. And she was full of fun - most amusing little thing. And such a pretty way with her. I bet the young fellows all thought so.'

'That's just where you're wrong,' said Mrs Bantry. 'Youth, as such, has no charms for young men nowadays. It's only old buffers like you, Arthur, who sit maundering on about young girls.'

'Being young's no good,' said Jane. 'You've got to have SA.'

'What,' said Miss Marple, 'is SA?'

'Sex appeal,' said Jane.

'Ah! yes,' said Miss Marple. 'What in my day they used to call "having the come hither in your eye".'

'Not a bad description,' said Sir Henry. "The *dame de compagnie* you described, I think, as a pussy, Mrs Bantry?'

'I didn't mean a *cat*, you know,' said Mrs Bantry. 'It's quite different. Just a big soft white purry person. Always very sweet. That's what Adelaide Carpenter was like.'

'What sort of aged woman?'

'Oh! I should say fortyish. She'd been there some time - ever since Sylvia was eleven, I believe. A very tactful person. One of those widows left in unfortunate circumstances with plenty of aristocratic relations, but no ready cash. I didn't like her myself - but then I never do like people with very white long hands. And I don't like pussies.'

'Mr Curie?'

'Oh! one of those elderly stooping men. There are so many of them about, you'd hardly know one from the other. He showed enthusiasm when talking about his musty books, but not at any other time. I don't think Sir Ambrose knew him very well.'

'And Jerry next door?'

'A really charming boy. He was engaged to Sylvia. That's what made it so sad.'

'Now I wonder - ' began Miss Marple, and then stopped.

'What?'

'Nothing, dear.'

Sir Henry looked at the old lady curiously. Then he said thoughtfully:

'So this young couple were engaged. Had they been engaged long?'

'About a year. Sir Ambrose had opposed the engagement on the plea that Sylvia was too young. But after a year's engagement he had given in and the marriage was to have taken place quite soon.'

'Ah! Had the young lady any property?'

'Next to nothing - a bare hundred or two a year.'

'No rat in that hole, Clithering,' said Colonel Bantry, and laughed.

'It's the doctor's turn to ask a question,' said Sir Henry. 'I stand down.'

'My curiosity is mainly professional,' said Dr Lloyd. 'I should like to know what medical evidence was given at the inquest - that is, if our hostess remembers, or, indeed, if she knows.'

'I know roughly,' said Mrs Bantry. 'It was poisoning by digitalin - is that right?'

Dr Lloyd nodded.

'The active principle of the foxglove - digitalis - acts on the heart. Indeed, it is a very valuable drug in some forms of heart trouble. A very curious case altogether. I would never have believed that eating a preparation of foxglove leaves could possibly result fatally. These ideas of eating poisonous leaves and berries are very much exaggerated. Very few people realize that the vital principle, or alkaloid, has to be extracted with much care and preparation.'

'Mrs MacArthur sent some special bulbs round to Mrs Toomie the other day,' said Miss Marple. 'And Mrs Toomie's cook mistook them for onions, and all the Toomies were very ill indeed.'

'But they didn't die of it,' said Dr Lloyd.

'No. They didn't die of it,' admitted Miss Marple.

'A girl I knew died of ptomaine poisoning.' said Jane Helier.

'We must get on with investigating the crime,' said Sir Henry.

'Crime?' said Jane, startled. 'I thought it was an accident.'

'If it were an accident,' said Sir Henry gently, 'I do not think Mrs Bantry would have told us this story. No, as I read it, this was an accident only in appearance - behind it is something more sinister. I remember a case - various guests in a house party were chatting after dinner. The walls were adorned with all kinds of old-fashioned weapons. Entirely as a joke, one of the party seized an ancient horse pistol and pointed it at another man, pretending to fire it. The pistol was loaded and went off, killing the man. We had to ascertain in that case, first, who had secretly prepared and loaded that pistol, and secondly who had so led

and directed the conversation that that final bit of horseplay resulted - for the man who had fired the pistol was entirely innocent!

'It seems to me we have much the same problem here. Those digitalis leaves were deliberately mixed with the sage, knowing what the result would be. Since we exonerate the cook - we do exonerate the cook, don't we? - the question arises: Who picked the leaves and delivered them to the kitchen?'

'That's easily answered,' said Mrs Bantry. 'At least the last part of it is. It was Sylvia herself who took the leaves to the kitchen. It was part of her daily job to gather things like salad or herbs, bunches of young carrots - all the sort of things that gardeners never pick right. They hate giving you anything young and tender - they wait for them to be fine specimens. Sylvia and Mrs Carpenter used to see to a lot of these things themselves. And there was foxglove actually growing all amongst the sage in one corner, so the mistake was quite natural.'

'But did Sylvia actually pick them herself?'

'That, nobody ever knew. It was assumed so.'

'Assumptions,' said Sir Henry, 'are dangerous things.'

'But I do know that Mrs Carpenter didn't pick them,' said Mrs Bantry. 'Because, as it happened, she was walking with me on the terrace that morning. We went out there after breakfast. It was unusually nice and warm for early spring. Sylvia went alone down into the garden, but later I saw her walking arm-in-arm with Maud Wye.'

'So they were great friends, were they?' asked Miss Marple.

'Yes,' said Mrs Bantry. She seemed as though about to say something, but did not do so.

'Had she been staying there long?' asked Miss Marple.

'About a fortnight,' said Mrs Bantry.

There was a note of trouble in her voice.

'You didn't like Miss Wye?' suggested Sir Henry.

'I did. That's just it. I did.'

The trouble in her voice had grown to distress.

'You're keeping something back, Mrs Bantry,' said Sir Henry accusingly.

'I wondered just now,' said Miss Marple, 'but I didn't like to go on.'

'When did you wonder?'

'When you said that the young people were engaged. You said that that was what made it so sad. But, if you know what I mean, your voice didn't sound right when you said it - not convincing, you know.'

'What a dreadful person you are,' said Mrs Bantry. 'You always seem to *know*. Yes, I was thinking of something. But I don't really know whether I ought to say it or not.'

'You must say it,' said Sir Henry. 'Whatever your scruples, it mustn't be kept back.'

'Well, it was just this,' said Mrs Bantry. 'One evening - in fact the very evening before the tragedy - I happened to go out on the terrace before dinner. The window in the drawing-room was open. And as it chanced I saw Jerry Lorimer and Maud Wye. He was - well - kissing her. Of course I didn't know whether it was just a sort of chance affair, or whether - well, I mean, one can't *tell*. I knew Sir Ambrose never had really liked Jerry Lorimer - so perhaps he knew he was that kind of young man. But one thing I *am* sure of: that girl, Maud Wye, was *really* fond of him. You'd only to see her looking at him when she was off guard. And I think, too, they were really better suited than he and Sylvia were.'

'I am going to ask a question quickly, before Miss Marple can,' said Sir Henry. 'I want to know whether, after the tragedy, Jerry Lorimer married Maud Wye?'

'Yes,' said Mrs Bantry. 'He did. Six months afterwards.'

'Oh! Scheherezade, Scheherezade,' said Sir Henry. 'To think of the way you told us this story at first! Bare bones indeed - and to think of the amount of flesh we're finding on them now.'

'Don't speak so ghoulishly,' said Mrs Bantry. 'And don't use the word flesh. Vegetarians always do. They say, "I never eat flesh" in a way that puts you right off your little beefsteak. Mr Curie was a vegetarian. He used to eat some peculiar stuff that looked like bran for breakfast. Those elderly stooping men with beards are often faddy. They have patent kinds of underwear, too.'

'What on earth, Dolly,' said her husband, 'do you know about Mr Curie's underwear?'

'Nothing,' said Mrs Bantry with dignity. 'I was just making a guess.'

'I'll amend my former statement,' said Sir Henry. 'I'll say instead that the dramatis personae in your problem are very interesting. I'm beginning to see them all - eh, Miss Marple?'

'Human nature is always interesting, Sir Henry. And it's curious to see how certain types always tend to act in exactly the same way.'

'Two women and a man,' said Sir Henry. 'The old eternal human triangle. Is that the base of our problem here? I rather fancy it is.'

Dr Lloyd cleared his throat.

'I've been thinking,' he said rather diffidently. 'Do you say, Mrs Bantry, that you yourself were ill?'

'Was I not! So was Arthur! So was everyone!'

'That's just it - everyone,' said the doctor. 'You see what I mean? In Sir Henry's story which he told us just now, one man shot another - he didn't have to shoot the whole room full.'

'I don't understand,' said Jane. 'Who shot who?'

'I'm saying that whoever planned this thing went about it very curiously, either with a blind belief in chance, or else with an absolutely reckless disregard for human life. I can hardly believe there is a man capable of deliberately poisoning eight people with the object of removing one amongst them.'

'I see your point,' said Sir Henry, thoughtfully. 'I confess I ought to have thought of that.'

'And mightn't he have poisoned himself too?' asked Jane.

'Was anyone absent from dinner that night?' asked Miss Marple.

Mrs Bantry shook her head.

'Everyone was there.'

'Except Mr Lorimer, I suppose, my dear. He wasn't staying in the house, was he?'

'No; but he was dining there that evening,' said Mrs Bantry.

'Oh!' said Miss Marple in a changed voice. 'That makes all the difference in the world.'

She frowned vexedly to herself.

'I've been very stupid,' she murmured. 'Very stupid indeed.'

'I confess your point worries me, Lloyd,' said Sir Henry.

'How ensure that the girl, and the girl only, should get a fatal dose?'

'You can't,' said the doctor. 'That brings me to the point I'm going to make. *Supposing the girl was not the intended victim after all*?'

'What?'

'In all cases of food poisoning, the result is very uncertain. Several people share a dish. What happens? One or two are slightly ill, two more, say, are seriously indisposed, one dies.

That's the way of it - there's no certainty anywhere. But there are cases where another factor might enter in. Digitalin is a drug that acts directly on the heart - as I've told you it's prescribed in certain cases. *Now, there was one person in that house who suffered from a heart complaint*. Suppose he was the victim selected? What would not be fatal to the rest *would* be fatal to him - or so the murderer might reasonably suppose. That the thing turned out differently is only a proof of what I was saying just now - the uncertainty and unreliability of the effects of drugs on human beings.'

'Sir Ambrose,' said Sir Henry, 'you think *he* was the person aimed at? Yes, yes - and the girl's death was a mistake.'

'Who got his money after he was dead?' asked Jane.

'A very sound question, Miss Helier. One of the first we always ask in my late profession,' said Sir Henry.

'Sir Ambrose had a son,' said Mrs Bantry slowly. 'He had quarrelled with him many years previously. The boy was wild, I believe. Still, it was not in Sir Ambrose's power to disinherit him - Clodderham Court was entailed. Martin Bercy succeeded to the title and estate. There was, however, a good deal of other property that Sir Ambrose could leave as he chose, and that he left to his ward Sylvia. I know this because Sir Ambrose died less than a year after the events I am telling you of, and he had not troubled to make a new will after Sylvia's death. I think the money went to the Crown - or perhaps it was to his son as next of kin - I don't really remember.'

'So it was only to the interest of a son who wasn't there and the girl who died herself to make away with him.' said Sir Henry thoughtfully. 'That doesn't seem very promising.'

'Didn't the other woman get anything?' asked Jane. 'The one Mrs Bantry calls the Pussy woman.'

'She wasn't mentioned in the will,' said Mrs Bantry.

'Miss Marple, you're not listening,' said Sir Henry. 'You're somewhere far away.'

'I was thinking of old Mr Badger, the chemist,' said Miss Marple. 'He had a very young housekeeper - young enough to be not only his daughter, but his grand-daughter. Not a word to anyone, and his family, a lot of nephews and nieces, full of expectations. And when he died, would you believe it, he'd been secretly married to her for two years? Of course Mr Badger was a chemist, and a very rude, common old man as well, and Sir Ambrose Bercy was a very courtly gentleman, so Mrs Bantry says, but for all that human nature is much the same everywhere.'

There was a pause. Sir Henry looked very hard at Miss Marple who looked back at him with gently quizzical blue eyes. Jane Helier broke the silence.

'Was this Mrs Carpenter good-looking?' she asked.

'Yes, in a very quiet way. Nothing startling.'

'She had a very sympathetic voice,' said Colonel Bantry.

'Purring - that's what I call it,' said Mrs Bantry. 'Purring!'

'You'll be called a cat yourself one of these days, Dolly.'

'I like being a cat in my home circle,' said Mrs Bantry. 'I don't much like women anyway, and you know it. I like men and flowers.'

'Excellent taste,' said Sir Henry. 'Especially in putting men first.'

'That was tact,' said Mrs Bantry. 'Well, now, what about my little problem? I've been quite fair, I think. Arthur, don't you think I've been fair?'

'Yes, my dear. I don't think there'll be any inquiry into the running by the stewards of the Jockey Club.'

'First boy,' said Mrs Bantry, pointing a finger at Sir Henry.

'I'm going to be long-winded. Because, you see, I haven't really got any feeling of certainty about the matter. First, Sir Ambrose. Well, he wouldn't take such an original method of committing suicide - and on the other hand he certainly had nothing to gain by the death of his ward. Exit Sir Ambrose. Mr Curie. No motive for death of girl. If Sir Ambrose was intended victim, he might possibly have purloined a rare manuscript or two that no one else would miss. Very thin and most unlikely. So I think that, in spite of Mrs Bantry's suspicions as to his underclothing, Mr Curie is cleared. Miss Wye. Motive for death of Sir Ambrose - none. Motive for death of Sylvia pretty strong. She wanted Sylvia's young man, and wanted him rather badly - from Mrs Bantry's account. She was with Sylvia that morning in the garden, so had opportunity to pick leaves. No, we can't dismiss Miss Wye so easily. Young Lorimer. He's got a motive in either case. If he gets rid of his

sweetheart, he can marry the other girl. Still it seems a bit drastic to kill her - what's a broken engagement these days? If Sir Ambrose dies, he will marry a rich girl instead of a poor one. That might be important or not - depends on his financial position. If I find that his estate was heavily mortgaged and that Mrs Bantry has deliberately withheld that fact from us, I shall claim a foul. Now Mrs Carpenter. You know, I have suspicions of Mrs Carpenter. Those white hands, for one thing, and her excellent alibi at the time the herbs were picked - I always distrust alibis. And I've got another reason for suspecting her which I will keep to myself. Still, on the whole, if I've got to plump, I shall plump for Miss Maude Wye, because there's more evidence against her than anyone else.'

'Next boy,' said Mrs Bantry, and pointed at Dr Lloyd.

'I think you're wrong, Clithering, in sticking to the theory that the girl's death was meant. I am convinced that the murderer intended to do away with Sir Ambrose. I don't think that young Lorimer had the necessary knowledge. I am inclined to believe that Mrs Carpenter was the guilty party. She had been a long time with the family, knew all about the state of Sir Ambrose's health, and could easily arrange for this girl Sylvia (who, you said yourself, was rather stupid) to pick the right leaves. Motive, I confess, I don't see; but I hazard the guess that Sir Ambrose had at one time made a will in which she was mentioned. That's the best I can do.'

Mrs Bantry's pointing finger went on to Jane Helier.

'I don't know what to say,' said Jane, 'except this: Why shouldn't the girl herself have done it? She took the leaves into the kitchen

after all. And you say Sir Ambrose had been sticking out against her marriage. If he died, she'd get the money and be able to marry at once. She'd know just as much about Sir Ambrose's health as Mrs Carpenter would.'

Mrs Bantry's finger came slowly round to Miss Marple.

'Now then, School Marm.' she said.

'Sir Henry has put it all very clearly - very clearly indeed,' said Miss Marple. 'And Dr Lloyd was so right in what he said. Between them they seem to have made things so very clear. Only I don't think Dr Lloyd quite realized one aspect of what he said. You see, not being Sir Ambrose's medical adviser, he couldn't know just what kind of heart trouble Sir Ambrose had, could he?'

'I don't quite see what you mean. Miss Marple,' said Dr Lloyd.

'You're assuming - aren't you? - that Sir Ambrose had the kind of heart that digitalin would affect adversely? But there's nothing to prove that that's so. It might be just the other way about.'

'The other way about?'

'Yes, you did say that it was often prescribed for heart trouble?'

'Even then, Miss Marple, I don't see what that leads to?'

'Well, it would mean that he would have digitalin in his possession quite naturally - without having to account for it. What I am trying to say (I always express myself so badly) is this: Supposing you wanted to poison anyone with a fatal dose of digitalin. Wouldn't the simplest and easiest way be to arrange for everyone to be poisoned - actually by digitalis leaves? It wouldn't be fatal in

anyone else's case, of course, but no one would be surprised at one victim because, as Dr Lloyd said, these things are so uncertain. No one would be likely to ask whether the girl had actually had a fatal dose of infusion of digitalis or something of that kind. He might have put it in a cocktail, or in her coffee or even made her drink it quite simply as a tonic.'

'You mean Sir Ambrose poisoned his ward, the charming girl whom he loved?'

'That's just it,' said Miss Marple. 'Like Mr Badger and his young housekeeper. Don't tell me it's absurd for a man of sixty to fall in love with a girl of twenty. It happens every day - and I daresay with an old autocrat like Sir Ambrose, it might take him queerly. These things become a madness sometimes. He couldn't bear the thought of her getting married - did his best to oppose it - and failed. His mad jealousy became so great that he preferred killing her to letting her go to young Lorimer. He must have thought of it some time beforehand, because that foxglove seed would have to be sown among the sage. He'd pick it himself when the time came, and send her into the kitchen with it. It's horrible to think of, but I suppose we must take as merciful a view of it as we can. Gentlemen of that age are sometimes very peculiar indeed where young girls are concerned. Our last organist - but there, I mustn't talk scandal.'

'Mrs Bantry,' said Sir Henry. 'Is this so?'

Mrs Bantry nodded.

'Yes. I'd no idea of it - never dreamed of the thing being anything but an accident. Then, after Sir Ambrose's death, I got a letter.

He had left directions to send it to me. He told me the truth in it I don't know why - but he and I always got on very well together.'

In the momentary silence, she seemed to feel an unspoken criticism and went on hastily:

'You think I'm betraying a confidence - but that isn't so. I've changed all the names. He wasn't really called Sir Ambrose Bercy. Didn't you see how Arthur stared stupidly when I said that name to him? He didn't understand at first I've changed everything. It's like they say in magazines and in the beginning of books: "All the characters in this story are purely fictitious." You never know who they really are.'

The Affair at the Bungalow

'I've thought of something,' said Jane Helier.

Her beautiful face was lit up with the confident smile of a child expecting approbation. It was a smile such as moved audiences nightly in London, and which had made the fortunes of photographers.

'It happened,' she went on carefully, 'to a friend of mine.'

Everyone made encouraging but slightly hypocritical noises. Colonel Bantry, Mrs Bantry, Sir Henry Clithering, Dr Lloyd and old Miss Marple were one and all convinced that Jane's 'friend' was Jane herself. She would have been quite incapable of

remembering or taking an interest in anything affecting anyone else.

'My friend,' went on Jane. '(I won't mention her name) was an actress - a very well-known actress.'

No one expressed surprise. Sir Henry Clithering thought to himself: 'Now I wonder how many sentences it will be before she forgets to keep up the fiction, and says "I" instead of "She"?'

'My friend was on tour in the provinces - this was a year or two ago. I suppose I'd better not give the name of the place. It was a riverside town not very far from London. I'll call it - '

She paused, her brows perplexed in thought. The invention of even a simple name appeared to be too much for her. Sir Henry came to the rescue.

'Shall we call it Riverbury?' he suggested gravely.

'Oh, yes, that would do splendidly. Riverbury, I'll remember that. Well, as I say, this - my friend - was at Riverbury with her company, and a very curious thing happened.'

She puckered her brows again.

'It's very difficult,' she said plaintively, 'to say just what you want. One gets things mixed up and tells the wrong things first.'

'You're doing it beautifully,' said Dr Lloyd encouragingly. 'Go on.'

'Well, this curious thing happened. My friend was sent for to the police station. And she went. It seemed there had been a

burglary at a riverside bungalow and they'd arrested a young man, and he told a very odd story. And so they sent for her.

'She'd never been to a police station before, but they were very nice to her - very nice indeed.'

'They would be, I'm sure,' said Sir Henry.

'The sergeant - I think it was a sergeant - or it may have been an inspector - gave her a chair and explained things, and of course I saw at once that it was some mistake - '

'Aha,' thought Sir Henry. 'I. Here we are. I thought as much.'

'My friend said so,' continued Jane, serenely unconscious of her self-betrayal. 'She explained she had been rehearsing with her understudy at the hotel and that she'd never even heard of this Mr Faulkener. And the sergeant said, "Miss Hel - "'

She stopped and flushed.

'Miss Helman,' suggested Sir Henry with a twinkle.

'Yes - yes, that would do. Thank you. He said. "Well, Miss Helman, I felt it must be some mistake, knowing that you were stopping at the Bridge Hotel," and he said would I have any objection to confronting - or was it being confronted? I can't remember.'

'It doesn't really matter,' said Sir Henry reassuringly.

'Anyway, with the young man. So I said, "Of course not." And they brought him and said, "This is Miss Helier," and - Oh!' Jane broke off open-mouthed.

'Never mind, my dear,' said Miss Marple consolingly. 'We were bound to guess, you know. And you haven't given us the name of the place or anything that really matters.'

'Well,' said Jane. 'I did mean to tell it as though it happened to someone else. But it *is* difficult, isn't it! I mean one forgets so.'

Everyone assured her that it was very difficult, and soothed and reassured, she went on with her slightly involved narrative.

'He was a nice-looking man - quite a nice-looking man. Young, with reddish hair. His mouth just opened when he saw me. And the sergeant said, "Is this the lady?" And he said, "No, indeed it isn't. What an ass I have been." And I smiled at him and said it didn't matter.'

'I can picture the scene,' said Sir Henry.

Jane Helier frowned.

'Let me see - how had I better go on?'

'Supposing you tell us what it was all about, dear,' said Miss Marple, so mildly that no one could suspect her of irony. 'I mean what the young man's mistake was, and about the burglary.'

'Oh, yes,' said Jane. 'Well, you see, this young man - Leslie Faulkener, his name was - had written a play. He'd written several plays, as a matter of fact, though none of them had ever been taken. And he had sent this particular play to me to read. I didn't know about it, because of course I have hundreds of plays sent to me and I read very few of them myself - only the ones I know something about. Anyway, there it was, and it seems that

Mr Faulkener got a letter from me - only it turned out not to be really from me - you understand - '

She paused anxiously, and they assured her that they understood.

'Saying that I'd read the play, and liked it very much and would he come down and talk it over with me. And it gave the address - The Bungalow, Riverbury. So Mr Faulkener was frightfully pleased and he came down and arrived at this place - The Bungalow. A parlourmaid opened the door, and he asked for Miss Helier, and she said Miss Helier was in and expecting him and showed him into the drawing-room, and there a woman came to him. And he accepted her as me as a matter of course - which seems queer because after all he had seen me act and my photographs are very well known, aren't they?'

'Over the length and breadth of England,' said Mrs Bantry promptly. 'But there's often a lot of difference between a photograph and its original, my dear Jane. And there's a great deal of difference between behind the footlights and off the stage. It's not every actress who stands the test as well as you do, remember.'

'Well,' said Jane slightly mollified, 'that may be so. Anyway, he described this woman as tall and fair with big blue eyes and very good-looking, so I suppose it must have been near enough. He certainly had no suspicions. She sat down and began talking about his play and said she was anxious to do it. Whilst they were talking cocktails were brought in and Mr Faulkener had one as a matter of course. Well - that's all he remembers - having this cocktail. When he woke up, or came to himself, or whatever you

call it - he was lying out in the road, by the hedge, of course, so that there would be no danger of his being run over. He felt very queer and shaky - so much so that he just got up and staggered along the road not quite knowing where he was going. He said if he'd had his sense about him he'd have gone back to the bungalow and tried to find out what had happened. But he felt just stupid and mazed and walked along without quite knowing what he was doing. He was just more or less coming to himself when the police arrested him.'

'Why did the police arrest him?' asked Dr Lloyd.

'Oh! didn't I tell you?' said Jane opening her eyes very wide. 'How very stupid I am. The burglary.'

'You mentioned a burglary - but you didn't say where or what or why,' said Mrs Bantry.

'Well, this bungalow - the one he went to, of course - it wasn't mine at all. It belonged to a man whose name was - '

Again Jane furrowed her brows.

'Do you want me to be godfather again?' asked Sir Henry. 'Pseudonyms supplied free of charge. Describe the tenant and I'll do the naming.'

'It was taken by a rich city man - a knight.'

'Sir Herman Cohen,' suggested Sir Henry.

'That will do beautifully. He took it for a lady - she was the wife of an actor, and she was also an actress herself.'

'We'll call the actor Claud Leason,' said Sir Henry, 'and the lady would be known by her stage name, I suppose, so we'll call her Miss Mary Kerr.'

'I think you're awfully clever.' said Jane. 'I don't know how you think of these things so easily. Well, you see this was a sort of week-end cottage for Sir Herman - did you say Herman? - and the lady. And, of course, his wife knew nothing about it.'

'Which is so often the case,' said Sir Henry.

'And he'd given this actress woman a good deal of jewellery including some very fine emeralds.'

'Ah!' said Dr Lloyd. 'Now we're getting at it'

'This jewellery was at the bungalow, just locked up in a jewel case. The police said it was very careless - anyone might have taken it.'

'You see, Dolly,' said Colonel Bantry. 'What do I always tell you?'

'Well, in my experience,' said Mrs Bantry, 'it's always the people who are so dreadfully careful who lose things. I don't lock mine up in a jewel case - I keep it in a drawer loose, under my stockings. I daresay if - what's her name? - Mary Kerr had done the same, it would never have been stolen.'

'It would,' said Jane, 'because all the drawers were burst open, and the contents strewn about.'

'Then they weren't really looking for jewels,' said Mrs Bantry. 'They were looking for secret papers. That's what always happens in books.'

'I don't know about secret papers,' said Jane doubtfully. 'I never heard of any.'

'Don't be distracted, Miss Helier,' said Colonel Bantry. 'Dolly's wild red-herrings are not to be taken seriously.'

'About the burglary,' said Sir Henry.

'Yes. Well, the police were rung up by someone who said she was Miss Mary Kerr. She said the bungalow had been burgled and described a young man with red hair who had called there that morning. Her maid had thought there was something odd about him and had refused him admittance, but later they had seen him getting out through a window. She described the man so accurately that the police arrested him only an hour later and then he told his story and showed them the letter from me. And as I told you, they fetched me and when he saw me he said what I told you - that it hadn't been me at all!'

'A very curious story,' said Dr Lloyd. 'Did Mr Faulkener know this Miss Kerr?'

'No, he didn't - or he said he didn't. But I haven't told you the most curious part yet. The police went to the bungalow of course, and they found everything as described - drawers pulled out and jewels gone, but the whole place was empty. It wasn't till some hours later that Mary Kerr came back, and when she did she said she'd never rung them up at all and this was the first she'd heard of it. It seemed that she had had a wire that morning from a manager offering her a most important part and making an appointment, so she had naturally rushed up to town to keep it.

When she got there, she found that the whole thing was a hoax. No telegram had ever been sent.'

'A common enough ruse to get her out of the way,' commented Sir Henry. 'What about the servants?'

'The same sort of thing happened there. There was only one, and she was rung up on the telephone - apparently by Mary Kerr, who said she had left a most important thing behind. She directed the maid to bring up a certain handbag which was in the drawer of her bedroom. She was to catch the first train. The maid did so, of course locking up the house; but when she arrived at Miss Kerr's club, where she had been told to meet her mistress, she waited there in vain.'

'H'm,' said Sir Henry. 'I begin to see. The house was left empty, and to make an entry by one of the windows would present few difficulties, I should imagine. But I don't quite see where Mr Faulkener comes in. Who did ring up the police, if it wasn't Miss Kerr?'

'That's what nobody knew or ever found out.'

'Curious,' said Sir Henry. 'Did the young man turn out to be genuinely the person he said he was?'

'Oh, yes, that part of it was all right. He'd even got the letter which was supposed to be written by me. It wasn't the least bit like my handwriting - but then, of course, he couldn't be supposed to know that.'

'Well, let's state the position clearly,' said Sir Henry. 'Correct me if I go wrong. The lady and the maid are decoyed from the house.

This young man is decoyed down there by means of a bogus letter - colour being lent to this last by the fact that you actually are performing at Riverbury that week. The young man is doped, and the police are rung up and have their suspicions directed against him. A burglary actually has taken place. I presume the jewels were taken?'

'Oh, yes.'

'Were they ever recovered?'

'No, never. I think, as a matter of fact, Sir Herman tried to hush things up all he knew how. But he couldn't manage it and I rather fancy his wife started divorce proceedings in consequence. Still, I don't really know about that.'

'What happened to Mr Leslie Faulkener?'

'He was released in the end. The police said they hadn't really got enough against him. Don't you think the whole thing was rather odd?'

'Distinctly odd. The first question is whose story to believe? In telling if Miss Helier, I noticed that you incline towards believing Mr Faulkener. Have you any reason for doing so beyond your own instinct in the matter?'

'No - no,' said Jane unwillingly. 'I suppose I haven't. But he was so very nice, and so apologetic for having mistaken anyone else for me, that I feel sure he *must* have been telling the truth.'

'I see,' said Sir Henry smiling. 'But you must admit that he could have invented the story quite easily. He could write the letter

purporting to be from you himself. He could also dope himself after successfully committing the burglary. But I confess I don't see where the *point* of all that would be. Easier to enter the house, help himself, and disappear quietly - unless just possibly he was observed by someone in the neighbourhood and knew himself to have been observed. Then he might hastily concoct this plan for diverting suspicion from himself and accounting for his presence in the neighbourhood.'

'Was he well off?' asked Miss Marple.

'I don't think so,' said Jane. 'No. I believe he was rather hard up.'

'The whole thing seems curious,' said Dr Lloyd. 'I must confess that if we accept the young man's story as true, it seems to make the case very much more difficult. Why should the unknown woman who pretended to be Miss Helier drag this unknown man into the affair? Why should she stage such an elaborate comedy?'

'Tell me, Jane,' said Mrs Bantry. 'Did young Faulkener ever come face to face with Mary Kerr at any stage of the proceedings?'

'I don't quite know,' said Jane slowly, as she puzzled her brows in remembrance.

'Because if he didn't the case is solved!' said Mrs Bantry. 'I'm sure I'm right. What is easier than to pretend you're called up to town? You telephone to your maid from Paddington or whatever station you arrive at, and as she comes up to town, you go down again. The young man calls by appointment, he's doped, you set the stage for the burglary, overdoing it as much as possible. You telephone the police, give a description of your scapegoat, and

off you go to town again. Then you arrive home by a later train and do the surprised innocent.'

'But why should she steal her own jewels, Dolly?'

'They always do,' said Mrs Bantry. 'And anyway, I can think of hundreds of reasons. She may have wanted money at once - old Sir Herman wouldn't give her the cash, perhaps, so she pretends the jewels are stolen and then sells them secretly. Or she may have been being blackmailed by someone who threatened to tell her husband or Sir Herman's wife. Or she may have already sold the jewels and Sir Herman was getting ratty and asking to see them, so she had to do something about it. That's done a good deal in books. Or perhaps she was going to have them reset and she'd got paste replicas. Or - here's a very good idea - and not so much done in books - she pretends they are stolen, gets in an awful state and he gives her a fresh lot. So she gets two lots instead of one. That kind of woman, I am sure, is most frightfully artful.'

'You are clever, Dolly,' said Jane admiringly. 'I never thought of that.'

'You may be clever, but she doesn't say you're right,' said Colonel Bantry. 'I incline to suspicion of the city gentleman. He'd know the sort of telegram to get the lady out of the way, and he could manage the rest easily enough with the help of a new lady friend. Nobody seems to have thought of asking *him* for an alibi.'

'What do you think, Miss Marple?' asked Jane, turning towards the old lady who had sat silent, a puzzled frown on her face.

'My dear, I really don't know what to say. Sir Henry will laugh, but I recall no village parallel to help me this time. Of course there are several questions that suggest themselves. For instance, the servant question. In - ahem - an irregular ménage of the kind you describe, the servant employed would doubtless be perfectly aware of the state of things, and a really nice girl would not take such a place - her mother wouldn't let her for a minute. So I think we can assume that the maid was not a really trustworthy character. She may have been in league with the thieves. She would leave the house open for them and actually go to London as though sure of the pretence telephone message so as to divert suspicion from herself. I must confess that that seems the most probable solution. Only if ordinary thieves were concerned it seems very odd. It seems to argue more knowledge than a maidservant was likely to have.'

Miss Marple paused and then went on dreamily.

'I can't help feeling that there was some - well, what I must describe as personal feeling about the whole thing. Supposing somebody had a spite, for instance? A young actress that he hadn't treated well? Don't you think that that would explain things better? A deliberate attempt to get him into trouble. That's what it looks like. And yet - that's not entirely satisfactory... '

'Why, doctor, you haven't said anything,' said Jane. 'I'd forgotten you.'

'I'm always getting forgotten,' said the grizzled doctor sadly. 'I must have a very inconspicuous personality.'

'Oh, no!' said Jane. 'Do tell us what you think.'

'I'm rather in the position of agreeing with everyone's solutions - and yet with none of them. I myself have a far-fetched and probably totally erroneous theory that the wife may have had something to do with it. Sir Herman's wife, I mean. I've no grounds for thinking so - only you would be surprised if you knew the extraordinary - really *very* extraordinary things that a wronged wife will take it into her head to do.'

'Oh! Dr Lloyd,' cried Miss Marple excitedly. 'How clever of you. And I never thought of poor Mrs Pebmarsh.'

Jane stared at her.

'Mrs Pebmarsh? Who is Mrs Pebmarsh?'

'Well - ' Miss Marple hesitated. 'I don't know that she really comes in. She's a laundress. And she stole an opal pin that was pinned into a blouse and put it in another woman's house.'

Jane looked more fogged than ever.

'And that makes it all perfectly clear to you, Miss Marple?' said Sir Henry, with his twinkle.

But to his surprise Miss Marple shook her head.

'No, I'm afraid it doesn't. I must confess myself completely at a loss. What I do realize is that women must stick together - one should, in an emergency, stand by one's own sex. I think that's the moral of the story Miss Helier has told us.'

'I must confess that that particular ethical significance of the mystery has escaped me,' said Sir Henry gravely. 'Perhaps I shall

see the significance of your point more clearly when Miss Helier has revealed the solution.'

'Eh?' said Jane looking rather bewildered.

'I was observing that, in childish language, we "give it up". You and you alone, Miss Helier, have had the high honour of presenting such an absolutely baffling mystery that even Miss Marple has to confess herself defeated.'

'You all give it up?' asked Jane.

'Yes.' After a minute's silence during which he waited for the others to speak, Sir Henry constituted himself spokesman once more. 'That is to say we stand or fall by the sketchy solutions we have tentatively advanced. One each for the mere men, two for Miss Marple, and a round dozen from Mrs B.'

'It was not a dozen,' said Mrs Bantry. 'They were variations on a main theme. And how often am I to tell you that I will *not* be called Mrs B?'

'So you all give it up,' said Jane thoughtfully. 'That's very interesting.'

She leaned back in her chair and began to polish her nails rather absent-mindedly.

'Well,' said Mrs Bantry. 'Come on, Jane. What is the solution?'

'The solution?'

'Yes. What really happened?'

Jane stared at her.

'I haven't the least idea.'

'*What*?'

'I've always wondered. I thought you were all so clever one of you would be able to tell *me*.'

Everybody harboured feelings of annoyance. It was all very well for Jane to be so beautiful - but at this moment everyone felt that stupidity could be carried too far. Even the most transcendent loveliness could not excuse it.

'You mean the truth was never discovered?' said Sir Henry.

'No. That's why, as I say, I did think you would be able to tell *me*.'

Jane sounded injured. It was plain that she had a grievance.

'Well - I'm - I'm - ' said Colonel Bantry, words failing him.

'You are the most aggravating girl, Jane.' said his wife. 'Anyway, I'm sure and always will be that I was right. If you just tell us the proper names of the people, I shall be *quite* sure.'

'I don't think I could do that,' said Jane slowly.

'No, dear,' said Miss Marple. 'Miss Helier couldn't do that.'

'Of course she could,' said Mrs Bantry. 'Don't be so high-minded, Jane. We older folk must have a bit of scandal. At any rate tell us who the city magnate was.'

But Jane shook her head, and Miss Marple, in her old-fashioned way, continued to support the girl.

'It must have been a very distressing business,' she said.

'No,' said Jane truthfully. 'I think - I think I rather enjoyed it.'

'Well, perhaps you did,' said Miss Marple. 'I suppose it was a break in the monotony. What play were you acting in?'

'*Smith*.'

'Oh, yes. That's one of Mr Somerset Maugham's, isn't it? All his are very clever, I think. I've seen them nearly all.'

'You're reviving it to go on tour next autumn, aren't you?' asked Mrs Bantry.

Jane nodded.

'Well,' said Miss Marple rising. 'I must go home. Such late hours! But we've had a very entertaining evening. Most unusually so. I think Miss Helier's story wins the prize. Don't you agree?'

'I'm sorry you're angry with me,' said Jane. 'About not knowing the end, I mean. I suppose I should have said so sooner.'

Her tone sounded wistful. Dr Lloyd rose gallantly to the occasion.

'My dear young lady, why should you? You gave us a very pretty problem to sharpen our wits on. I am only sorry we could none of us solve it convincingly.'

'Speak for yourself,' said Mrs Bantry. 'I *did* solve it. I'm convinced I am right.'

'Do you know, I really believe you are,' said Jane. 'What you said sounded so probable.'

'Which of her seven solutions do you refer to?' asked Sir Henry teasingly.

Dr Lloyd gallantly assisted Miss Marple to put on her goloshes. 'Just in case,' as the old lady explained. The doctor was to be her escort to her old-world cottage. Wrapped in several woollen shawls, Miss Marple wished everyone good night once more. She came to Jane Helier last and leaning forward, she murmured something in the actress's ear. A startled 'Oh!' burst from Jane - so loud as to cause the others to turn their heads.

Smiling and nodding, Miss Marple made her exit, Jane Helier staring after her.

'Are you coming to bed, Jane?' asked Mrs Bantry. 'What's the matter with you? You're staring as though you'd seen a ghost.'

With a deep sigh Jane came to herself, shed a beautiful and bewildering smile on the two men and followed her hostess up the staircase. Mrs Bantry came into the girl's room with her.

'Your fire's nearly out,' said Mrs Bantry, giving it a vicious and ineffectual poke. 'They can't have made it up properly. How stupid housemaids are. Still, I suppose we are rather late tonight. Why, it's actually past one o'clock!'

'Do you think there are many people like her?' asked Jane Helier.

She was sitting on the side of the bed apparently wrapped in thought.

'Like the housemaid?'

'No. Like that funny old woman - what's her name - Marple?'

'Oh! I don't know. I suppose she's a fairly common type in a small village.'

'Oh dear.' said Jane. 'I don't know what to do.'

She sighed deeply.

'What's the matter?'

'I'm worried.'

'What about?'

'Dolly,' Jane Helier was portentously solemn. 'Do you know what that queer old lady whispered to me before she went out of the door tonight?'

'No. What?'

'She said: "*I shouldn't do it if I were you, my dear. Never put yourself too much in another woman's power, even if you do think she's your friend at the moment.*" You know, Dolly, that's awfully true.'

'The maxim? Yes, perhaps it is. But I don't see the application.'

'I suppose you can't ever really trust a woman. And I should be in her power. I never thought of that.'

'What woman are you talking about?'

'Netta Greene, my understudy.'

'What on earth does Miss Marple know about your understudy?'

'I suppose she guessed - but I can't see how.'

'Jane, will you kindly tell me at once what you are talking about?'

'The story. The one I told. Oh, Dolly, that woman, you know - the one that took Claud from me?'

Mrs Bantry nodded, casting her mind back rapidly to the first of Jane's unfortunate marriages - to Claud Averbury, the actor.

'He married her; and I could have told him how it would be. Claud doesn't know, but she's carrying on with Sir Joseph Salmon - week-ends with him at the bungalow I told you about I wanted her shown up - I would like everyone to know the sort of woman she was. And you see, with a burglary, everything would be bound to come out.'

'Jane!' gasped Mrs Bantry. 'Did *you* engineer this story you've been telling us?'

Jane nodded.

'That's why I chose *Smith*. I wear parlourmaid's kit in it, you know. So I should have it handy. And when they sent for me to the police station it's the easiest thing in the world to say I was rehearsing my part with my understudy at the hotel. Really, of course, we would be at the bungalow. I just have to open the door and bring in the cocktails, and Netta to pretend to be me. He'd never see *her* again, of course, so there would be no fear of his recognizing her. And I can make myself look quite different as a parlourmaid; and besides, one doesn't look at parlourmaids as though they

were people. We planned to drag him out into the road afterwards, bag the jewel case, telephone the police and get back to the hotel. I shouldn't like the poor young man to suffer, but Sir Henry didn't seem to think he would, did he? And she'd be in the papers and everything - and Claud would see what she was really like.'

Mrs Bantry sat down and groaned.

'Oh! my poor head. And all the time - Jane Helier, you deceitful girl! Telling us that story the way you did!'

'I *am* a good actress,' said Jane complacently. 'I always have been, whatever people choose to say. I didn't give myself away once, did I?'

'Miss Marple was right,' murmured Mrs Bantry. 'The personal element. Oh, yes, the personal element. Jane, my good child, do you realize that theft is theft, and you might have been sent to prison?'

'Well, none of you guessed,' said Jane. 'Except Miss Marple.' The worried expression returned to her face. 'Dolly, do you *really* think there are many like her?'

'Frankly, I don't,' said Mrs Bantry.

Jane sighed again.

'Still, one had better not risk it. And of course I should be in Netta's power - that's true enough. She might turn against me or blackmail me or anything. She helped me think out the details and

she professed to be devoted to me, but one never *does* know with women. No, I think Miss Marple was right. I had better not risk it.'

'But, my dear, you have risked it.'

'Oh, no.' Jane opened her blue eyes very wide. 'Don't you understand? *None of this has happened yet*! I was - well, trying it on the dog, so to speak.'

'I don't profess to understand your theatrical slang,' said Mrs Bantry with dignity. 'Do you mean this is a future project - not a past deed?'

'I was going to do it this autumn - in September. I don't know what to do now.'

'And Jane Marple guessed - actually guessed the truth and never told us,' said Mrs Bantry wrathfully.

'I think that was why she said that - about women sticking together. She wouldn't give me away before the men. That was nice of her. I don't mind your knowing, Dolly.'

'Well, give the idea up, Jane. I beg of you.'

'I think I shall,' murmured Miss Helier. 'There might be other Miss Marples... '

Death by Drowning

I

Sir Henry Clithering, ex-Commissioner of Scotland Yard, was

staying with his friends the Bantrys at their place near the little village of St Mary Mead.

On Saturday morning, coming down to breakfast at the pleasant guestly hour of ten fifteen, he almost collided with his hostess, Mrs Bantry, in the doorway of the breakfast room. She was rushing from the room, evidently in a condition of some excitement and distress.

Colonel Bantry was sitting at the table, his face rather redder than usual.

"Morning, Clithering,' he said. 'Nice day. Help yourself.'

Sir Henry obeyed. As he took his seat, a plate of kidneys and bacon in front of him, his host went on:

'Dolly's a bit upset this morning.'

'Yes - er - I rather thought so,' said Sir Henry mildly.

He wondered a little. His hostess was of a placid disposition, little given to moods or excitement. As far as Sir Henry knew, she felt keenly on one subject only - gardening.

'Yes,' said Colonel Bantry. 'Bit of news we got this morning upset her. Girl in the village - Emmott's daughter - Emmott who keeps the Blue Boar.'

'Oh, yes, of course.'

'Ye-es,' said Colonel Bantry ruminatively. 'Pretty girl. Got herself into trouble. Usual story. I've been arguing with Dolly about that. Foolish of me. Women never see sense. Dolly was all up in arms

for the girl - you know what women are - men are brutes - all the rest of it, etcetera. But it's not so simple as all that - not in these days. Girls know what they're about. Fellow who seduces a girl's not necessarily a villain. Fifty-fifty as often as not. I rather liked young Sandford myself. A young ass rather than a Don Juan, I should have said.'

'It is this man Sandford who got the girl into trouble?'

'So it seems. Of course I don't know anything personally,' said the colonel cautiously. 'It's all gossip and chat. You know what this place is! As I say, I *know* nothing. And I'm not like Dolly - leaping to conclusions, flinging accusations all over the place. Damn it all, one ought to be careful in what one says. You know - inquest and all that.'

'Inquest?'

Colonel Bantry stared.

'Yes. Didn't I tell you? Girl drowned herself. That's what all the bother's about.'

'That's a nasty business,' said Sir Henry.

'Of course it is. Don't like to think of it myself. Poor pretty little devil. Her father's a hard man by all accounts. I suppose she just felt she couldn't face the music.'

He paused.

'That's what's upset Dolly so.'

'Where did she drown herself?'

'In the river. Just below the mill it runs pretty fast. There's a footpath and a bridge across. They think she threw herself off that. Well, well, it doesn't bear thinking about.'

And with a portentous rustle, Colonel Bantry opened his newspaper and proceeded to distract his mind from painful matters by an absorption in the newest iniquities of the government.

Sir Henry was only mildly interested by the village tragedy. After breakfast, he established himself on a comfortable chair on the lawn, tilted his hat over his eyes and contemplated life from a peaceful angle.

It was about half past eleven when a neat parlourmaid tripped across the lawn.

'If you please, sir, Miss Marple has called, and would like to see you.'

'Miss Marple?'

Sir Henry sat up and straightened his hat. The name surprised him. He remembered Miss Marple very well - her gentle quiet old-maidish ways, her amazing penetration. He remembered a dozen unsolved and hypothetical cases - and how in each case this typical 'old maid of the village' had leaped unerringly to the right solution of the mystery. Sir Henry had a very deep respect for Miss Marple. He wondered what had brought her to see him.

Miss Marple was sitting in the drawing-room - very upright as always, a gaily coloured marketing basket of foreign extraction

beside her. Her cheeks were rather pink and she seemed flustered.

'Sir Henry - I am so glad. So fortunate to find you. I just happened to hear that you were staying down here... I do hope you will forgive me... '

'This is a great pleasure,' said Sir Henry, taking her hand. 'I'm afraid Mrs Bantry's out.'

'Yes,' said Miss Marple. 'I saw her talking to Footit, the butcher, as I passed. Henry Footit was run over yesterday - that was his dog. One of those smooth-haired fox terriers, rather stout and quarrelsome, that butchers always seem to have.'

'Yes,' said Sir Henry helpfully.

'I was glad to get here when she wasn't at home,' continued Miss Marple. 'Because it was you I wanted to see. About this sad affair.'

'Henry Footit?' asked Sir Henry, slightly bewildered.

Miss Marple threw him a reproachful glance.

'No, no. Rose Emmott, of course. You've heard?'

Sir Henry nodded.

'Bantry was telling me. Very sad.'

He was a little puzzled. He could not conceive why Miss Marple should want to see him about Rose Emmott.

Miss Marple sat down again. Sir Henry also sat. When the old lady spoke her manner had changed. It was grave, and had a certain dignity.

'You may remember, Sir Henry, that on one or two occasions we played what was really a pleasant kind of game. Propounding mysteries and giving solutions. You were kind enough to say that I - that I did not do too badly.'

'You beat us all,' said Sir Henry warmly. 'You displayed an absolute genius for getting to the truth. And you always instanced, I remember, some village parallel which had supplied you with the clue.'

He smiled as he spoke, but Miss Marple did not smile. She remained very grave.

'What you said has emboldened me to come to you now. I feel that if I say something to you - at least you will not laugh at me.'

He realized suddenly that she was in deadly earnest.

'Certainly, I will not laugh,' he said gently.

'Sir Henry - this girl - Rose Emmott. She did not drown herself - *she was murdered...* And I know who murdered her.'

Sir Henry was silent with sheer astonishment for quite three seconds. Miss Marple's voice had been perfectly quiet and unexcited. She might have been making the most ordinary statement in the world for all the emotion she showed.

'This is a very serious statement to make, Miss Marple,' said Sir Henry when he had recovered his breath.

She nodded her head gently several times.

'I know - I know - that is why I have come to you.'

'But, my dear lady, I am not the person to come to. I am merely a private individual nowadays. If you have knowledge of the kind you claim, you must go to the police.'

'I don't think I can do that,' said Miss Marple.

'But why not?'

'Because, you see, I haven't got any - what you call *knowledge*.'

'You mean it's only a guess on your part?'

'You can call it that, if you like, but it's not really that at all. I *know*. I'm in a position to know; but if I gave my reasons for knowing to Inspector Drewitt - well, he'd simply laugh. And really, I don't know that I'd blame him. It's very difficult to understand what you might call specialized knowledge.'

'Such as?' suggested Sir Henry.

Miss Marple smiled a little.

'If I were to tell you that I know because of a man called Peasegood leaving turnips instead of carrots when he came round with a can and sold vegetables to my niece several years ago - '

She stopped eloquently.

'A very appropriate name for the trade,' murmured Sir Henry. 'you mean that you are simply judging from the facts in a parallel case.'

'I know human nature,' said Miss Marple. 'It's impossible not to know human nature living in a village all these years. The question is, do you believe me, or don't you?'

She looked at him very straight. The pink flush had heightened on her cheeks. Her eyes met his steadily without wavering.

Sir Henry was a man with a very vast experience of life. He made his decisions quickly without beating about the bush. Unlikely and fantastic as Miss Marple's statement might seem, he was instantly aware that he accepted it.

'I *do* believe you, Miss Marple. But I do not see what you want me to do in the matter, or why you have come to me.'

'I have thought and thought about it,' said Miss Marple. 'As I said, it would be useless going to the police without any facts. I have no facts. What I would ask you to do is to interest yourself in the matter - Inspector Drewitt would be most flattered, I am sure. And, of course, if the matter went farther, Colonel Melchett, the Chief Constable, I am sure, would be wax in your hands.'

She looked at him appealingly.

'And what data are you going to give me to work upon?'

'I thought,' said Miss Marple, 'of writing a name - *the* name - on a piece of paper and giving it to you. Then if, on investigation, you

decided that the - the *person* - is not involved in any way - well, I shall have been quite wrong.'

She paused and then added with a slight shiver. 'It would be so dreadful - so very dreadful - if an innocent person were to be hanged.'

'What on earth - ' cried Sir Henry, startled.

She turned a distressed face upon him.

'I may be wrong about that - though I don't think so. Inspector Drewitt you see, is really an intelligent man. But a mediocre amount of intelligence is sometimes most dangerous. It does not take one far enough.'

Sir Henry looked at her curiously.

Fumbling a little, Miss Marple opened a small reticule, took out a little notebook, tore out a leaf, carefully wrote a name on it and folding it in two, handed it to Sir Henry.

He opened it and read the name. It conveyed nothing to him, but his eyebrows lifted a little. He looked across at Miss Marple and tucked the piece of paper in his pocket.

'Well, well,' he said. 'Rather an extraordinary business, this. I've never done anything like it before. But I'm going to back my judgment - of *you*, Miss Marple.'

II

Sir Henry was sitting in a room with Colonel Melchett, the Chief Constable of the county, and Inspector Drewitt.

The Chief Constable was a little man of aggressively military demeanour. The Inspector was big and broad and eminently sensible.

'I really do feel I'm butting in,' said Sir Henry with his pleasant smile. 'I can't really tell you why I'm doing it' (Strict truth this!)

'My dear fellow, we're charmed. It's a great compliment.'

'Honoured, Sir Henry,' said the Inspector.

The Chief Constable was thinking: 'Bored to death, poor fellow, at the Bantrys. The old man abusing the government and the old woman babbling on about bulbs.'

The Inspector was thinking: 'Pity we're not up against a real teaser. One of the best brains in England, I've heard it said. Pity it's all such plain sailing.'

Aloud, the Chief Constable said:

'I'm afraid it's all very sordid and straightforward. First idea was that the girl had pitched herself in. She was in the family way, you understand. However, our doctor, Haydock, is a careful fellow. He noticed the bruises on each arm - upper arm. Caused before death. Just where a fellow would have taken her by the arms and flung her in.'

'Would that require much strength?'

'I think not. There would be no struggle - the girl would be taken unawares. It's a footbridge of slippery wood. Easiest thing in the world to pitch her over - there's no handrail that side.'

'You know for a fact that the tragedy occurred there?'

'Yes. We've got a boy - Jimmy Brown - aged twelve. He was in the woods on the other side. He heard a kind of scream from the bridge and a splash. It was dusk you know - difficult to see anything. Presently he saw something white floating down in the water and he ran and got help. They got her out but it was too late to revive her.'

Sir Henry nodded.

'The boy saw no one on the bridge?'

'No. But as I tell you, it was dusk, and there's mist always hanging about there. I'm going to question him as to whether he saw anyone about just afterwards or just before. You see he naturally assumed that the girl had thrown herself over. Everybody did to start with.'

'Still, we've got the note,' said Inspector Drewitt. He turned to Sir Henry.

'Note in the dead girl's pocket, sir. Written with a kind of artist's pencil it was, and all of a sop though the paper was we managed to read it.'

'And what did it say?'

'It was from young Sandford. "All right," that's how it ran. "I'll meet you at the bridge at eight-thirty. - R.S." Well, it was near as

might be to eight-thirty - a few minutes after - when Jimmy Brown heard the cry and the splash.'

'I don't know whether you've met Sandford at all?' went on Colonel Melchett. 'He's been down here about a month. One of these modern day young architects who build peculiar houses. He's doing a house for Allington. God knows what it's going to be like - full of new-fangled stuff, I suppose. Glass dinner table and surgical chairs made of steel and webbing. Well, that's neither here nor there, but it shows the kind of chap Sandford is. Bolshie, you know - no morals.'

'Seduction,' said Sir Henry mildly, 'is quite an old-established crime though it does not, of course, date back so far as murder.'

Colonel Melchett stared.

'Oh! yes,' he said. 'Quite. Quite.'

'Well, Sir Henry,' said Drewitt, 'there it is - an ugly business, but plain. This young Sandford gets the girl into trouble. Then he's all for clearing off back to London. He's got a girl there - nice young lady - he's engaged to be married to her. Well, naturally this business, if she gets to hear of it, may cook his goose good and proper. He meets Rose at the bridge - it's a misty evening, no one about - he catches her by the shoulders and pitches her in. A proper young swine - and deserves what's coming to him. That's my opinion.'

Sir Henry was silent for a minute or two. He perceived a strong undercurrent of local prejudice. A new fangled architect was not likely to be popular in the conservative village of St Mary Mead.

'There is no doubt, I suppose, that this man, Sandford, was actually the father of the coming child?' he asked.

'He's the father all right,' said Drewitt. 'Rose Emmott let out as much to her father. She thought he'd marry her. Marry her! Not he!'

'Dear me," thought Sir Henry. 'I seem to be back in mid-Victorian melodrama. Unsuspecting girl, the villain from London, the stern father, the betrayal - we only need the faithful village lover. Yes, I think it's time I asked about him.'

And aloud he said:

'Hadn't the girl a young man of her own down here?'

'You mean Joe Ellis?' said the Inspector. 'Good fellow Joe. Carpentering's his trade. Ah! If she'd stuck to Joe - '

Colonel Melchett nodded approval.

'Stick to your own class,' he snapped.

'How did Joe Ellis take this affair?' asked Sir Henry.

'Nobody knew how he was taking it,' said the inspector. 'He's a quiet fellow, is Joe. Close. Anything Rose did was right in his eyes. She had him on a string all right. Just hoped she'd come back to him some day - that was his attitude, I reckon.'

'I'd like to see him,' said Sir Henry.

'Oh! We're going to look him up,' said Colonel Melchett. 'We're not neglecting any line. I thought myself we'd see Emmott first, then

Sandford, and then we can go on and see Ellis. That suits you, Clithering?'

Sir Henry said it would suit him admirably.

They found Tom Emmott at the Blue Boar. He was a big burly man of middle age with a shifty eye and a truculent jaw.

'Glad to see you, gentlemen - good morning, Colonel. Come in here and we can be private. Can I offer you anything, gentlemen? No? It's as you please. You've come about this business of my poor girl. Ah! She was a good girl, Rose was. Always was a good girl - till this bloody swine - beg pardon, but that's what he is - till he came along. Promised her marriage, he did. But I'll have the law on him. Drove her to it, he did. Murdering swine. Bringing disgrace on all of us. My poor girl.'

'Your daughter distinctly told you that Mr Sandford was responsible for her condition?' asked Melchett crisply.

'She did. In this very room she did.'

'And what did you say to her?' asked Sir Henry.

'Say to her?' The man seemed momentarily taken aback.

'Yes. You didn't, for example, threaten to turn her out of the house?'

'I was a bit upset - that's only natural. I'm sure you'll agree that's only natural. But, of course, I didn't turn her out of the house. I wouldn't do such a thing.' He assumed virtuous indignation. 'No. What's the law for - that's what I say. What's the law for? He'd got to do the right by her. And if he didn't, by God, he'd got to pay.'

He brought down his fist on the table.

'What time did you last see your daughter?' asked Melchett.

'Yesterday - tea time.'

'What was her manner then?'

'Well, much as usual. I didn't notice anything. If I'd known - '

'But you didn't know,' said the Inspector drily.

They took their leave.

'Emmott hardly creates a favourable impression,' said Sir Henry thoughtfully.

'Bit of a blackguard,' said Melchett. 'He'd have bled Sandford all right if he'd had the chance.'

Their next call was on the architect. Rex Sandford was very unlike the picture Sir Henry had unconsciously formed of him. He was a tall young man, very fair and very thin. His eyes were blue and dreamy, his hair was untidy and rather too long. His speech was a little too ladylike.

Colonel Melchett introduced himself and his companions. Then passing straight to the object of his visit, he invited the architect to make a statement as to his movements on the previous evening.

'You understand,' he said warningly. 'I have no power to compel a statement from you and any statement you make may be used in evidence against you. I want the position to be quite clear to you.'

'I - I don't understand,' said Sandford.

'You understand that the girl Rose Emmott was drowned last night?'

'I know. Oh! it's too, too distressing. Really, I haven't slept a wink. I've been incapable of any work today. I feel responsible - terribly responsible.'

He ran his hands through his hair, making it untidier still.

'I never meant any harm,' he said piteously. 'I never thought. I never dreamt she'd take it that way.'

He sat down at a table and buried his face in his hands.

'Do I understand you to say, Mr Sandford, that you refuse to make a statement as to where you were last night at eight-thirty?'

'No, no - certainly not. I was out. I went for a walk.'

'You went to meet Miss Emmott?'

'No. I went by myself. Through the woods. A long way.'

'Then how do you account for this note, sir, which was found in the dead girl's pocket?'

And Inspector Drewitt read it unemotionally aloud.

'Now, sir,' he finished. 'Do you deny that you wrote that?'

'No - no. You're right. I did write it. Rose asked me to meet her. She insisted. I didn't know what to do. So I wrote that note.'

'Ah, that's better,' said the Inspector.

'But I didn't go!' Sandford's voice rose high and excited. 'I didn't go! I felt it would be much better not. I was returning to town tomorrow. I felt it would be better not - not to meet. I intended to write from London and - and make - some arrangement.'

'You are aware, sir, that this girl was going to have a child, and that she had named you as its father?'

Sandford groaned, but did not answer.

'Was that statement true, sir?'

Sandford buried his face deeper.

'I suppose so,' he said in a muffled voice.

'Ah!' Inspector Drewitt could not disguise the satisfaction. 'Now about this "walk" of yours. Is there anyone who saw you last night?'

'I don't know. I don't think so. As far as I can remember, I didn't meet anybody.'

'That's a pity.'

'What do you mean?' Sandford stared wildly at him. 'What does it matter whether I was out for a walk or not? What difference does that make to Rose drowning herself?'

'Ah!' said the inspector. 'But you see, *she didn't*. She was thrown in deliberately, Mr Sandford.'

'She was - ' It took him a minute or two to take in all the horror of it. 'My God! Then - '

He dropped into a chair.

Colonel Melchett made a move to depart.

'You understand, Sandford,' he said. 'You are on no account to leave this house.'

The three men left together. The Inspector and the Chief Constable exchanged glances.

'That's enough, I think, sir,' said the Inspector.

'Yes. Get a warrant made out and arrest him.'

'Excuse me,' said Sir Henry, 'I've forgotten my gloves.'

He re-entered the house rapidly. Sandford was sitting just as they had left him, staring dazedly in front of him.

'I have come back,' said Sir Henry, 'to tell you that I personally, am anxious to do all I can to assist you. The motive of my interest in you I am not at liberty to reveal. But I am going to ask you, if you will, to tell me as briefly as possible exactly what passed between you and this girl Rose.'

'She was very pretty,' said Sandford. 'Very pretty and very alluring. And - and she made a dead set at me. Before God, that's true. She wouldn't let me alone. And it was lonely down here, and nobody liked me much, and - and, as I say she was amazingly pretty and she seemed to know her way about and all that - ' His voice died away. He looked up. 'And then this happened. She wanted me to marry her. I didn't know what to do. I'm engaged to a girl in London. If she ever gets to hear of this - and she will, of course - well, it's all up. She won't understand. How could she?

And I'm a rotter, of course. As I say, I didn't know what to do. I avoided seeing Rose again. I thought I'd get back to town - see my lawyer - make arrangements about money and so forth, for her. God, what a fool I've been! And it's all so clear - the case against me. But they've made a mistake. She *must* have done it herself.'

'Did she ever threaten to take her life?'

Sandford shook his head.

'Never. I shouldn't have said she was that sort.'

'What about a man called Joe Ellis?'

'The carpenter fellow? Good old village stock. Dull fellow - but crazy about Rose.'

'He might have been jealous?' suggested Sir Henry.

'I suppose he was a bit - but he's the bovine kind. He'd suffer in silence.'

'Well,' said Sir Henry. 'I must be going.'

He rejoined the others.

'You know, Melchett,' he said. 'I feel we ought to have a look at this other fellow - Ellis - before we do anything drastic. Pity if you made an arrest that turned out to be a mistake. After all, jealousy is a pretty good motive for murder - and a pretty common one, too.'

'That's true enough,' said the Inspector. 'But Joe Ellis isn't that kind. He wouldn't hurt a fly. Why, nobody's ever seen him out of temper. Still, I agree we'd better just ask him where he was last night. He'll be at home now. He lodges with Mrs Bartlett - very decent soul - a widow, she takes in a bit of washing.'

The little cottage to which they bent their footsteps was spotlessly clean and neat. A big stout woman of middle age opened the door to them. She had a pleasant face and blue eyes.

'Good morning, Mrs Bartlett,' said the Inspector. 'Is Joe Ellis here?'

'Came back not ten minutes ago,' said Mrs Bartlett. 'Step inside, will you, please, sirs.'

Wiping her hands on her apron she led them into a tiny front parlour with stuffed birds, china dogs, a sofa and several useless pieces of furniture.

She hurriedly arranged seats for them, picked up a whatnot bodily to make further room and went out calling:

'Joe, there's three gentlemen want to see you.'

A voice from the back kitchen replied:

'I'll be there when I've cleaned myself.'

Mrs Bartlett smiled.

'Come in, Mrs Bartlett.' said Colonel Melchett. 'Sit down.'

'Oh, no, sir, I couldn't think of it.'

Mrs Bartlett was shocked at the idea.

'You find Joe Ellis a good lodger?' inquired Melchett in a seemingly careless tone.

'Couldn't have a better, sir. A real steady young fellow. Never touches a drop of drink. Takes a pride in his work. And always kind and helpful about the house. He put up those shelves for me, and he's fixed a new dresser in the kitchen. And any little thing that wants doing in the house - why, Joe does it as a matter of course, and won't hardly take thanks for it. Ah! there aren't many young fellows like Joe, sir.'

'Some girl will be lucky some day,' said Melchett carelessly. 'He was rather sweet on that poor girl, Rose Emmott, wasn't he?'

Mrs Bartlett sighed.

'It made me tired, it did. Him worshipping the ground she trod on and her not caring a snap of the fingers for him.'

'Where does Joe spend his evenings, Mrs Bartlett?'

'Here, sir, usually. He does some odd piece of work in the evenings, sometimes, and he's trying to learn book-keeping by correspondence.'

'Ah! really. Was he in yesterday evening?'

'Yes, sir.'

'You're sure, Mrs Bartlett?' said Sir Henry sharply.

She turned to him.

'Quite sure, sir.'

'He didn't go out, for instance, somewhere about eight to eight-thirty?'

'Oh, no.' Mrs Bartlett laughed. 'He was fixing the kitchen dresser for me nearly all the evening, and I was helping him.'

Sir Henry looked at her smiling assured face and felt his first pang of doubt.

A moment later Ellis himself entered the room.

He was a tall broad-shouldered young man, very good-looking in a rustic way. He had shy, blue eyes and a good-tempered smile. Altogether an amiable young giant.

Melchett opened the conversation. Mrs Barlett withdrew to the kitchen.

'We are investigating the death of Rose Emmott. You knew her, Ellis.'

'Yes.' He hesitated, then muttered, 'Hoped to marry her one day. Poor lass.'

'You have heard of what her condition was?'

'Yes.' A spark of anger showed in his eyes. 'Let her down, he did. But 'twere for the best. She wouldn't have been happy married to him. I reckoned she'd come to me when this happened. I'd have looked after her.'

'In spite of - '

''Tweren't her fault. He led her astray with fine promises and all. Oh! she told me about it. She'd no call to drown herself. He weren't worth it.'

'Where were you, Ellis, last night at eight-thirty?'

Was it Sir Henry's fancy, or was there really a shade of constraint in the ready - almost too ready - reply?

'I was here. Fixing up a contraption in the kitchen for Mrs B. You ask her. She'll tell you.'

'He was too quick with that,' thought Sir Henry. 'He's a slow thinking man. That popped out so pat that I suspect he'd got it ready beforehand.'

Then he told himself that it was imagination. He was imagining things - yes, even imagining an apprehensive glint in those blue eyes.

A few more questions and answers and they left. Sir Henry made an excuse to go to the kitchen. Mrs Bartlett was busy at the stove. She looked up with a pleasant smile. A new dresser was fixed against the wall. It was not quite finished. Some tools lay about and some pieces of wood.

'That's what Ellis was at work on last night?' said Sir Henry.

'Yes, sir, it's a nice bit of work, isn't it? He's a very clever carpenter, Joe is.'

No apprehensive gleam in her eye - no embarrassment.

But Ellis - had he imagined it? No, there *had* been something.

'I must tackle him,' thought Sir Henry.

Turning to leave the kitchen, he collided with a perambulator.

'Not woken the baby up, I hope,' he said.

Mrs Bartlett's laugh rang out.

'Oh, no, sir. I've no children - more's the pity. That's what I take the laundry on, sir.'

'Oh! I see - '

He paused then said on an impulse:

'Mrs Bartlett. You knew Rose Emmott. Tell me what you really thought of her.'

She looked at him curiously.

'Well, sir, I thought she was flighty. But she's dead - and I don't like to speak ill of the dead.'

'But I have a reason - a very good reason for asking.'

He spoke persuasively.

She seemed to consider, studying him attentively. Finally she made up her mind.

'She was a bad lot, sir,' she said quietly. 'I wouldn't say so before Joe. She took *him* in good and proper. That kind can - more's the pity. You know how it is, sir.'

Yes, Sir Henry knew. The Joe Ellises of the world were peculiarly vulnerable. They trusted blindly. But for that very cause the shock of discovery might be greater.

He left the cottage baffled and perplexed. He was up against a blank wall. Joe Ellis had been working indoors all yesterday evening. Mrs Bartlett had actually been there watching him. Could one possibly get round that? There was nothing to set against it - except possibly that suspicious readiness in replying on Joe Ellis's part - that suggestion of having a story pat.

'Well,' said Melchett, 'that seems to make the matter quite clear, eh?'

'It does, sir,' agreed the Inspector. 'Sandford's our man. Not a leg to stand upon. The thing's as plain as daylight. It's my opinion as the girl and her father were out to - well - practically blackmail him. He's no money to speak of - he didn't want the matter to get to his young lady's ears. He was desperate and he acted accordingly. What do you say, sir?' he added, addressing Sir Henry deferentially.

'It seems so,' admitted Sir Henry. 'And yet - I can hardly picture Sandford committing any violent action.'

But he knew as he spoke that that objection was hardly valid. The meekest animal, when cornered, is capable of amazing actions.

'I should like to see the boy, though,' he said suddenly. 'The one who heard the cry.'

Jimmy Brown proved to be an intelligent lad, rather small for his age, with a sharp, rather cunning face. He was eager to be

questioned and was rather disappointed when checked in his dramatic tale of what he had heard on the fatal night.

'You were on the other side of the bridge, I understand,' said Sir Henry. 'Across the river from the village. Did you see anyone on that side as you came over the bridge?'

'There was someone walking up in the woods. Mr Sandford, I think it was, the architecting gentleman who's building the queer house.'

The three men exchanged glances.

'That was about ten minutes or so before you heard the cry?'

The boy nodded.

'Did you see anyone else - on the village side of the river?'

'A man came along the path that side. Going slow and whistling he was. Might have been Joe Ellis.'

'You couldn't possibly have seen who it was,' said the Inspector sharply. 'What with the mist and its being dusk.'

'It's on account of the whistle,' said the boy. 'Joe Ellis always whistles the same tune - "I wanner be happy" - it's the only tune he knows.'

He spoke with the scorn of the modernist for the old-fashioned.

'Anyone might whistle a tune,' said Melchett. 'Was he going towards the bridge?'

'No. Other way - to village.'

'I don't think we need concern ourselves with this unknown man,' said Melchett. 'You heard the cry and the splash and a few minutes later you saw the body floating downstream and you ran for help, going back to the bridge, crossing it, and making straight for the village. You didn't see anyone near the bridge as you ran for help?'

'I think as there were two men with a wheelbarrow on the river path; but they were some way away and I couldn't tell if they were going or coming and Mr Giles's place was nearest - so I ran there.'

'You did well, my boy,' said Melchett 'You acted very creditably and with presence of mind. You're a scout, aren't you?'

'Yes, sir.'

'Very good. Very good indeed.'

Sir Henry was silent - thinking. He took a slip of paper from his pocket, looked at it, shook his head. It didn't seem possible - and yet -

He decided to pay a call on Miss Marple.

She received him in her pretty, slightly overcrowded old-style drawing-room.

'I've come to report progress,' said Sir Henry. 'I'm afraid that from our point of view things aren't going well. They are going to arrest Sandford. And I must say I think they are justified.'

'You have found nothing in - what shall I say - support of my theory, then?' She looked perplexed - anxious. 'Perhaps I have

been wrong - quite wrong. You have such wide experience - you would surely detect it if it were so.'

'For one thing,' said Sir Henry, 'I can hardly believe it. And for another we are up against an unbreakable alibi. Joe Ellis was fixing shelves in the kitchen all the evening and Mrs Bartlett was watching him do it.'

Miss Marple leaned forward, taking in a quick breath.

'But that can't be so,' she said. 'It was Friday night.'

'Friday night?'

'Yes - Friday night. On Friday evenings Mrs Bartlett takes the laundry she has done round to the different people.'

Sir Henry leaned back in his chair. He remembered the boy Jimmy's story of the whistling man and - yes - it would all fit in.'

He rose, taking Miss Marple warmly by the hand.

'I think I see my way,' he said. 'At least I can try... '

Five minutes later he was back at Mrs Bartlett's cottage and facing Joe Ellis in the little parlour among the china dogs.

'You lied to us, Ellis, about last night,' he said crisply. 'You were not in the kitchen here fixing the dresser between eight and eight-thirty. You were seen walking along the path by the river towards the bridge a few minutes before Rose Emmott was murdered.'

The man gasped.

'She weren't murdered - she weren't. I had naught to do with it. She threw herself in, she did. She was desperate like. I wouldn't have harmed a hair on her head, I wouldn't.'

'Then why did you lie as to where you were?' asked Sir Henry keenly.

The man's eyes shifted and lowered uncomfortably.

'I was scared. Mrs B. saw me around there and when we heard just afterwards what had happened - well, she thought it might look bad for me. I fixed I'd say I was working here, and she agreed to back me up. She's a rare one, she is. She's always been good to me.'

Without a word Sir Henry left the room and walked into the kitchen. Mrs Bartlett was washing up at the sink.

'Mrs Bartlett,' he said, 'I know everything. I think you'd better confess - that is, unless you want Joe Ellis hanged for something he didn't do... No. I see you don't want that. I'll tell you what happened. You were out taking the laundry home. You came across Rose Emmott. You thought she'd given Joe the chuck and was taking up with this stranger. Now she was in trouble - Joe was prepared to come to the rescue - marry her if need be, and if she'd have him. He's lived in your house for four years. You've fallen in love with him. You want him for yourself. You hated this girl - you couldn't bear that this worthless little slut should take your man from you. You're a strong woman, Mrs Bartlett. You caught the girl by the shoulders and shoved her over into the stream. A few minutes later you met Joe Ellis. The boy Jimmy saw you together in the distance - but in the darkness and the mist he

assumed the perambulator was a wheelbarrow and two men wheeling it. You persuaded Joe that he might be suspected and you concocted what was supposed to be an alibi for him, but which was really an alibi for *you*. Now then, I'm right, am I not?'

He held his breath. He had staked all on this throw.

She stood before him rubbing her hands on her apron, slowly making up her mind.

'It's just as you say, sir,' she said at last, in her quiet subdued voice (a dangerous voice, Sir Henry suddenly felt it to be). 'I don't know what came over me. Shameless - that's what she was. It just came over me - she shan't take Joe from me. I haven't had a happy life, sir. My husband, he was a poor lot - an invalid and cross-grained. I nursed and looked after him true. And then Joe came here to lodge. I'm not such an old woman, sir, in spite of my grey hair. I'm just forty, sir. Joe's one in a thousand. I'd have done anything for him - anything at all. He was like a little child, sir, so gentle and believing. He was mine, sir, to look after and see to. And this - this - ' She swallowed - checked her emotion. Even at this moment she was a strong woman. She stood up straight and looked at Sir Henry curiously. 'I'm ready to come, sir. I never thought anyone would find out. I don't know how you knew, sir - I don't, I'm sure.'

Sir Henry shook his head gently.

'It was not I who knew,' he said - and he thought of the piece of paper still reposing in his pocket with the words on it written in neat old-fashioned handwriting.

'Mrs Bartlett, with whom Joe Ellis lodges at 2 Mill Cottages.'

Miss Marple had been right again.

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THE RED SIGNAL

"No, but how too thrilling," said pretty Mrs Eversleigh, opening her lovely, but slightly vacant, blue eyes very wide. "They always say women have a sixth sense; do you think it's true, Sir Alington?"

The famous alienist smiled sardonically. He had an unbounded contempt for the foolish pretty type, such as his fellow guest. Alington West was the supreme authority on mental disease, and he was fully alive to his own position and importance. A slightly pompous man of full figure.

"A great deal of nonsense is talked, I know that, Mrs Eversleigh. What does the term mean - a sixth sense?"

"You scientific men are always so severe. And it really is extraordinary the way one seems to positively know things sometimes - just know them, feel them, I mean - quite uncanny - it really is. Claire knows what I mean, don't you, Claire?"

She appealed to her hostess with a slight pout, and a tilted shoulder.

Claire Trent did not reply at once. It was a small dinner party - she and her husband, Violet Eversleigh, Sir Alington West, and his nephew Dermot West, who was an old friend of Jack Trent's. Jack Trent himself, a somewhat heavy florid man, with a good-humored smile, and a pleasant lazy laugh, took up the thread.

"Bunkum, Violet! Your best friend is killed in a railway accident. Straight away you remember that you dreamed of a black cat last Tuesday - marvelous, you felt all along that something was going to happen!"

"Oh, no, Jack, you're mixing up premonitions with intuition now. Come, now, Sir Alington, you must admit that premonitions are real?"

"To a certain extent, perhaps," admitted the physician cautiously. "But coincidence accounts for a good deal, and then there is the invariable tendency to make the most of a story afterwards."

"I don't think there is any such thing as premonition," said Claire Trent, rather abruptly. "Or intuition, or a sixth sense, or any of the things we talk about so glibly. We go through life like a train rushing through the darkness to an unknown destination."

"That's hardly a good simile, Mrs Trent," said Dermot West, lifting his head for the first time and taking part in the discussion. There was a curious glitter in the clear gray eyes that shone out rather oddly from the deeply tanned face. "You've forgotten the signals, you see."

"The signals?"

"Yes, green if it's all right, and red - for danger!"

"Red - for danger - how thrilling!" breathed Violet Eversleigh.

Dermot turned from her rather impatiently.

"That's just a way of describing it, of course."

Trent stared at him curiously.

"You speak as though it were an actual experience, Dermot, old boy."

"So it is - has been, I mean."

"Give us the yarn."

"I can give you one instance. Out in Mesopotamia, just after the Armistice, I came into my tent one evening with the feeling strong upon me. Danger! Look out! Hadn't the ghost of a notion what it was all about. I made a round of the camp, fussed unnecessarily, took all precautions against an attack by hostile Arabs. Then I went back to my tent. As soon as I got inside, the feeling popped up again stronger than ever. Danger! In the end I took a blanket outside, rolled myself up in it and slept there."

"Well?"

"The next morning, when I went inside the tent, first thing I saw was a great knife arrangement - about half a yard long - struck down through my bunk, just where I would have lain. I soon found out about it - one of the Arab servants. His son had been spot as a spy. What have you got to say to that, Uncle Alington, as an example of what I call the red signal?"

The specialist smiled noncommittally. "A very interesting story, my dear Dermot."

"But not one that you accept unreservedly?"

"Yes, yes, I have no doubt but that you had the premonition of danger, just as you state. But it is the origin of the premonition I dispute. According to you, it came from without, impressed by some outside source upon your mentality. But nowadays we find that nearly everything comes from within - from our subconscious self.

"I suggest that by some glance or look this Arab had betrayed himself. Your conscious self did not notice or remember, but with your subconscious self it was otherwise. The subconscious never forgets. We believe, too, that it can reason and deduce quite independently of the higher or conscious will. Your subconscious self, then, believed that an attempt might be made to assassinate you, and succeeded in forcing its fear upon your conscious realization."

"That sounds very convincing, I admit," said Dermot, smiling.

"But not nearly so exciting," pouted Mrs Eversleigh.

"It is also possible that you may have been subconsciously aware of the hate felt by the man towards you. What in old days used to be called telepathy certainly exists, though the conditions governing it are very little understood."

"Have there been any other instances?" asked Claire of Dermot.

"Oh yes, but nothing very pictorial - and I suppose they could all be explained under the heading of coincidence. I refused an invitation to a country house once, for no other reason than the 'red signal.' The place was burned out during the week. By the way, Uncle Alington, where does the subconscious come in there?"

"I'm afraid it doesn't," said Sir Alington, smiling.

"But you've got an equally good explanation. Come, now. No need to be tactful with near relatives."

"Well, then, nephew, I venture to suggest that you refused the invitation for the ordinary reason that you didn't much want to go, and that after the fire, you suggested to yourself that you had had a warning of danger, which explanation you now believe implicitly."

"It's hopeless," laughed Dermot. "It's heads you win, tails I lose."

"Never mind, Mr West," cried Violet Eversleigh. "I believe in your Red Signal. Is the time in Mesopotamia the last time you had it?"

"Yes - until -"

"I beg your pardon?"

"Nothing."

Dermot sat silent. The words which had nearly left his lips were: "Yes, until tonight." They had come quite unbidden to his lips, voicing a thought which had as yet not been consciously realized, but he was aware at once that they were true. The Red Signal was looming up out of the darkness. Danger! Danger close at hand!

But why? What conceivable danger could there be here? Here in the house of his friends? At least - well, yes, there was that kind of danger. He looked at Claire Trent - her whiteness, her slenderness, the exquisite droop of her golden head. But that danger had been there for some time - it was never likely to get acute. For Jack Trent was his best friend, and more than his best friend, the man who had saved his life in

Flanders and been recommended for the V.C. for doing so. A good fellow, Jack, one of the best. Damned bad luck that he should have fallen in love with Jack's wife. He'd get over it some day, he supposed. A thing couldn't go on hurting like this forever. One could starve it out - that was it, starve it out. It was not as though she would ever guess - and if she did guess, there was no danger of her caring. A statue, a beautiful statue, a thing of gold and ivory and pale pink coral... a toy for a king, not a real woman...

Claire... the very thought of her name, uttered silently, hurt him... He must get over it. He'd cared for women before... "But not like this!" said something. "Not like this." Well, there it was. No danger there - heartache, yes, but not danger. Not the danger of the Red Signal. That was for something else.

He looked round the table and it struck him for the first time that it was rather an unusual little gathering. His uncle, for instance, seldom dined out in this small, informal way. It was not as though the Trents were old friends; until this evening Dermot had not been aware that he knew them at all.

To be sure, there was an excuse. A rather notorious medium was coming after dinner to give a séance. Sir Alington professed to be mildly interested in spiritualism. Yes, that was an excuse, certainly.

The word forced itself on his notice. An excuse. Was the séance just an excuse to make the specialist's presence at dinner natural? If so, what was the real object of his being here? A host of details came rushing

into Dermot's mind, trifles unnoticed at the time, or, as his uncle would have said, unnoticed by the conscious mind.

The great physician had looked oddly, very oddly, at Claire more than once. He seemed to be watching her. She was uneasy under his scrutiny. She made little twitching motions with her hands. She was nervous, horribly nervous, and was it, could it be, frightened? Why was she frightened?

With a jerk he came back to the conversation round the table. Mrs Eversleigh had got the great man talking upon his own subject.

"My dear lady," he was saying, "what is madness? I can assure you that the more we study the subject, the more difficult we find it to pronounce. We all practice a certain amount of self-deception, and when we carry it so far as to believe we are the Czar of Russia, we are shut up or restrained. But there is a long road before we reach that point. At what particular spot on it shall we erect a post and say, 'On this side sanity, on the other madness'? It can't be done, you know. And I will tell you this: if the man suffering from a delusion happened to hold his tongue about it, in all probability we should never be able to distinguish him from a normal individual. The extraordinary sanity of the insane is an interesting subject."

Sir Alington sipped his wine with appreciation and beamed upon the company.

"I've always heard they are very cunning," remarked Mrs Eversleigh. "Loonies, I mean."

"Remarkably so. And suppression of one's particular delusion has a disastrous effect very often. All suppressions are dangerous, as psychoanalysis has taught us. The man who has a harmless eccentricity, and can indulge it as such, seldom goes over the border-line. But the man -" he paused - "or woman who is to all appearance perfectly normal, may be in reality a poignant source of danger to the community."

His gaze traveled gently down the table to Claire and then back again.

A horrible fear shook Dermot. Was that what he meant? Was that what he was driving at? Impossible, but -

"And all from suppressing oneself," sighed Mrs Eversleigh. "I quite see that one should be very careful always to - to express one's personality. The dangers of the other are frightful."

"My dear Mrs Eversleigh," expostulated the physician, "you have quite misunderstood me. The cause of the mischief is in the physical matter of the brain - sometimes arising from some outward agency such as a blow; sometimes, alas, congenital."

"Heredity is so sad," sighed the lady vaguely. "Consumption and all that."

"Tuberculosis is not hereditary," said Sir Alington drily.

"Isn't it? I always thought it was. But madness is! How dreadful. What else?"

"Gout," said Sir Alington, smiling. "And color blindness - the latter is rather interesting. It is transmitted direct to males, but is latent in females. So, while there are many color blind men, for a woman to be color blind, it must have been latent in her mother as well as present in her father - rather an unusual state of things to occur. That is what is called sex limited heredity."

"How interesting. But madness is not like that, is it?"

"Madness can be handed down to men or women equally," said the physician gravely.

Claire rose suddenly, pushing back her chair so abruptly that it overturned and fell to the ground. She was very pale and the nervous motions of her fingers were very apparent.

"You - you will not be long, will you?" she begged. "Mrs Thompson will be here in a few minutes now."

"One glass of port, and I will be with you," declared Sir Alington. "To see this wonderful Mrs Thompson's performance is what I have come for, is it not? Ha, ha! Not that I needed any inducement." He bowed.

Claire gave a faint smile of acknowledgment and passed out of the room with Mrs Eversleigh.

"Afraid I've been talking shop," remarked the physician as he resumed his seat. "Forgive me, my dear fellow."

"Not at all," said Trent perfunctorily.

He looked strained and worried. For the first time Dermot felt an outsider in the company of his friend. Between these two was a secret that even an old friend might not share. And yet the whole thing was fantastic and incredible. What had he to go upon? Nothing but a couple of glances and a woman's nervousness.

They lingered over their wine but a very short time, and arrived up in the drawing room just as Mrs Thompson was announced.

The medium was a plump middle-aged woman, atrociously dressed in magenta velvet, with a loud, rather common voice.

"Hope I'm not late, Mrs Trent," she said cheerily. "You did say nine o'clock, didn't you?"

"You are quite punctual, Mrs Thompson," said Claire in her sweet, slightly husky voice. "This is our little circle."

No further introductions were made, as was evidently the custom. The medium swept them all with a shrewd, penetrating eye.

"I hope we shall get some good results," she remarked briskly. "I can't tell you how I hate it when I go out and I can't give satisfaction, so to speak. It just makes me mad. But I think Shiromako (my Japanese

control, you know) will be able to get through all right tonight. I'm feeling ever so fit, and I refused the welsh rarebit, fond of cheese though I am."

Dermot listened, half-amused, half-disgusted. How prosaic the whole thing was! And yet, was he not judging foolishly? Everything, after all, was natural - the powers claimed by mediums were natural powers, as yet imperfectly understood. A great surgeon might be wary of indigestion on the eve of a delicate operation. Why not Mrs Thompson?

Chairs were arranged in a circle, lights so that they could conveniently be raised and lowered. Dermot noticed that there was no question of tests, or of Sir Alington satisfying himself as to the conditions of the séance. No, this business of Mrs Thompson was only a blind. Sir Alington was here for quite another purpose. Claire's mother, Dermot remembered, had died abroad. There had been some mystery about her... Hereditary...

With a jerk he forced his mind back to the surroundings of the moment.

Everyone took their places, and the lights were turned out, all but a small red-shaded one on a far table.

For a while nothing was heard but the low, even breathing of the medium. Gradually it grew more and more stertorous. Then, with a suddenness that made Dermot jump, a loud rap came from the far end of the room. It was repeated from the other side. Then a perfect crescendo of raps was heard. They died away, and a sudden high peal of mocking laughter rang through the room.

Then silence, broken by a voice utterly unlike that of Mrs Thompson, a high-pitched, quaintly inflected voice.

"I am here, gentlemen," it said. "Yess, I am here. You wish ask me things?"

"Who are you? Shiromako?"

"Yess. I Shiromako. I pass over long ago. I work. I very happy."

Further details of Shiromako's life followed. It was all very flat and uninteresting, and Dermot had heard it often before. Everyone was happy, very happy. Messages were given from vaguely described relatives, the description being so loosely worded as to fit almost any contingency. An elderly lady, the mother of someone present, held the floor for some time, imparting copybook maxims with an air of refreshing novelty hardly borne out by her subject matter.

"Someone else want to get through now," announced Shiromako. "Got a very important message for one of the gentlemen."

There was a pause, and then a new voice spoke, prefacing its remarks with an evil demoniacal chuckle.

"Ha, ha! Ha, ha, ha! Better not go home. Take my advice."

"Who are you speaking to?" asked Trent.

"One of you three. I shouldn't go home if I were him. Danger! Blood! Not very much blood - quite enough. No, don't go home." The voice grew fainter. "Don't go home!"

It died away completely. Dermot felt his blood tingling. He was convinced that the warning was meant for him. Somehow or other, there was danger abroad tonight.

There was a sigh from the medium, and then a groan. She was coming round. The lights were turned on, and presently she sat upright, her eyes blinking a little.

"Go off well, my dear? I hope so."

"Very good indeed, thank you, Mrs Thompson."

"Shiromako, I suppose?"

"Yes, and others."

Mrs Thompson yawned.

"I'm dead beat. Absolutely down and out. Does fairly take it out of you. Well, I'm glad it was a success. I was a bit afraid something disagreeable might happen. There's a queer feel about this room tonight."

She glanced over each ample shoulder in turn, and then shrugged them uncomfortably.

"I don't like it," she said. "Any sudden deaths among any of you people lately?"

"What do you mean - among us?"

"Near relatives - dear friends? No? Well, if I wanted to be melodramatic, I'd say that there was death in the air tonight. There, it's only my nonsense. Good-bye, Mrs Trent. I'm glad you've been satisfied."

Mrs Thompson in her magenta velvet gown went out.

"I hope you've been interested, Sir Alington," murmured Claire.

"A most interesting evening, my dear lady. Many thanks for the opportunity. Let me wish you good night. You are all going on to a dance, are you not?"

"Won't you come with us?"

"No, no. I make it a rule to be in bed by half-past eleven. Good night. Good night, Mrs Eversleigh. Ah, Dermot, I rather want to have a word with you. Can you come with me now? You can rejoin the others at the Grafton Galleries."

"Certainly, Uncle. I'll meet you there then, Trent."

Very few words were exchanged between uncle and nephew during the short drive to Harley Street. Sir Alington made a semi-apology for

dragging Dermot away, and assured him that he would only detain him a few minutes.

"Shall I keep the car for you, my boy?" he asked, as they alighted.

"Oh, don't bother, Uncle. I'll pick up a taxi."

"Very good. I don't like to keep Charlson up later than I can help. Good night, Charlson. Now where the devil did I put my key?"

The car glided away as Sir Alington stood on the steps searching his pockets.

"Must have left it in my other coat," he said at length. "Ring the bell, will you? Johnson is still up, I dare say."

The imperturbable Johnson did indeed open the door within sixty seconds.

"Mislaid my key, Johnson," explained Sir Alington. "Bring a couple of whiskies and sodas into the library."

"Very good, Sir Alington."

The physician strode on into the library and turned on the lights. He motioned to Dermot to close the door.

"I won't keep you long, Dermot, but there's just something I want to say to you. Is it my fancy, or have you a certain - tendresse, shall we say, for Mrs Jack Trent?"

The blood rushed to Dermot's face.

"Jack Trent is my best friend."

"Pardon me, but that is hardly answering my question. I dare say that you consider my views on divorce and such matters highly puritanical, but I must remind you that you are my only near relative and my heir."

"There is no question of a divorce," said Dermot angrily.

"There certainly is not, for a reason which I understand perhaps better than you do. That particular reason I cannot give you now, but I do wish to warn you. She is not for you."

The young man faced his uncle's gaze steadily.

"I do understand - and permit me to say, perhaps better than you think. I know the reason for your presence at dinner tonight."

"Eh?" The physician was clearly startled. "How did you know that?"

"Call it a guess, sir. I am right, am I not, when I say that you were there in your - professional capacity."

Sir Alington strode up and down.

"You are quite right, Dermot. I could not, of course, have told you so myself, though I am afraid it will soon be common property."

Dermot's heart contracted.

"You mean that you have - made up your mind?"

"Yes, there is insanity in the family - on the mother's side. A sad case - a very sad case."

"I can't believe it, sir."

"I dare say not. To the layman there are few if any signs apparent."

"And to the expert?"

"The evidence is conclusive. In such a case the patient must be placed under restraint as soon as possible."

"My God!" breathed Dermot. "But you can't shut anyone up for nothing at all."

"My dear Dermot! Cases are only placed under restraint when their being at large would result in danger to the community."

"Danger?"

"Very grave danger. In all probability a peculiar form of homicidal mania. It was so in the mother's case."

Dermot turned away with a groan, burying his face in his hands. Claire - white and golden Claire!

"In the circumstances," continued the physician comfortably, "I felt it incumbent on me to warn you."

"Claire," murmured Dermot. "My poor Claire."

"Yes, indeed, we must all pity her."

Suddenly Dermot raised his head.

"I say I don't believe it. Doctors make mistakes. Everyone knows that. And they're always keen on their own specialty."

"My dear Dermot," cried Sir Alington angrily.

"I tell you I don't believe it - and anyway, even if it is so, I don't care. I love Claire. If she will come with me, I shall take her away - far away - out of the reach of meddling physicians. I shall guard her, care for her, shelter her with my love."

"You will do nothing of the sort. Are you mad?"

Dermot laughed scornfully.

"You would say so."

"Understand me, Dermot." Sir Alington's face was red with suppressed passion. "If you do this thing - this shameful thing - I shall withdraw the allowance I am now making you, and I shall make a new will leaving all I possess to various hospitals."

"Do as you please with your damned money," said Dermot in a low voice. "I shall have the woman I love."

"A woman who -"

"Say a word against her and, by God, I'll kill you!" cried Dermot.

A slight chink of glasses made them both swing round. Unheard by them in the heat of their argument, Johnson had entered with a tray of glasses. His face was the imperturbable one of the good servant, but Dermot wondered just exactly how much he had overheard.

"That'll do, Johnson," said Sir Alington curtly. "You can go to bed."

"Thank you, sir. Good night, sir."

Johnson withdrew.

The two men looked at each other. The momentary interruption had calmed the storm.

"Uncle," said Dermot. "I shouldn't have spoken to you as I did. I can quite see that from your point of view you are perfectly right. But I have loved Claire Trent for a long time. The fact that Jack Trent is my best friend has hitherto stood in the way of my ever speaking of love to Claire herself. But in these circumstances that fact no longer counts. The idea that any monetary condition's can deter me is absurd. I think we've both said all there is to be said. Good night."

"Dermot -"

"It is really no good arguing further. Good night, Uncle Alington."

He went out quickly, shutting the door behind him. The hall was in darkness. He passed through it, opened the front door and emerged into the street, banging the door behind him.

A taxi had just deposited a fare at a house farther along the street and Dermot hailed it, and drove to the Grafton Galleries.

In the door of the ballroom he stood for a minute, bewildered, his head spinning. The raucous jazz music, the smiling women - it was as though he had stepped into another world.

Had he dreamed it all? Impossible that that grim conversation with his uncle should have really taken place. There was Claire floating past, like a lily in her white and silver gown that fitted sheathlike to her slenderness. She smiled at him, her face calm and serene. Surely it was all a dream.

The dance had stopped. Presently she was near him, smiling up into his face. As in a dream he asked her to dance. She was in his arms now, the raucous melodies had begun again.

He felt her flag a little.

"Tired? Do you want to stop?"

"If you don't mind. Can we go somewhere where we can talk? There is something I want to say to you."

Not a dream. He came back to earth with a bump. Could he ever have thought her face calm and serene? It was haunted with anxiety, with dread. How much did she know?

He found a quiet corner, and they sat down side by side.

"Well," he said, assuming a lightness he did not feel, "you said you had something you wanted to say to me?"

"Yes." Her eyes were cast down. She was playing nervously with the tassel of her gown. "It's difficult -"

"Tell me, Claire."

"It's just this, I want you to - to go away for a time."

He was astonished. Whatever he had expected, it was not this.

"You want me to go away? Why?"

"It's best to be honest, isn't it? I know that you are a - a gentleman and my friend. I want you to go away because I - I have let myself get fond of you."

"Claire."

Her words left him dumb - tongue-tied.

"Please do not think that I am conceited enough to fancy that you - would ever be likely to fall in love with me. It is only that - I am not very happy - and - oh! I would rather you went away."

"Claire, don't you know that I have cared - cared damnably - ever since I met you?"

She lifted startled eyes to his face.

"You cared? You have cared a long time?"

"Since the beginning."

"Oh!" she cried. "Why didn't you tell me? Then? When I could have come to you! Why tell me now when it's too late. No, I'm mad - I don't know what I'm saying. I could never have come to you."

"Claire, what did you mean when you said 'now that it's too late'? Is it - is it because of my uncle? What he knows?"

She nodded, the tears running down her face.

"Listen, Claire, you're not to believe all that. You're not to think about it. Instead, you will come away with me. I will look after you - keep you safe always."

His arms went round her. He drew her to him, felt her tremble at his touch. Then suddenly she wrenched herself free.

"Oh, no, please. Can't you see? I couldn't now. It would be ugly - ugly - ugly. All along I've wanted to be good - and now - it would be ugly as well."

He hesitated, baffled by her words. She looked at him appealingly.

"Please," she said. "I want to be good..."

Without a word, Dermot got up and left her. For the moment he was touched and racked by her words beyond argument He went for his hat and coat, running into Trent as he did so.

"Hallo, Dermot, you're off early."

"Yes, I'm not in the mood for dancing tonight"

"It's a rotten night," said Trent gloomily. "But you haven't got my worries."

Dermot had a sudden panic that Trent might be going to confide in him. Not that - anything but that!

"Well, so long," he said hurriedly. "I'm off home."

"Home, eh? What about the warning of the spirits?"

"I'll risk that. Good night, Jack."

Dermot's flat was not far away. He walked there, feeling the need of the cool night air to calm his fevered brain. He let himself in with his key and switched on the light in the bedroom.

And all at once, for the second time that night, the feeling of the Red Signal surged over him. So overpowering was it that for the moment it swept even Claire from his mind.

Danger! He was in danger. At this very moment, in this very room!

He tried in vain to ridicule himself free of the fear. Perhaps his efforts were secretly halfhearted. So far, the Red Signal had given him timely warning which had enabled him to avoid disaster. Smiling a little at his own superstition, he made a careful tour of the flat. It was possible that some malefactor had got in and was lying concealed there. But his search revealed nothing. His man, Milson, was away, and the flat was absolutely empty.

He returned to his bedroom and undressed slowly, frowning to himself. The sense of danger was acute as ever. He went to a drawer to get out

a handkerchief, and suddenly stood stock still. There was an unfamiliar lump in the middle of the drawer.

His quick nervous fingers tore aside the handkerchiefs and took out the object concealed beneath them.

It was a revolver.

With the utmost astonishment Dermot examined it keenly. It was of a somewhat unfamiliar pattern, and one shot had been fired from it lately. Beyond that he could make nothing of it Someone had placed it in that drawer that very evening. It had not been there when he dressed for dinner - he was sure of that.

He was about to replace it in the drawer, when he was startled by a bell ringing. It rang again and again, sounding unusually loud in the quietness of the empty flat.

Who could be coming to the front door at this hour? And only one answer came to the question - an answer instinctive and persistent.

Danger - danger - danger.

Led by some instinct for which he did not account, Dermot switched off his light, slipped on an overcoat that lay across a chair, and opened the hall door.

Two men stood outside. Beyond them Dermot caught sight of a blue uniform. A policeman!

"Mr West?" asked one of the two men.

It seemed to Dermot that ages elapsed before he answered. In reality it was only a few seconds before he replied in a very fair imitation of his servant's expressionless voice:

"Mr West hasn't come in yet."

"Hasn't come in yet, eh? Very well, then, I think we'd better come in and wait for him."

"No, you don't."

"See here, my man, I'm inspector Verall of Scotland Yard, and I've got a warrant for the arrest of your master. You can see it if you like."

Dermot perused the proffered paper, or pretended to do so, asking in a dazed voice:

"What for? What's he done?"

"Murder. Sir Alington West of Harley Street"

His brain in a whirl, Dermot fell back before his redoubtable visitors. He went into the sitting-room and switched on the light. The inspector followed him.

"Have a search round," he directed the other man. Then he turned to Dermot.

"You stay here, my man. No slipping off to warn your master. What's your name, by the way?"

"Milson, sir."

"What time do you expect your master in, Milson?"

"I don't know, sir, he was going to a dance, I believe. At the Grafton Galleries."

"He left there just under an hour ago. Sure he's not been back here?"

"I don't think so, sir. I fancy I should have heard him come in."

At this moment the second man came in from the adjoining room. In his hand he carried the revolver. He took it across to the inspector in some excitement. An expression of satisfaction flitted across the latter's face.

"That settles it," he remarked. "Must have slipped in and out without your hearing him. He's hooked it by now. I'd better be off. Cawley, you stay here, in case he should come back again, and you can keep an eye on this fellow. He may know more about his master than he pretends."

The inspector bustled off. Dermot endeavored to get the details of the affair from Cawley, who was quite ready to be talkative.

"Pretty clear case," he vouchsafed. "The murder was discovered almost immediately. Johnson, the manservant, had only just gone up to bed when he fancied he heard a shot, and came down again. Found Sir Alington dead, shot through the heart. He rang us up at once and we came along and heard his story."

"Which made it a pretty clear case?" ventured Dermot.

"Absolutely. This young West came in with his uncle and they were quarrelling when Johnson brought in the drinks. The old boy was threatening to make a new will, and your master was talking about shooting him. Not five minutes later the shot was heard. Oh, yes, clear enough."

Clear enough indeed. Dermot's heart sank as he realized the overwhelming evidence against him. And no way out save flight. He set his wits to work. Presently he suggested making a cup of tea. Cawley assented readily enough. He had already searched the flat and knew there was no back entrance.

Dermot was permitted to depart to the kitchen. Once there he put the kettle on, and chinked cups and saucers industriously. Then he stole swiftly to the window and lifted the sash. The flat was on the second floor, and outside the window was the small wire lift used by tradesmen which ran up and down on its steel cable.

Like a flash Dermot was outside the window and swinging himself down the wire rope. It cut into his hands, making them bleed, but he went on desperately.

A few minutes later he was emerging cautiously from the back of the block. Turning the corner, he cannoned into a figure standing by the sidewalk. To his utter amazement he recognized Jack Trent. Trent was fully alive to the perils of the situation.

"My God! Dermot! Quick, don't hang about here."

Taking him by the arm, he led him down a by street, then down another. A lonely taxi was sighted and hailed and they jumped in, Trent giving the man his own address.

"Safest place for the moment. There we can decide what to do next to put those fools off the track. I came round here, hoping to be able to warn you before the police got here."

"I didn't even know that you had heard of it. Jack, you don't believe -"

"Of course not, old fellow, not for one minute. I know you far too well. All the same, it's a nasty business for you. They came round asking questions - what time you got to the Grafton Galleries, when you left, and so on. Dermot, who could have done the old boy in?"

"I can't imagine. Whoever did it put the revolver in my drawer, I suppose. Must have been watching us pretty closely."

"That séance business was damned funny. 'Don't go home.' Meant for poor old West. He did go home, and got shot."

"It applies to me, too," said Dermot. "I went home and found a planted revolver and a police inspector."

"Well, I hope it doesn't get me, too," said Trent "Here we are."

He paid the taxi, opened the door with his latchkey, and guided Dermot up the dark stairs to his den, a small room on the first floor.

He threw open the door and Dermot walked in, while Trent switched on the light, and came to join him.

"Pretty safe here for the time being," he remarked. "Now we can get our heads together and decide what is best to be done."

"I've made a fool of myself," said Dermot suddenly. "I ought to have faced it out. I see more clearly now. The whole thing's a plot. What the devil are you laughing at?"

For Trent was leaning back in his chair, shaking with unrestrained mirth. There was something horrible in the sound - something horrible, too, about the man altogether.

There was a curious light in his eyes.

"A damned clever plot," he gasped out. "Dermot, you're done for."

He drew the telephone towards him.

"What are you going to do?" asked Dermot.

"Ring up Scotland Yard. Tell 'em their bird's here - safe under lock and key. Yes, I locked the door when I came in and the key's in my pocket. No good looking at that other door behind me. That leads into Claire's room, and she always locks it on her side. She's afraid of me, you know. Been afraid of me a long time. She always knows when I'm thinking about that knife - a long sharp knife. No, you don't -"

Dermot had been about to make a rush at him. but the other had suddenly produced a revolver.

"That's the second of them," chuckled Trent. "I put the first in your drawer - after shooting old West with it - What are you looking at over my head? That door? It's no use, even if Claire were to open it - and she might to you - I'd shoot you before you got there. Not in the heart - not to kill, just wing you, so that you couldn't get away. I'm a jolly good shot, you know. I saved your life once. More fool I. No, no, I want you hanged - yes, hanged. It isn't you I want the knife for. It's Claire - pretty Claire, so white and soft. Old West knew. That's what he was here for tonight, to see if I were mad or not. He wanted to shut me up - so that I shouldn't get at Claire with a knife. I was very cunning. I took his latchkey and yours, too. I slipped away from the dance as soon as I got there. I saw you come out of his house, and I went in. I shot him and came away at once. Then I went to your place and left the revolver. I was at the Grafton Galleries again almost as soon as you were, and I put the latchkey back in your coat pocket when I was saying good night to you. I don't mind telling you all this. There's no one else to hear, and when you're being hanged I'd like you to know I did it... There's not a loophole

of escape. It makes me laugh... God, how it makes me laugh! What are you thinking of? What the devil are you looking at?"

"I'm thinking of some words you quoted just now. You'd have done better, Trent, not to come home."

"What do you mean?"

"Look behind you!"

Trent spun round. In the doorway of the communicating room stood Claire - and Inspector Verall...

Trent was quick. The revolver spoke just once - and found its mark. He fell forward across the table. The inspector sprang to his side, as Dermot stared at Claire in a dream. Thoughts flashed through his brain disjointedly. His uncle - their quarrel - the colossal misunderstanding - the divorce laws of England which would never free Claire from an insane husband - "we must all pity her" - the plot between her and Sir Alington which the cunning of Trent had seen through - her cry to him, "Ugly - ugly - ugly!" Yes, but now -

The inspector straightened up.

"Dead," he said vexedly.

"Yes," Dermot heard himself saying, "he was always a good shot..."

THE FOURTH MAN

Canon Parfitt panted a little. Running for trains was not much of a business for a man of his age. For one thing his figure was not what it was and with the loss of his slender silhouette went an increasing tendency to be short of breath. This tendency the Canon himself always referred to, with dignity, as "My heart, you know!"

He sank into the corner of the first-class carriage with a sigh of relief. The warmth of the heated carriage was most agreeable to him. Outside the snow was falling. Lucky to get a corner seat on a long night journey. Miserable business if you didn't. There ought to be a sleeper on this train.

The other three corners were already occupied, and noting this fact Canon Parfitt became aware that the man in the far corner was smiling at him in gentle recognition. He was a clean-shaven man with a quizzical face and hair just turning gray on the temples. His profession was so clearly the law that no one could have mistaken him for anything else for a moment. Sir George Durand was, indeed, a very famous lawyer.

"Well, Parfitt," he remarked genially, "you had a run for it, didn't you?"

"Very bad for my heart, I'm afraid," said the Canon. "Quite a coincidence meeting you, Sir George. Are you going far north?"

"Newcastle," said Sir George laconically. "By the way," he added, "do you know Dr Campbell Clark?"

The man sitting on the same side of the carriage as the Canon inclined his head pleasantly.

"We met on the platform," continued the lawyer. "Another coincidence."

Canon Parfitt looked at Dr Campbell Clark with a good deal of interest. It was a name of which he had often heard. Dr Clark was in the forefront as a physician and mental specialist, and his last book, The Problem of the Unconscious Mind, had been the most discussed book of the year.

Canon Parfitt saw a square jaw, very steady blue eyes, and reddish hair untouched by gray, but thinning rapidly. And he received also the impression of a very forceful personality.

By a perfectly natural association of ideas the Canon looked across to the seat opposite him, half-expecting to receive a glance of recognition there also, but the fourth occupant of the carriage proved to be a total stranger - a foreigner, the Canon fancied. He was a slight dark man, rather insignificant in appearance. Hunched in a big overcoat, he appeared to be fast asleep.

"Canon Parfitt of Bradchester?" inquired Dr Campbell Clark in a pleasant voice.

The Canon looked flattered. Those "scientific sermons" of his had really made a great hit - especially since the press had taken them up. Well, that was what the Church needed - good modern up-to-date stuff.

"I have read your book with great interest, Dr Campbell Clark," he said. "Though it's a bit too technical here and there for me to follow."

Durand broke in.

"Are you for talking or sleeping, Canon?" he asked. "I'll confess at once that I suffer from insomnia and that therefore I'm in favor of the former."

"Oh, certainly! By all means," said the Canon. "I seldom sleep on these night journeys and the book I have with me is a very dull one."

"We are at any rate a representative gathering," remarked the doctor with a smile. "The Church, the law, the medical profession."

"Not much we couldn't give an opinion on between us, eh?" laughed Durand. "The Church for the spiritual view, myself for the purely worldly and legal view, and you, doctor, with the widest field of all, ranging from the purely pathological to the - super-psychological! Among the three of us we should cover any ground pretty completely, I fancy."

"Not so completely as you imagine, I think," said Dr Clark. "There's another point of view, you know, that you left out, and that's rather an important one."

"Meaning?" queried the lawyer.

"The point of view of the man in the street."

"Is that so important? Isn't the man in the street usually wrong?"

"Oh, almost always! But he has the thing that all expert opinion must lack - the personal point of view. In the end, you know, you can't get away from personal relationships. I've found that in my profession. For every patient who comes to me genuinely ill, at least five come who have nothing whatever the matter with them except an inability to live happily with the inmates of the same house. They call it everything - from housemaid's knee to writer's cramp, but it's all the same thing, the raw surface produced by mind rubbing against mind."

"You have a lot of patients with 'nerves,' I suppose," the Canon remarked disparagingly. His own nerves were excellent.

"Ah, and what do you mean by that?" The other swung round on him, quick as a flash. "Nerves! people use that word and laugh after it, just as you did. 'Nothing the matter with so and so,' they say. 'Just nerves.' But, good God, man, you've got the crux of everything there! You can get at a mere bodily ailment and heal it. But at this day we know very little more about the obscure causes of the hundred and one forms of nervous disease than we did in - well, the reign of Queen Elizabeth!"

"Dear me," said Canon Parfitt, a little bewildered by this onslaught. "Is that so?"

"Mind you, it's a sign of grace," Dr Campbell Clark went on. "In the old days we considered man a simple animal, body and soul - with stress laid on the former."

"Body, soul and spirit," corrected the clergyman mildly.

"Spirit?" The doctor smiled oddly. "What do you parsons mean exactly by spirit? You've never been very clear about it, you know. All down the ages you've funked an exact definition."

The Canon cleared his throat in preparation for speech, but to his chagrin he was given no opportunity. The doctor went on.

"Are we even sure the word is spirit - might it not be spirits?"

"Spirits?" Sir George Durand questioned, his eyebrows raised quizzically.

"Yes." Campbell Clark's gaze transferred itself to him. He leaned forward and tapped the other man lightly on the breast. "Are you so sure," he said gravely, "that there is only one occupant of this structure - for that is all it is, you know - this desirable residence to be let furnished - for seven, twenty-one, forty-one, seventy-one - whatever it may be! - years? And in the end the tenant moves his things out - little by little - and then goes out of the house altogether - and down comes the house, a mass of ruin and decay. You're the master of the house, we'll admit that, but aren't you ever conscious of the presence of others - soft-footed servants, hardly noticed, except for the work they do - work that you're not conscious of having done? Or friends - moods that

take hold of you and make you, for the time being, a 'different man,' as the saying goes? You're the king of the castle, right enough, but be very sure the 'dirty rascal' is there too."

"My dear Clark," drawled the lawyer, "you make me positively uncomfortable. Is my mind really a battleground of conflicting personalities? Is that Science's latest?"

It was the doctor's turn to shrug his shoulders.

"Your body is," he said drily. "If the body, why not the mind?"

"Very interesting," said Canon Parfitt. "Ah! Wonderful science - wonderful science."

And inwardly he thought to himself: "I can get a most arresting sermon out of the idea."

But Dr Campbell Clark had leaned back again in his seat, his momentary excitement spent.

"As a matter of fact," he remarked in a dry, professional manner, "it is a case of dual personality that takes me to Newcastle tonight. Very interesting case. Neurotic subject, of course. But quite genuine."

"Dual personality," said Sir George Durand thoughtfully. "It's not so very rare, I believe. There's loss of memory as well, isn't there? I know the matter cropped up in a case in the Probate Court the other day."

Dr Clark nodded.

"The classic case, of course," he said, "was that of Felicie Bault. You may remember hearing of it?"

"Of course," said Canon Parfitt. "I remember reading about it in the papers - but quite a long time ago - seven years at least."

Dr Campbell Clark nodded.

"That girl became one of the most famous figures in France. Scientists from all over the world came to see her. She had no less than four distinct personalities. They were known as Felicie 1, Felicie 2, Felicie 3, etc."

"Wasn't there some suggestion of deliberate trickery?" asked Sir George alertly.

"The personalities of Felicie 3 and Felicie 4 were a little open to doubt," admitted the doctor. "But the main facts remain. Felicie Bault was a Brittany peasant girl. She was the third of a family of five, the daughter of a drunken father and a mentally defective mother. In one of his drinking bouts the father strangled the mother and was, if I remember rightly, transported for life. Felicie was then five years of age. Some charitable people interested themselves in the children and Felicie was brought up and educated by an English maiden lady who had a kind of home for destitute children. She could make very little of Felicie, however. She describes the girl as abnormally slow and stupid, taught to read and write only with the greatest difficulty, and clumsy with her

hands. This lady, Miss Slater, tried to fit the girl for domestic service, and did indeed find her several places when she was of an age to take them. But she never stayed long anywhere owing to her stupidity and also her intense laziness."

The doctor paused for a minute, and the Canon, recrossing his legs and arranging his traveling rug more closely round him, was suddenly aware that the man opposite him had moved very slightly. His eyes, which had formerly been shut, were now open, and something in them, something mocking and indefinable, startled the worthy Canon. It was as though the man were listening and gloating secretly over what he heard.

"There is a photograph taken of Felicie Bault at the age of seventeen," continued the doctor. "It shows her as a loutish peasant girl, heavy of build. There is nothing in that picture to indicate that she was soon to be one of the most famous persons in France.

"Five years later, when she was 22, Felicie Bault had a severe nervous illness, and on recovery the strange phenomena began to manifest themselves. The following are facts attested to by many eminent scientists. The personality called Felicie 1 was indistinguishable from the Felicie Bault of the last twenty-two years. Felicie 1 wrote French badly and haltingly, spoke no foreign languages, and was unable to play the piano. Felicie 2, on the contrary, spoke Italian fluently and German moderately. Her handwriting was quite different from that of Felicie 1, and she wrote fluent and expressive French. She could discuss politics and art and she was passionately fond of playing the piano. Felicie 3 had many points in common with Felicie 2. She was

intelligent and apparently well educated, but in moral character she was a total contrast. She appeared, in fact, an utterly depraved creature - but depraved in a Parisian and not a provincial way. She knew all the Paris argot, and the expressions of the chic demi monde. Her language was filthy and she would rail against religion and so-called 'good people' in the most blasphemous terms. Finally there was Felicie 4 - a dreamy, almost half-witted creature, distinctly pious and professedly clairvoyant, but this fourth personality was very unsatisfactory and elusive, and has been sometimes thought to be a deliberate trickery on the part of Felicie 3 - a kind of joke played by her on a credulous public. I may say that (with the possible exception of Felicie 4) each personality was distinct and separate and had no knowledge of the others. Felicie 2 was undoubtedly the most predominant and would last sometimes for a fortnight at a time, then Felicie 1 would appear abruptly for a day or two. After that, perhaps, Felicie 3 or 4, but the two latter seldom remained in command for more than a few hours. Each change was accompanied by severe headache and heavy sleep, and in each case there was complete loss of memory of the other states, the personality in question taking up life where she had left it, unconscious of the passage of time."

"Remarkable," murmured the Canon. "Very remarkable. As yet we know next to nothing of the marvels of the universe."

"We know that there are some very astute impostors in it," remarked the lawyer dryly.

"The case of Felicie Bault was investigated by lawyers as well as by doctors and scientists," said Dr Campbell Clark quickly. "Maître

Quimbellier, you remember, made the most thorough investigation and confirmed the views of the scientists. And after all, why should it surprise us so much? We come across the double-yolked egg, do we not? And the twin banana? Why not the double soul - or in this case the quadruple soul - in the single body?"

"The double soul?" protested the Canon.

Dr Campbell Clark turned his piercing blue eyes on him.

"What else can we call it? That is to say - if the personality is the soul?"

"It is a good thing such a state of affairs is only in the nature of a 'freak,'" remarked Sir George. "If the case were common, it would give rise to pretty complications."

"The condition is, of course, quite abnormal," agreed the doctor. "It was a great pity that a longer study could not have been made, but all that was put an end to by Felicie's unexpected death."

"There was something queer about that, if I remember rightly," said the lawyer slowly.

Dr Campbell Clark nodded.

"A most unaccountable business. The girl was found one morning dead in bed. She had clearly been strangled. But to everyone's stupefaction it was presently proved beyond doubt that she had actually strangled herself. The marks on her neck were those of her own fingers. A

method of suicide which, though not physically impossible, must have necessitated terrific muscular strength and almost superhuman will power. What had driven the girl to such straits has never been found out. Of course her mental balance must always have been precarious. Still, there it is. The curtain has been rung down forever on the mystery of Felicie Bault."

It was then that the man in the far corner laughed.

The other three men jumped as though shot. They had totally forgotten the existence of the fourth among them. As they stared towards the place where he sat, still hunched in his overcoat, he laughed again.

"You must excuse me, gentlemen," he said, in perfect English that had, nevertheless, a foreign flavor.

He sat up, displaying a pale face with a small jet-black mustache.

"Yes, you must excuse me," he said, with a mock bow. "But really! in science, is the last word ever said?"

"You know something of the case we have been discussing?" asked the doctor courteously.

"Of the case? No. But I knew her."

"Felicie Bault?"

"Yes. And Annette Ravel also. You have not heard of Annette Ravel, I see? And yet the story of the one is the story of the other. Believe me, you know nothing of Felicie Bault if you do not also know the history of Annette Ravel."

He drew out a watch and looked at it.

"Just half an hour before the next stop. I have time to tell you the story - that is, if you care to hear it?"

"Please tell it to us," said the doctor quietly.

"Delighted," said the Canon. "Delighted."

Sir George Durand merely composed himself in an attitude of keen attention.

"My name, gentlemen," began their strange traveling companion, "is Raoul Letardeau. You have spoken just now of an English lady, Miss Slater, who interested herself in works of charity. I was born in that Brittany fishing village and when my parents were both killed in a railway accident it was Miss Slater who came to the rescue and saved me from the equivalent of your English workhouse. There were some twenty children under her care, girls and boys. Among these children were Felicie Bault and Annette Ravel. If I cannot make you understand the personality of Annette, gentlemen, you will understand nothing. She was the child of what you call a fille de joie who had died of consumption abandoned by her lover. The mother had been a dancer, and Annette, too, had the desire to dance. When I saw her first she was

eleven years old, a little shrimp of a thing with eyes that alternately mocked and promised - a little creature all fire and life. And at once - yes, at once - she made me her slave. It was 'Raoul, do this for me.' 'Raoul, do that for me.' And me, I obeyed. Already I worshipped her, and she knew it.

"We would go down to the shore together, we three - for Felicie would come with us. And there Annette would pull off her shoes and stockings and dance on the sand. And then when she sank down breathless, she would tell us of what she meant to do and be.

"'See you, I shall be famous. Yes, exceedingly famous. I will have hundreds and thousands of silk stockings - the finest silk. And I shall live in an exquisite apartment. All my lovers shall be young and handsome as well as being rich. And when I dance all Paris shall come to see me. They will yell and call and shout and go mad over my dancing. And in the winters I shall not dance, I shall go south to the sunlight. There are villas there with orange trees. I shall have one of them. I shall lie in the sun on silk cushions, eating oranges. As for you, Raoul, I will never forget you, however great and rich and famous I shall be. I will protect you and advance your career. Felicie here shall be my maid - no, her hands are too clumsy. Look at them, how large and coarse they are.'

"Felicie would grow angry at that. And then Annette would go on teasing her.

"'She is so ladylike, Felicie - so elegant, so refined. She is a princess in disguise - ha, ha.'

"'My father and mother were married, which is more than yours were,' Felicie would growl out spitefully.

"'Yes, and your father killed your mother. A pretty thing, to be a murderer's daughter.'

"'Your father left your mother to rot,' Felicie would rejoin.

"'Ah! yes.' Annette became thoughtful. 'Pauvre Maman. One must keep strong and well. It is everything to keep strong and well.'

"'I am as strong as a horse,' Felicie boasted.

"And indeed she was. She had twice the strength of any other girl in the Home. And she was never ill.

"But she was stupid, you comprehend, stupid like a brute beast. I often wondered why she followed Annette round as she did. It was, with her, a kind of fascination. Sometimes, I think, she actually hated Annette, and indeed Annette was not kind to her. She jeered at her slowness and stupidity, and baited her in front of the others. I have seen Felicie grow quite white with rage. Sometimes I have thought that she would fasten her fingers round Annette's neck and choke the life out of her. She was not nimble-witted enough to reply to Annette's taunts, but she did learn in time to make one retort which never failed. That was the reference to her own health and strength. She had learned (what I had always known) that Annette envied her her strong physique, and she struck instinctively at the weak spot in her enemy's armor.

"One day Annette came to me in great glee.

"'Raoul,' she said, 'we shall have fun today with that stupid Felicie.'

"'What are you going to do?'

"'Come behind the little shed and I will tell you.'

"It seemed that Annette had got hold of some book. Part of it she did not understand, and indeed the whole thing was much over her head. It was an early work on hypnotism.

"'A bright object, they say. The brass knob of my bed, it twirls round. I made Felicie look at it last night. "Look at it steadily," I said. "Do not take your eyes off it." And then I twirled it. Raoul, I was frightened. Her eyes looked so queer - so queer. "Felicie, you will do what I say always," I said. "I will do what you say always, Annette," she answered. And then - and then - I said: "Tomorrow you will bring a tallow candle out into the playground at twelve o'clock and start to eat it. And if anyone asks you, you will say that it is the best galette you ever tasted." Oh! Raoul, think of it!'

"'But she'll never do such a thing,' I objected.

"'The book says so. Not that I can quite believe it - but, oh! Raoul, if the book is all true, how we shall amuse ourselves!'

"I, too, thought the idea very funny. We passed word round to the comrades and at twelve o'clock we were all in the playground. Punctual to the minute, out came Felicie with a stump of candle in her hand. Will you believe me, Messieurs, she began solemnly to nibble at it. We were all in hysterics! Every now and then one or another of the children would go up to her and say solemnly: 'It is good, what you eat there, eh, Felicie?' And she would answer. 'But, yes, it is the best galette I ever tasted.' And then we would shriek with laughter. We laughed at last so loud that the noise seemed to wake up Felicie to a realization of what she was doing. She blinked her eyes in a puzzled way, looked at the candle, then at us. She passed her hand over her forehead.

"'But what is it that I do here?' she muttered.

"'You are eating a candle,' we screamed.

"'I made you do it. I made you do it,' cried Annette, dancing about.

"Felicie stared for a moment. Then she went slowly up to Annette.

"'So it is you - it is you who have made me ridiculous? I seem to remember. Ah! I will kill you for this.'

"She spoke in a very quiet tone, but Annette rushed suddenly away and hid behind me.

"'Save me, Raoul! I am afraid of Felicie. It was only a joke, Felicie. Only a joke.'

"'I do not like these jokes,' said Felicie. 'You understand? I hate you. I hate you all.'

"She suddenly burst out crying and rushed away.

"Annette was, I think, scared by the result of her experiment, and did not try to repeat it. But from that day on her ascendancy over Felicie seemed to grow stronger.

"Felicie, I now believe, always hated her, but nevertheless she could not keep away from her. She used to follow Annette around like a dog.

"Soon after that, Messieurs, employment was found for me, and I only came to the Home for occasional holidays. Annette's desire to become a dancer was not taken seriously, but she developed a very pretty singing voice as she grew older and Miss Slater consented to her being trained as a singer.

"She was not lazy, Annette. She worked feverishly, without rest. Miss Slater was obliged to prevent her doing too much. She spoke to me once about her.

"'You have always been fond of Annette,' she said. 'Persuade her not to work too hard. She has a little cough lately that I do not like.'

"My work took me far afield soon afterwards. I received one or two letters from Annette at first, but then came silence. For five years after that I was abroad.

"Quite by chance, when I returned to Paris, my attention was caught by a poster advertising Annette Ravelli with a picture of the lady. I recognized her at once. That night I went to the theatre in question. Annette sang in French and Italian. On the stage she was wonderful. Afterwards I went to her dressing room. She received me at once.

"'Why, Raoul,' she cried, stretching out her whitened hands to me. 'This is splendid! Where have you been all these years?'

"I would have told her, but she did not really want to listen.

"'You see, I have very nearly arrived!'

"She waved a triumphant hand round the room filled with bouquets.

"'The good Miss Slater must be proud of your success.'

"'That old one? No, indeed. She designed me, you know, for the Conservatoire. Decorous concert singing. But me, I am an artist. It is here, on the variety stage, that I can express myself.'

"Just then a handsome middle-aged man came in. He was very distinguished. By his manner I soon saw that he was Annette's protector. He looked sideways at me, and Annette explained.

"'A friend of my infancy. He passes through Paris, sees my picture on a poster, et voilà!'

"The man was then very affable and courteous. In my presence he produced a ruby and diamond bracelet and clasped it on Annette's wrist. As I rose to go, she threw me a glance of triumph and a whisper.

"'I arrive, do I not? You see? All the world is before me.'

"But as I left the room, I heard her cough, a sharp dry cough. I knew what it meant, that cough. It was the legacy of her consumptive mother.

"I saw her next two years later. She had gone for refuge to Miss Slater. Her career had broken down. She was in a state of advanced consumption for which the doctors said nothing could be done.

"Ah! I shall never forget her as I saw her then! She was lying in a kind of shelter in the garden. She was kept outdoors night and day. Her cheeks were hollow and flushed, her eyes bright and feverish.

"She greeted me with a kind of desperation that startled me.

"'It is good to see you, Raoul. You know what they say - that I may not get well? They say it behind my back, you understand. To me they are soothing and consolatory. But it is not true, Raoul, it is not true! I shall not permit myself to die. Die? With beautiful life stretching in front of me? It is the will to live that matters. All the great doctors say that nowadays. I am not one of the feeble ones who let go. Already I feel myself infinitely better - infinitely better, do you hear?'

"She raised herself on her elbow to drive her words home, then fell back, attacked by a fit of coughing that racked her thin body.

"'The cough - it is nothing,' she gasped. 'And hemorrhages do not frighten me. I shall surprise the doctors. It is the will that counts. Remember, Raoul, I am going to live.'

"It was pitiful, you understand, pitiful.

"Just then, Felicie Bault came out with a tray. A glass of hot milk. She gave it to Annette and watched her drink it with an expression that I could not fathom. There was a kind of smug satisfaction in it.

"Annette, too, caught the look. She flung the glass down angrily, so that it smashed to bits.

"'You see her? That is how she always looks at me. She is glad I am going to die! Yes, she gloats over it. She who is well and strong. Look at her - never a day's illness, that one! And all for nothing. What good is that great carcass of hers to her? What can she make of it?'

"Felicie stooped and picked up the broken fragments of glass.

"'I do not mind what she says,' she observed in a singsong voice. 'What does it matter? I am a respectable girl, I am. As for her. She will be knowing the fires of Purgatory before very long. I am a Christian. I say nothing.'

"'You hate me!' cried Annette. 'You have always hated me. Ah! but I can charm you, all the same. I can make you do what I want. See now, if I

asked you to, you would go down on your knees before me now on the grass.'

"'You are absurd,' said Felicie uneasily.

"'But, yes, you will do it. You will. To please me. Down on your knees. I ask it of you, I, Annette. Down on your knees, Felicie.'

"Whether it was the wonderful pleading in the voice, or some deeper motive, Felicie obeyed. She sank slowly on to her knees, her arms spread wide, her face vacant and stupid.

"Annette flung back her head and laughed - peal upon peal of laughter.

"'Look at her, with her stupid face! How ridiculous she looks. You can get up now, Felicie, thank you! It is of no use to scowl at me. I am your mistress. You have to do what I say.'

"She lay back on her pillows exhausted. Felicie picked up the tray and moved slowly away. Once she looked back over her shoulder, and the smoldering resentment in her eyes startled me.

"I was not there when Annette died. But it was terrible, it seems. She clung to life. She fought against death like a madwoman. Again and again she gasped out: 'I will not die - do you hear me? I will not die. I will live - live -'

"Miss Slater told me all this when I came to see her six months later.

"'My poor Raoul,' she said kindly. 'You loved her, did you not?'"

"'Always - always. But of what use could I be to her? Let us not talk of it. She is dead - she so brilliant, so full of burning life...'

"Miss Slater was a sympathetic woman. She went on to talk of other things. She was very worried about Felicie, so she told me. The girl had had a queer sort of nervous breakdown and ever since she had been very strange in manner.

"'You know,' said Miss Slater, after a momentary hesitation, 'that she is learning the piano?'

"I did not know it and was very much surprised to hear it. Felicie - learning the piano! I would have declared the girl would not know one note from another.

"'She has talent, they say,' continued Miss Slater. 'I can't understand it. I have always put her down as - well, Raoul, you know yourself, she was always a stupid girl.'

"I nodded.

"'She is so strange in her manner I don't know what to make of it.'

"A few minutes later I entered the Salle de Lecture. Felicie was playing the piano. She was playing the air that I had heard Annette sing in Paris. You understand, Messieurs, it gave me quite a turn. And then, hearing me, she broke off suddenly and looked round at me, her eyes full of

mockery and intelligence. For a moment I thought - Well, I will not tell you what I thought.

"'Tiens!' she said. 'So it is you - Monsieur Raoul.'

"I cannot describe the way she said it. To Annette I had never ceased to be Raoul. But Felicie, since we had met as grown-ups, always addressed me as Monsieur Raoul. But the way she said it now was different - as though the Monsieur, slightly stressed, was somehow amusing.

"'Why, Felicie,' I stammered, 'you look quite different today.'

"'Do I?' she said reflectively. 'It is odd, that. But do not be so solemn, Raoul - decidedly I shall call you Raoul - did we not play together as children? - Life was made for laughter. Let us talk of the poor Annette - she who is dead and buried. Is she in Purgatory, I wonder, or where?'

"And she hummed a snatch of song - untunefully enough, but the words caught my attention.

"'Felicie!' I cried. 'You speak Italian?'

"'Why not, Raoul? I am not as stupid as I pretend to be, perhaps.' She laughed at my mystification.

"'I don't understand -' I began.

"'But I will tell you. I am a very fine actress, though no one suspects it. I can play many parts - and play them very well.'

"She laughed again and ran quickly out of the room before I could stop her.

"I saw her again before I left. She was asleep in an armchair. She was snoring heavily. I stood and watched her, fascinated, yet repelled. Suddenly she woke with a start. Her eyes, dull and lifeless, met mine.

"'Monsieur Raoul,' she muttered mechanically.

"'Yes, Felicie. I am going now. Will you play for me again before I go?'

"'I? Play? You are laughing at me, Monsieur Raoul.'

"'Don't you remember playing for me this morning?'

"She shook her head.

"'I play? How can a poor girl like me play?'

"She paused for a minute as though in thought, then beckoned me nearer.

"'Monsieur Raoul, there are things going on in this house! They play tricks upon you. They alter the clocks. Yes, yes, I know what I am saying. And it is all her doing.'

"'Whose doing?' I asked, startled.

"'That Annette's. That wicked one's. When she was alive she always tormented me. Now that she is dead, she comes back from the dead to torment me.'

"I stared at Felicie. I could see now that she was in an extremity of terror, her eyes starting from her head.

"'She is bad, that one. She is bad, I tell you. She would take the bread from your mouth, the clothes from your back, the soul from your body...'

"She clutched me suddenly.

"'I am afraid, I tell you - afraid. I hear her voice - not in my ear - no, not in my ear. Here, in my head -' She tapped her forehead. 'She will drive me away - drive me away altogether, and then what shall I do, what will become of me?'

"Her voice rose almost to a shriek. She had in her eyes the look of the terrified beast at bay...

"Suddenly she smiled, a pleasant smile, full of cunning, with something in it that made me shiver.

"'If it should come to it, Monsieur Raoul, I am very strong with my hands - very strong with my hands.'

"I had never noticed her hands particularly before. I looked at them now and shuddered in spite of myself. Squat brutal fingers, and as Felicie had said, terribly strong... I cannot explain to you the nausea that swept over me. With hands such as these her father must have strangled her mother...

"That was the last time I ever saw Felicie Bault. Immediately afterwards I went abroad - to South America. I returned from there two years after her death. Something I had read in the newspapers of her life and sudden death. I have heard fuller details tonight - from you. Felicie 3 and Felicie 4 - I wonder? She was a good actress, you know!"

The train suddenly slackened speed. The man in the corner sat erect and buttoned his overcoat more closely.

"What is your theory?" asked the lawyer, leaning forward.

"I can hardly believe -" began Canon Parfitt, and stopped.

The doctor said nothing. He was gazing steadily at Raoul Letardeau.

"The clothes from your back, the soul from your body," quoted the Frenchman lightly. He stood up. "I say to you, Messieurs, that the history of Felicie Bault is the history of Annette Ravel. You did not know her, gentlemen. I did. She was very fond of life..."

His hand on the door, ready to spring out, he turned suddenly and bending down tapped Canon Parfitt on the chest.

"M. le docteur over there, he said just now that all this -" his hand smote the Canon's stomach, and the Canon winced - "was only a residence. Tell me, if you find a burglar in your house what do you do? Shoot him, do you not?"

"No," cried the Canon. "No, indeed - I mean - not in this country."

But he spoke the last words to empty air. The carriage door banged.

The clergyman, the lawyer, and the doctor were alone. The fourth corner was vacant.

S.O.S.

"Ah!" said Mr Dinsmead appreciatively. He stepped back and surveyed the round table with approval. The firelight gleamed on the coarse white tablecloth, the knives and forks, and the other table appointments.

"Is - is everything ready?" asked Mrs Dinsmead hesitatingly. She was a little faded woman, with a colorless face, meager hair scraped back from her forehead, and a perpetually nervous manner.

"Everything's ready," said her husband with a kind of ferocious geniality.

He was a big man, with stooping shoulders and a broad red face. He had little pig's eyes that twinkled under his bushy brows, and a big jowl devoid of hair.

"Lemonade?" suggested Mrs Dinsmead, almost in a whisper.

Her husband shook his head.

"Tea. Much better in every way. Look at the weather, streaming and blowing. A nice cup of hot tea is what's needed for supper on an evening like this."

He winked facetiously, then fell to surveying the table again.

"A good dish of eggs, cold corned beef, and bread and cheese. That's my order for supper. So come along and get it ready, Mother. Charlotte's in the kitchen waiting to give you a hand."

Mrs Dinsmead rose, carefully winding up the ball of her knitting.

"She's grown a very good-looking girl," she murmured.

"Ah!" said Mr Dinsmead. "The mortal image of her ma! So go along with you, and don't let's waste any more time."

He strolled about the room humming to himself for a minute or two. Once he approached the window and looked out.

"Wild weather," he murmured to himself. "Not much likelihood of our having visitors tonight."

Then he too left the room.

About ten minutes later Mrs Dinsmead entered bearing a dish of fried eggs. Her two daughters followed, bringing the rest of the provisions. Mr Dinsmead and his son Johnnie brought up the rear. The former seated himself at the head of the table.

"And for what we are to receive, et cetera," he remarked humorously. "And blessings on the man who first thought of tinned foods. What would we do, I should like to know, miles from anywhere, if we hadn't a tin now and then to fall back upon when the butcher forgets his weekly call?"

He proceeded to carve corned beef dexterously.

"I wonder who ever thought of building a house like this, miles from anywhere," said his daughter Magdalen, pettishly. "We never see a soul."

"No," said her father. "Never a soul."

"I can't think what made you take it, Father," said Charlotte.

"Can't you, my girl? Well, I had my reasons - I had my reasons."

His eyes sought his wife's furtively, but she frowned.

"And haunted, too," said Charlotte. "I wouldn't sleep alone here for anything."

"Pack of nonsense," said her father. "Never seen anything, have you?"

"Not seen anything perhaps, but -"

"But what?"

Charlotte did not reply, but she shivered a little. A great surge of rain came driving against the window-pane, and Mrs Dinsmead dropped a spoon with a tinkle on the tray.

"Not nervous, are you, Mother?" said Mr Dinsmead. "It's a wild night, that's all. Don't you worry, we're safe here by our fireside, and not a soul from outside likely to disturb us. Why, it would be a miracle if anyone did. And miracles don't happen. No," he added as though to himself, with a kind of peculiar satisfaction, "miracles don't happen."

As the words left his lips there came a sudden knocking at the door. Mr Dinsmead stayed as though petrified.

"What's that?" he muttered. His jaw fell.

Mrs Dinsmead gave a little whimpering cry and pulled her shawl up round her. The color came into Magdalen's face and she leaned forward and spoke to her father.

"The miracle has happened," she said. "You'd better go and let whoever it is in."

Twenty minutes earlier Mortimer Cleveland had stood in the driving rain and mist surveying his car. It was really cursed bad luck. Two punctures within ten minutes of each other, and here he was, stranded, miles from anywhere, in the midst of these bare Wiltshire downs with night coming on and no prospect of shelter. Serve him right for trying to take a short cut. If only he had stuck to the main road! Now he was lost on what seemed a mere cart-track on the hillside, with no possibility of getting the car farther, and with no idea if there were even a village anywhere near.

He looked round him perplexedly, and his eye was caught by a gleam of light on the hillside above him. A second later the mist obscured it once more but, waiting patiently, he presently got a second glimpse of it. After a moment's cogitation, he left the car and struck up the side of the hill.

Soon he was out of the mist, and he recognized the light as shining from the lighted window of a small cottage. Here, at any rate, was shelter. Mortimer Cleveland quickened his pace, bending his head to meet the furious onslaught of wind and rain trying its best to drive him back.

Cleveland was, in his own way, something of a celebrity though doubtless the majority of folks would have displayed complete ignorance of his name and achievements. He was an authority on

mental science and had written two excellent text books on the subconscious. He was also a member of the Psychical Research Society and a student of the occult in so far as it affected his own conclusions and line of research.

He was by nature peculiarly susceptible to atmosphere, and by deliberate training he had increased his own natural gift. When he had at last reached the cottage and rapped at the door, he was conscious of an excitement, a quickening of interest, as though all his faculties had suddenly been sharpened.

The murmur of voices within had been plainly audible to him. Upon his knock there came a sudden silence, then the sound of a chair being pushed back along the floor. In another minute the door was flung open by a boy of about fifteen. Cleveland could look straight over his shoulder upon the scene within.

It reminded him of an interior by some Dutch painter. A round table spread for a meal, a family party sitting round it, one or two flickering candies and the firelight's glow over all. The father, a big man, sat at one side of the table, a little gray woman with a frightened face sat opposite him. Facing the door, looking straight at Cleveland, was a girl. Her startled eyes looked straight into his, her hand with a cup in it was arrested halfway to her lips.

She was, Cleveland saw at once, a beautiful girl of an extremely uncommon type. Her hair, red gold, stood out round her face like a mist; her eyes, very far apart, were a pure gray. She had the mouth and chin of an early Italian Madonna.

There was a moment's dead silence. Then Cleveland stepped into the room and explained his predicament. He brought his trite story to a close, and there was another pause harder to understand. At last, as though with an effort, the father rose.

"Come in, sir - Mr Cleveland, did you say?"

"That is my name," said Mortimer, smiling.

"Ah, yes. Come in, Mr Cleveland. Not weather for a dog outside, is it? Come in by the fire. Shut the door, can't you, Johnnie? Don't stand there half the night."

Cleveland came forward and sat on a wooden stool by the fire. The boy Johnnie shut the door.

"Dinsmead, that's my name," said the other man. He was all geniality now. "This is the Missus, and these are my two daughters, Charlotte and Magdalen."

For the first time, Cleveland saw the face of the girl who had been sitting with her back to him, and saw that, in a totally different way, she was quite as beautiful as her sister. Very dark, with a face of marble pallor, a delicate aquiline nose, and a grave mouth. It was a kind of frozen beauty, austere and almost forbidding. She acknowledged her father's introduction by bending her head, and she looked at him with an intent gaze that was searching in character. It was as though she

were summing him up, weighing him in the balance of her clear young judgement.

"A drop of something to drink, eh, Mr Cleveland?"

"Thank you," said Mortimer. "A cup of tea will meet the case admirably."

Mr Dinsmead hesitated a minute, then he picked up the five cups, one after another, from the table and emptied them into the slop bowl.

"This tea's cold," he said brusquely. "Make us some more, will you, Mother?"

Mrs Dinsmead got up quickly and hurried off with the teapot. Mortimer had an idea that she was glad to get out of the room.

The fresh tea soon came, and the unexpected guest was plied with viands.

Mr Dinsmead talked and talked. He was expansive, genial, loquacious. He told the stranger all about himself. He'd lately retired from the building trade - yes, made quite a good thing out of it. He and the Missus thought they'd like a bit of country air - never lived in the country before. Wrong time of year to choose, of course, October and November, but they didn't want to wait "Life's uncertain, you know, sir." So they had taken this cottage. Eight miles from anywhere, and nineteen miles from anything you could call a town. No, they didn't

complain. The girls found it a bit dull, but he and Mother enjoyed the quiet.

So he talked on, leaving Mortimer almost hypnotized by the easy flow. Nothing here, surely, but rather commonplace domesticity. And yet, at that first glimpse of the interior, he had diagnosed something else, some tension, some strain, emanating from one of those four people - he didn't know which. Mere foolishness, his nerves were all awry! They were startled by his sudden appearance - that was all.

He broached the question of a night's lodging, and was met with a ready response.

"You'll have to stop with us, Mr Cleveland. Nothing else for miles around. We can give you a bedroom, and though my pajamas may be a bit roomy, why, they're better than nothing, and your own clothes will be dry by morning."

"It's very good of you."

"Not at all," said the other genially. "As I said just now, one couldn't turn away a dog on a night like this. Magdalen, Charlotte, go up and see to the room."

The two girls left the room. Presently Mortimer heard them moving about overhead.

"I can quite understand that two attractive young ladies like your daughters might find it dull here," said Cleveland.

"Good lookers, aren't they?" said Mr Dinsmead with fatherly pride. "Not much like their mother or myself. We're a homely pair, but much attached to each other, I'll tell you that, Mr Cleveland. Eh, Maggie, isn't that so?"

Mrs Dinsmead smiled primly. She had started knitting again. The needles clicked busily. She was a fast knitter.

Presently the room was announced ready, and Mortimer, expressing thanks once more, declared his intention of turning in.

"Did you put a hot-water bottle in the bed?" demanded Mrs Dinsmead, suddenly mindful of her house pride.

"Yes, Mother, two."

"That's right," said Dinsmead. "Go up with him, girls, and see that every thing is all right."

Magdalen preceded him up the staircase, her candle held aloft. Charlotte came behind.

The room was quite a pleasant one, small and with a sloping roof, but the bed looked comfortable, and the few pieces of somewhat dusty furniture were of old mahogany. A large can of hot water stood in the basin, a pair of pink pajamas of ample proportions were laid over a chair, and the bed was made and turned down.

Magdalen went over to the window and saw that the fastenings were secure. Charlotte cast a final eye over the washstand appointments. Then they both lingered by the door.

"Good night, Mr Cleveland. You are sure there is everything?"

"Yes, thank you, Miss Magdalen. I am sorry to have given you both so much trouble. Good night."

"Good night."

They went out, shutting the door behind them. Mortimer Cleveland was alone. He undressed slowly and thoughtfully. When he had donned Mr Dinsmead's pink pajamas, he gathered up his own wet clothes and put them outside the door as his host had bade him. From downstairs he could hear the rumble of Dinsmead's voice.

What a talker the man was! Altogether an odd personality - but indeed there was something odd about the whole family, or was it his imagination?

He went slowly back into his room and shut the door. He stood by the bed lost in thought. And then he started -

The mahogany table by the bed was smothered in dust. Written in the dust were three letters, clearly visible. S.O.S.

Mortimer stared as if he could hardly believe his eyes. It was a confirmation of all his vague surmises and forebodings. He was right, then. Something was wrong in this house.

S.O.S. A call for help. But whose finger had written it in the dust? Magdalen's or Charlotte's? They had both stood there, he remembered, for a moment or two, before going out of the room. Whose hand had secretly dropped to the table and traced out those three letters?

The faces of the two girls came up before him. Magdalen's, dark and aloof, and Charlotte's, as he had seen it first, wide-eyed, startled, with an unfathomable something in her glance.

He went again to the door and opened it. The boom of Mr Dinsmead's voice was no longer to be heard. The house was silent

He thought to himself.

"I can do nothing tonight. Tomorrow - well, we shall see."

Cleveland woke early. He went down through the living room, and out into the garden. The morning was fresh and beautiful after the rain. Someone else was up early, too. At the bottom of the garden Charlotte was leaning on the fence staring out over the Downs. His pulses quickened a little as he went down to join her. All along he had been secretly convinced that it was Charlotte who had written the message. As he came up to her, she turned and wished him "Good morning." Her

eyes were direct and childlike, with no hint of a secret understanding in them.

"A very good morning," said Mortimer, smiling. "The weather this morning is a contrast to last night's."

"It is indeed."

Mortimer broke off a twig from a tree near by. With it he began idly to draw on the smooth, sandy patch at his feet. He traced an S, then an O, then an S, watching the girl narrowly as he did so. But again he could detect no gleam of comprehension.

"Do you know what these letters represent?" he said abruptly.

Charlotte frowned a little. "Aren't they what boats send out when they are in distress?" she asked.

Mortimer nodded. "Someone wrote that on the table by my bed last night," he said quietly. "I thought perhaps you might have done so."

She looked at him in wide-eyed astonishment.

"I? Oh, no."

He was wrong then. A sharp pang of disappointment shot through him. He had been so sure - so sure. It was not often that his intuitions led him astray.

"You are quite certain?" he persisted.

"Oh, yes."

They turned and went slowly together toward the house. Charlotte seemed preoccupied about something. She replied at random to the few observations he made. Suddenly she burst out in a low, hurried voice.

"It - it's odd your asking that about those letters, S.O.S. I didn't write them, of course, but - I so easily might have."

He stopped and looked at her, and she went on quickly: "It sounds silly, I know, but I have been so frightened, so dreadfully frightened, and when you came in last night, it seemed like an - an answer to something."

"What are you frightened of?" he asked quickly.

"I don't know."

"You don't know?"

"I think - it's the house. Ever since we came here it has been growing and growing. Everyone seems different somehow. Father, Mother, and Magdalen, they all seem different."

Mortimer did not speak at once, and before he could do so, Charlotte went on again.

"You know this house is supposed to be haunted?"

"What?" All his interest was quickened.

"Yes, a man murdered his wife in it, oh, some years ago now. We only found out about it after we got here. Father says ghosts are all nonsense, but I - don't know."

Mortimer was thinking rapidly.

"Tell me," he said in a businesslike tone, "was this murder committed in the room I had last night?"

"I don't know anything about that," said Charlotte.

"I wonder now," said Mortimer half to himself, "yes, that may be it."

Charlotte looked at him uncomprehendingly.

"Miss Dinsmead," said Mortimer, gently, "Have you ever had any reason to believe that you are mediumistic?"

She stared at him.

"I think you know that you did write S.O.S. last night," he said quietly. "Oh! quite unconsciously, of course. A crime stains the atmosphere, so to speak. A sensitive mind such as yours might be acted upon in such a manner. You have been reproducing the sensations and impressions of

the victim. Many years ago she may have written S.O.S. on that table, and you unconsciously reproduced her act last night."

Charlotte's face brightened.

"I see," she said. "You think that is the explanation?"

A voice called her from the house, and she went in, leaving Mortimer to pace up and down the garden paths. Was he satisfied with his own explanation? Did it cover the facts as he knew them? Did it account for the tension he had felt on entering the house last night?

Perhaps, and yet he still had the odd feeling that his sudden appearance had produced something very like consternation. He thought to himself.

"I must not be carried away by the psychic explanation. It might account for Charlotte - but not for the others. My coming as I did upset them horribly, all except Johnnie. Whatever it is that's the matter, Johnnie is out of it."

He was quite sure of that; strange that he should be so positive, but there it was.

At that minute Johnnie himself came out of the cottage and approached the guest.

"Breakfast's ready," he said awkwardly. "Will you come in?"

Mortimer noticed that the lad's fingers were much stained. Johnnie felt his glance and laughed ruefully.

"I'm always messing about with chemicals, you know," he said. "It makes Dad awfully wild sometimes. He wants me to go into building, but I want to do chemistry and research work."

Mr Dinsmead appeared at the window ahead of them, broad, jovial, smiling, and at sight of him all Mortimer's distrust and antagonism reawakened. Mrs Dinsmead was already seated at the table. She wished him "Good morning" in her colorless voice, and he had again the impression that for some reason or other, she was afraid of him.

Magdalen came in last. She gave him a brief nod and took her seat opposite him.

"Did you sleep well?" she asked abruptly. "Was your bed comfortable?"

She looked at him very earnestly, and when he replied courteously in the affirmative he noticed something very like a flicker of disappointment pass over her face. What had she expected him to say, he wondered?

He turned to his host.

"This lad of yours is interested in chemistry, it seems," he said pleasantly.

There was a crash. Mrs Dinsmead had dropped her tea cup.

"Now then, Maggie, now then," said her husband.

It seemed to Mortimer that there was admonition, warning, in his voice. He turned to his guest and spoke fluently of the advantages of the building trade, and of not letting young boys get above themselves. After breakfast he went out in the garden by himself, and smoked. The time was clearly at hand when he must leave the cottage. A night's shelter was one thing; to prolong it was difficult without an excuse, and what possible excuse could he offer? And yet he was singularly loath to depart.

Turning the thing over and over in his mind, he took a path that led round the other side of the house. His shoes were soled with crepe rubber, and made little or no noise. He was passing the kitchen window when he heard Dinsmead's words from within, and the words attracted his attention immediately.

"It's a fair lump of money, it is."

Mrs Dinsmead's voice answered. It was too faint in tone for Mortimer to hear the words, but Dinsmead replied:

"Nigh on £60,000, the lawyer said."

Mortimer had no intention of eavesdropping, but he retraced his steps very thoughtfully. The mention of money seemed to crystallize the situation. Somewhere or other there was a question of £60,000. It made the thing clearer - and uglier.

Magdalen came out of the house, but her father's voice called her almost immediately, and she went in again. Presently Dinsmead himself joined his guest.

"Rare good morning," he said genially. "I hope your car will be none the worse."

"Wants to find out when I'm going," thought Mortimer to himself.

Aloud he thanked Mr Dinsmead once more for his timely hospitality.

"Not at all, not at all," said the other.

Magdalen and Charlotte came together out of the house and strolled arm in arm to a rustic seat some little distance away. The dark head and the golden one made a pleasant contrast together and on an impulse Mortimer said:

"Your daughters are very unlike, Mr Dinsmead."

The other who was just lighting his pipe gave a sharp jerk of the wrist and dropped the match.

"Do you think so?" he asked. "Yes, well, I suppose they are."

Mortimer had a flash of intuition.

"But of course they are not both your daughters," he said smoothly.

He saw Dinsmead look at him, hesitate for a moment, and then make up his mind.

"That's very clever of you, sir," he said. "No, one of them is a foundling; we took her in as a baby and we have brought her up as our own. She herself has not the least idea of the truth, but she'll have to know soon." He sighed.

"A question of inheritance?" suggested Mortimer quietly.

The other flashed a suspicious look at him.

Then he decided that frankness was best; his manner became almost aggressively frank and open.

"It's odd you should say that, sir."

"A case of telepathy, eh?" said Mortimer, and smiled.

"It is like this, sir. We took her in to oblige the mother - for a consideration, as at the time I was just starting in the building trade. A few months ago I noticed an advertisement in the papers, and it seemed to me that the child in question must be our Magdalen. I went to see the lawyers, and there has been a lot of talk one way and another. They were suspicious - naturally, as you might say - but everything is cleared up now. I am taking the girl herself to London next week - she doesn't know anything about it so far. Her father, it seems, was a very rich man. He only learned of the child's existence a few months before

his death. He hired agents to try and trace her, and left all his money to her when she should be found."

Mortimer listened with close attention. He had no reason to doubt Mr Dinsmead's story. It explained Magdalen's dark beauty; explained too, perhaps, her aloof manner. Nevertheless, though the story itself might be true, something lay undivulged behind it.

But Mortimer had no intention of rousing the other's suspicions. Instead, he must go out of his way to allay them.

"A very interesting story, Mr Dinsmead," he said. "I congratulate Miss Magdalen. An heiress and a beauty, she has a great future ahead."

"She has that," agreed her father warmly, "and she's a rare good girl too, Mr Cleveland."

There was every evidence of hearty warmth in his manner.

"Well," said Mortimer, "I must be pushing along now, I suppose. I have got to thank you once more, Mr Dinsmead, for your singularly well-timed hospitality."

Accompanied by his host, he went into the house to bid farewell to Mrs Dinsmead. She was standing by the window with her back to them, and did not hear them enter. At her husband's jovial, "Here's Mr Cleveland come to say good-bye," she started nervously and swung round, dropping something which she held in her hand. Mortimer picked it up for her. It was a miniature of Charlotte done in the style of some twenty-

five years ago. Mortimer repeated to her the thanks he had already proffered to her husband. He noticed again her look of fear and the furtive glances that she shot at him beneath her eyelids.

The two girls were not in evidence, but it was not part of Mortimer's policy to seem anxious to see them; also he had his own idea, which was shortly to prove correct.

He had gone about half a mile from the house on his way down to where he had left the car the night before, when the bushes on one side of the path were thrust aside, and Magdalen came out on the track ahead of him.

"I had to see you," she said.

"I expected you," said Mortimer. "It was you who wrote S.O.S. on the table in my room last night, wasn't it?"

Magdalen nodded.

"Why?" asked Mortimer gently.

The girl turned aside and began pulling off leaves from a bush.

"I don't know," she said. "Honestly, I don't know."

"Tell me," said Mortimer.

Magdalen drew a deep breath.

"I am a practical person," she said, "not the kind of person who imagines things or fancies them. You, I think, believe in ghosts and spirits. I don't, and when I tell you that there is something very wrong in that house," she pointed up the hill, "I mean that there is something tangibly wrong - it's not just an echo of the past. It has been coming on ever since we've been there. Every day it grows worse. Father is different, Mother is different, Charlotte is different."

Mortimer interposed. "Is Johnnie different?" he asked.

Magdalen looked at him, a dawning appreciation in her eyes. "No," she said, "now I come to think of it. Johnnie is not different. He is the only one who's - who's untouched by it all. He was untouched last night at tea."

"And you?" asked Mortimer.

"I was afraid - horribly afraid, just like a child - without knowing what it was I was afraid of. And Father was - queer, there's no other word for it. He talked about miracles and then I prayed - actually prayed for a miracle, and you knocked on the door."

She stopped abruptly, staring at him. "I seem mad to you, I suppose," she said defiantly.

"No," said Mortimer, "on the contrary you seem extremely sane. All sane people have a premonition of danger if it is near them."

"You don't understand," said Magdalen. "I was not afraid - for myself."

"For whom, then?"

But again Magdalen shook her head in a puzzled fashion. "I don't know,"

She went on: "I wrote S.O.S. on an impulse. I had an idea - absurd, no doubt - that they would not let me speak to you - the rest of them, I mean. I don't know what it was I meant to ask you to do. I don't know now."

"Never mind," said Mortimer. "I shall do it."

"What can you do?"

Mortimer smiled a little.

"I can think."

She looked at him doubtfully.

"Yes," said Mortimer, "a lot can be done that way, more than you would ever believe. Tell me, was there any chance word or phrase that attracted your attention just before that meal last evening?"

Magdalen frowned. "I don't think so," she said. "At least I heard Father saying something to Mother about Charlotte being the living image of her, and he laughed in a very queer way, but - there's nothing odd in that, is there?"

"No," said Mortimer slowly, "except that Charlotte is not like your mother."

He remained lost in thought for a minute or two, then looked up to find Magdalen watching him uncertainly.

"Go home, child," he said, "and don't worry. Leave it in my hands."

She went obediently up the path towards the cottage. Mortimer strolled on a little farther, then threw himself from conscious thought or effort, and let a series of pictures flit at will across the surface of his mind.

Johnnie! He always came back to Johnnie. Johnnie, completely innocent, utterly free from all the network of suspicion and intrigue, but nevertheless the pivot around which everything turned. He remembered the crash of Mrs Dinsmead's cup on her saucer at breakfast that morning. What had caused her agitation? A chance reference on his part to the lad's fondness for chemicals? At the moment he had not been conscious of Mr Dinsmead, but he saw him now clearly, as he sat, his teacup poised halfway to his lips.

That took him back to Charlotte, as he had seen her when the door opened last night. She had sat staring at him over the rim of her teacup. And swiftly on that followed another memory. Mr Dinsmead emptying teacups one after the other, and saying, "This tea's cold."

He remembered the steam that went up. Surely the tea had not been so very cold after all?

Something began to stir in his brain. A memory of something read not so very long ago, within a month perhaps. Some account of a whole family poisoned by a lad's carelessness. A packet of arsenic left in the larder had sifted through to the bread below. He had read it in the paper. Probably Mr Dinsmead had read it too.

Things began to grow clearer...

Half an hour later, Mortimer Cleveland rose briskly to his feet.

It was evening once more in the cottage. The eggs were poached tonight and there was a tin of brawn. Presently Mrs Dinsmead came in from the kitchen bearing the big teapot. The family took their places round the table.

Mrs Dinsmead filled the cups and handed them round the table. Then, as she put the teapot down, she gave a sudden little cry and pressed her hand to her throat. Mr Dinsmead swung round in his chair, following the direction of her terrified eyes. Mortimer Cleveland was standing in the doorway.

He came forward. His manner was pleasant and apologetic.

"I'm afraid I startled you," he said. "I had to come back for something."

"Back for something," cried Mr Dinsmead. His face was purple, his veins swelling. "Back for what, I should like to know?"

"Some tea," said Mortimer.

With a swift gesture he took something from his pocket and taking up one of the teacups from the table, emptied some of its contents into a little test-tube he held in his left hand.

"What - what are you doing?" gasped Mr Dinsmead. His face had gone chalky-white, the purple dying out as if by magic. Mrs Dinsmead gave a thin, high, frightened cry.

"You read the papers, Mr Dinsmead? I am sure you do. Sometimes one reads accounts of a whole family being poisoned - some of them recover, some do not. In this case, one would not. The first explanation would be the tinned brawn you were eating, but supposing the doctor to be a suspicious man, not easily taken in by the tinned food theory? There is a packet of arsenic in your larder. On the shelf below it is a packet of tea. There is a convenient hole in the top shelf. What more natural to suppose than that the arsenic found its way into the tea by accident? Your son Johnnie might be blamed for carelessness, nothing more."

"I - I don't know what you mean," gasped Dinsmead.

"I think you do." Mortimer took up a second teacup and filled a second test-tube. He fixed a red label to one and a blue label to the other.

"The red-labeled one," he said, "contains tea from your daughter Charlotte's cup, the other from your daughter Magdalen's. I am prepared to swear that in the first I shall find four or five times the amount of arsenic than in the latter."

"You are mad!" said Dinsmead.

"Oh, dear me, no. I am nothing of the kind. You told me today, Mr Dinsmead, that Magdalen was not your own daughter. You lied to me. Magdalen is your daughter. Charlotte was the child you adopted, the child who was so like her mother that when I held a miniature of that mother in my hand today I mistook it for one of Charlotte herself. You wanted your own daughter to inherit the fortune, and since it might be impossible to keep Charlotte out of sight, and someone who knew her mother might have realized the truth of the resemblance, you decided on, well - sufficient white arsenic at the bottom of a teacup."

Mrs Dinsmead gave a sudden high cackle, rocking herself to and fro in violent hysterics.

"Tea," she squeaked, "that's what he said, tea, not lemonade."

"Hold your tongue, can't you?" roared her husband wrathfully.

Mortimer saw Charlotte looking at him, wide-eyed, wondering, across the table. Then he felt a hand on his arm, and Magdalen dragged him out of earshot.

"Those," she pointed at the phials - "Daddy. You won't -"

Mortimer laid his hand on her shoulder. "My child," he said, "you don't believe in the past. I do. I believe in the atmosphere of this house. If he had not come to this particular house, perhaps - I say perhaps - your father might not have conceived the plan he did. I will keep these two test-tubes to safeguard Charlotte now and in the future. Apart from that, I shall do nothing - in gratitude, if you will, to the hand that wrote S.O.S."

WIRELESS

"Above all, avoid worry and excitement," said Dr Meynell, in the comfortable fashion affected by doctors.

Mrs Harter, as is often the case with people hearing these soothing but meaningless words, seemed more doubtful than relieved.

"There is a certain cardiac weakness," continued the doctor fluently, "but nothing to be alarmed about. I can assure you of that. All the same," he added, "it might be as well to have an elevator installed. Eh? What about it?"

Mrs Harter looked worried.

Dr Meynell, on the contrary, looked pleased with himself. The reason he liked attending rich patients rather than poor ones was that he could exercise his active imagination in prescribing for their ailments.

"Yes, an elevator," said Dr Meynell, trying to think of something else even more dashing - and failing. "Then we shall avoid all undue exertion. Daily exercise on the level on a fine day, but avoid walking up hills. And, above all, plenty of distraction for the mind. Don't dwell on your health."

To the old lady's nephew, Charles Ridgeway, the doctor was slightly more explicit.

"Do not misunderstand me," he said. "Your aunt may live for years, probably will. At the same time, shock or overexertion might carry her off like that!" He snapped his fingers. "She must lead a very quiet life. No exertion. No fatigue. But, of course, she must not be allowed to brood. She must be kept cheerful and the mind well distracted."

"Distracted," said Charles Ridgeway thoughtfully.

Charles was a thoughtful young man. He was also a young man who believed in furthering his own inclinations whenever possible.

That evening he suggested the installation of a radio set.

Mrs Harter, already seriously upset at the thought of the elevator, was disturbed and unwilling. Charles was persuasive.

"I do not know that I care for these new-fangled things," said Mrs Harter piteously. "The waves, you know - the electric waves. They might affect me."

Charles, in a superior and kindly fashion, pointed out the futility of this idea.

Mrs Harter, whose knowledge of the subject was of the vaguest but who was tenacious of her own opinion, remained unconvinced.

"All that electricity," she murmured timorously. "You may say what you like, Charles, but some people are affected by electricity. I always have a terrible headache before a thunderstorm. I know that."

She nodded her head triumphantly.

Charles was a patient young man. He was also persistent.

"My dear Aunt Mary," he said, "let me make the thing clear to you."

He was something of an authority on the subject. He delivered quite a lecture on the theme; warming to his task, he spoke of bright-emitter tubes, of dull-emitter tubes, of high frequency and low frequency, of amplification and of condensers.

Mrs Harter, submerged in a sea of words that she did not understand, surrendered.

"Of course, Charles," she murmured, "if you really think -"

"My dear Aunt Mary," said Charles enthusiastically, "it is the very thing for you, to keep you from moping and all that."

The elevator prescribed by Dr Meynell was installed shortly afterwards and was very nearly the death of Mrs Harter since, like many other old ladies, she had a rooted objection to strange men in the house. She suspected them one and all of having designs on her old silver.

After the elevator the radio set arrived. Mrs Harter was left to contemplate the, to her, repellent object - a large, ungainly-looking box, studded with knobs.

It took all Charles's enthusiasm to reconcile her to it, but Charles was in his element, turning knobs and discoursing eloquently.

Mrs Harter sat in her high-backed chair, patient and polite, with a rooted conviction in her own mind that these new-fangled notions were neither more nor less than unmitigated nuisances.

"Listen, Aunt Mary, we are on to Berlin! Isn't that splendid? Can you hear the fellow?"

"I can't hear anything except a good deal of buzzing and clicking," said Mrs Harter.

Charles continued to twirl knobs. "Brussels," he announced with enthusiasm.

"It is really?" said Mrs Harter with no more than a trace of interest

Charles again turned knobs and an unearthly howl echoed forth into the room.

"Now we seem to be on to the Dogs' Home," said Mrs Harter, who was an old lady with a certain amount of spirit.

"Ha, ha!" said Charles, "you will have your joke, won't you, Aunt Mary? Very good that!"

Mrs Harter could not help smiling at him. She was very fond of Charles. For some years a niece, Miriam Harter, had lived with her. She had intended to make the girl her heiress, but Miriam had not been a success. She was impatient and obviously bored by her aunt's society. She was always out, "gadding about" as Mrs Harter called it. In the end she had entangled herself with a young man of whom her aunt thoroughly disapproved. Miriam had been returned to her mother with a curt note much as if she had been goods on approval. She had married the young man in question and Mrs Harter usually sent her a handkerchief case or a table center at Christmas.

Having found nieces disappointing, Mrs Harter turned her attention to nephews. Charles, from the first, had been an unqualified success. He was always pleasantly deferential to his aunt and listened with an appearance of intense interest to the reminiscences of her youth. In this he was a great contrast to Miriam who had been frankly bored and showed it. Charles was never bored; he was always good-tempered,

always gay. He told his aunt many times a day that she was a perfectly marvelous old lady.

Highly satisfied with her new acquisition, Mrs Harter had written to her lawyer with instructions as to the making of a new will. This was sent to her, duly approved by her, and signed.

And now even in the matter of the radio, Charles was soon proved to have won fresh laurels.

Mrs Harter, at first antagonistic, became tolerant and finally fascinated. She enjoyed it very much better when Charles was out. The trouble with Charles was that he could not leave the thing alone. Mrs Harter would be seated in her chair comfortably listening to a symphony concert or a lecture on Lucrezia Borgia or Pond Life, quite happy and at peace with the world. Not so Charles. The harmony would be shattered by discordant shrieks while he enthusiastically attempted to get foreign stations. But on those evenings when Charles was dining out with friends, Mrs Harter enjoyed the radio very much indeed. She would turn on two switches, sit in her high-backed chair, and enjoy the program of the evening.

It was about three months after the radio had been installed that the first eerie happening occurred. Charles was absent at a bridge party.

The program for that evening was a ballad concert. A well-known soprano was singing Annie Laurie, and in the middle of Annie Laurie a strange thing happened. There was a sudden break, the music ceased for a moment, the buzzing, clicking noise continued, and then that too

died away. There was silence, and then very faintly a low buzzing sound was heard.

Mrs Harter got the impression, why she did not know, that the machine was tuned into somewhere very far away, and then, clearly and distinctly, a voice spoke, a man's voice with a faint Irish accent.

"Mary - can you hear me, Mary? It is Patrick speaking... I am coming for you soon. You will be ready, won't you, Mary?"

Then, almost immediately, the strains of Annie Laurie once more filled the room.

Mrs Harter sat rigid in her chair, her hands clenched on each arm of it. Had she been dreaming? Patrick! Patrick's voice! Patrick's voice in this very room, speaking to her. No, it must be a dream, a hallucination perhaps. She must just have dropped off to sleep for a minute or two. A curious thing to have dreamed - that her dead husband's voice should speak to her over the ether. It frightened her just a little. What were the words he had said?

"I am coming for you soon. You will be ready, won't you, Mary?"

Was it, could it be a premonition? Cardiac weakness. Her heart. After all, she was getting on in years.

"It's a warning - that's what it is," said Mrs Harter, rising slowly and painfully from her chair, and added characteristically, "All that money wasted on putting in an elevator!"

She said nothing of her experience to anyone, but for the next day or two she was thoughtful and a little preoccupied.

And then came the second occasion. Again she was alone in the room. The radio, which had been playing an orchestral selection, died away with the same suddenness as before. Again there was silence, the sense of distance, and finally Patrick's voice, not as it had been in life - but a voice rarefied, far-away, with a strange unearthly quality.

"Patrick speaking to you, Mary. I will be coming for you very soon now..."

Then click, buzz, and the orchestral selection was in full swing again.

Mrs Harter glanced at the clock. No, she had not been asleep this time. Awake and in full possession of her faculties, she had heard Patrick's voice speaking. It was no hallucination, she was sure of that. In a confused way she tried to think over all that Charles had explained to her of the theory of ether waves.

Could it be that Patrick had really spoken to her? That his actual voice had been wafted through space? There were missing wave lengths or something of that kind. She remembered Charles speaking of "gaps in the scale." Perhaps the missing waves explained all the so-called psychological phenomena? No, there was nothing inherently impossible in the idea. Patrick had spoken to her. He had availed himself of modern science to prepare her for what must soon be coming.

Mrs Harter rang the bell for her maid, Elizabeth.

Elizabeth was a tall, gaunt woman of sixty. Beneath an unbending exterior she concealed a wealth of affection and tenderness for her mistress.

"Elizabeth," said Mrs Harter when her faithful retainer had appeared, "you remember what I told you? The top left-hand drawer of my bureau. It is locked - the long key with the white label. Everything there is ready."

"Ready, ma'am?"

"For my burial," snorted Mrs Harter. "You know perfectly well what I mean, Elizabeth. You helped me to put the things there yourself."

Elizabeth's face began to work strangely.

"Oh, ma'am," she wailed. "don't dwell on such things. I thought you was a sight better."

"We have all got to go sometime or another," said Mrs Harter practically. "I am over my three score years and ten, Elizabeth. There, there, don't make a fool of yourself. If you must cry, go and cry somewhere else."

Elizabeth retired, still sniffing.

Mrs Harter looked after her with a good deal of affection.

"Silly old fool, but faithful," she said, "very faithful. Let me see, was it a hundred pounds, or only fifty I left her? It ought to be a hundred."

The point worried the old lady and the next day she sat down and wrote to her lawyer asking if he would send her her will so that she might look it over. It was that same day that Charles startled her by something he said at lunch.

"By the way, Aunt Mary," he said, "who is that funny old josser up in the spare room? The picture over the mantelpiece, I mean. The old johnny with the beaver and sidewhiskers?"

Mrs Harter looked at him austerely.

"That is your Uncle Patrick as a young man," she said.

"Oh, I say, Aunt Mary, I am awfully sorry. I didn't mean to be rude."

Mrs Harter accepted the apology with a dignified bend of the head.

Charles went on rather uncertainly, "I just wondered. You see -"

He stopped undecidedly and Mrs Harter said sharply:

"Well? What were you going to say?"

"Nothing," said Charles hastily. "Nothing that makes sense, I mean."

For the moment the old lady said nothing more, but later that day, when they were alone together, she returned to the subject.

"I wish you would tell me, Charles, what it was that made you ask me about the picture of your uncle."

Charles looked embarrassed.

"I told you, Aunt Mary. It was nothing but a silly fancy of mine - quite absurd."

"Charles," said Mrs Harter in her most autocratic voice, "I insist upon knowing."

"Well, my dear aunt, if you will have it, I fancied I saw him - the man in the picture, I mean - looking out of the end window when I was coming up the drive last night. Some effect of the light, I suppose. I wondered who on earth he could be, the face so - early Victorian, if you know what I mean. And then Elizabeth said there was no one, no visitor or stranger in the house, and later in the evening I happened to drift into the spare room, and there was the picture over the mantelpiece. My man to the life! It is quite easily explained, really, I expect. Subconscious and all that. Must have noticed the picture before without realizing that I had noticed it, and then just fancied the face at the window."

"The end window?" said Mrs Harter sharply.

"Yes, why?"

"Nothing," said Mrs Harter.

But she was startled all the same. That room had been her husband's dressing room.

That same evening, Charles again being absent, Mrs Harter sat listening to the wireless with feverish impatience. If for the third time she heard the mysterious voice, it would prove to her finally and without a shadow of doubt that she was really in communication with some other world.

Although her heart beat faster, she was not surprised when the same break occurred, and after the usual interval of deathly silence the faint far-away Irish voice spoke once more.

"Mary - you are prepared now... On Friday I shall come for you... Friday at half-past nine... Do not be afraid - there will be no pain... Be ready..."

Then, almost cutting short the last word, the music of the orchestra broke out again, clamorous and discordant.

Mrs Harter sat very still for a minute or two. Her face had gone white and she looked blue and pinched round the lips.

Presently she got up and sat down at her writing-desk. In a somewhat shaky hand she wrote the following lines:

Tonight, at 9:15, I have distinctly heard the voice of my dead husband. He told me that he would come for me on Friday night at 9:30. If I should die on that day and at that hour I should like the facts made known so as to prove beyond question the possibility of communicating with the spirit world.

Mary Harter

Mrs Harter read over what she had written, enclosed it in an envelope, and addressed the envelope. Then she rang the bell, which was promptly answered by Elizabeth. Mrs Harter got up from her desk and gave the note she had just written to the old woman.

"Elizabeth," she said, "if I should die on Friday night I should like that note given to Dr Meynell. No -" as Elizabeth appeared about to protest - "do not argue with me. You have often told me you believe in premonitions. I have a premonition now. There is one thing more. I have left you in my will £50. I should like you to have £100. If I am not able to go to the bank myself before I die, Mr Charles will see to it."

As before, Mrs Harter cut short Elizabeth's tearful protests. In pursuance of her determination the old lady spoke to her nephew on the subject the following morning.

"Remember, Charles, that if anything should happen to me, Elizabeth is to have an extra £50."

"You are very gloomy these days, Aunt Mary," said Charles cheerfully. "What is going to happen to you? According to Dr Meynell, we shall be celebrating your hundredth birthday in twenty years or so!"

Mrs Harter smiled affectionately at him but did not answer. After a minute or two she said:

"What are you doing on Friday evening, Charles?"

Charles looked a trifle surprised.

"As a matter of fact, the Ewings asked me to go in and play bridge, but if you would rather I stayed at home -"

"No," said Mrs Harter with determination. "Certainly not. I mean it, Charles. On that night of all nights I should much rather be alone."

Charles looked at her curiously, but Mrs Harter vouchsafed no further information. She was an old lady of courage and determination. She felt that she must go through with her strange experience single-handed.

Friday evening found the house very silent. Mrs Harter sat as usual in her straight-backed chair drawn up to the fireplace. All her preparations were made. That morning she had been to the bank, had drawn out £50 in notes, and had handed them over to Elizabeth despite the latter's tearful protests. She had sorted and arranged all her

personal belongings and had labeled one or two pieces of jewelry with the names of friends or relations. She had also written out a list of instructions for Charles. The Worcester tea service was to go to Cousin Emma, the Sévres jars to young William, and so on.

Now she looked at the long envelope she held in her hand and drew from it a folded document. This was her will sent to her by Mr Hopkinson in accordance with her instructions. She had already read it carefully, but now she looked over it once more to refresh her memory. It was a short, concise document. A bequest of £50 to Elizabeth Marshall in consideration of faithful service; two bequests of £500 to a sister and a first cousin; and the remainder to her beloved nephew Charles Ridgeway.

Mrs Harter nodded her head several times. Charles would be a very rich man when she was dead. Well, he had been a dear good boy to her. Always kind, always affectionate, and with a merry tongue which never failed to please her.

She looked at the clock. Three minutes to the half-hour. Well, she was ready. And she was calm - quite calm. Although she repeated these last words to herself several times, her heart beat strangely and unevenly. She hardly realized it herself, but she was strung up to a fine point of over-wrought nerves.

Half-past nine. The wireless was switched on. What would she hear? A familiar voice announcing the weather forecast or that far-away voice belonging to a man who had died twenty-five years before?

But she heard neither. Instead there came a familiar sound, a sound she knew well but which tonight made her feel as though an icy hand were laid on her heart. A fumbling at the front door...

It came again. And then a cold blast seemed to sweep through the room. Mrs Harter had now no doubt what her sensations were. She was afraid... She was more than afraid - she was terrified...

And suddenly there came to her the thought:

"Twenty-five years is a long time. Patrick is a stranger to me now."

Terror! That was what was invading her.

A soft step outside the door - a soft halting foot-step. Then the door swung silently open...

Mrs Harter staggered to her feet, swaying slightly from side to side, her eyes fixed on the open doorway. Something slipped from her fingers into the grate.

She gave a strangled cry which died in her throat. In the dim light of the doorway stood a familiar figure with chestnut beard and whiskers and an old-fashioned Victorian coat.

Patrick had come for her!

Her heart gave one terrified leap and stood still. She slipped to the ground in a crumpled heap.

There Elizabeth found her, an hour later.

Dr Meynell was called at once and Charles Ridgeway was hastily summoned from his bridge party. But nothing could be done. Mrs Harter was beyond human aid.

It was not until two days later that Elizabeth remembered the note given to her by her mistress. Dr Meynell read it with great interest and showed it to Charles Ridgeway.

"A very curious coincidence," he said. "It seems clear that your aunt had been having hallucinations about her dead husband's voice. She must have strung herself up to such a point that the excitement was fatal, and when the time actually came she died of the shock."

"Auto-suggestion?" asked Charles.

"Something of the sort. I will let you know the result of the autopsy as soon as possible, though I have no doubt of it myself. In the circumstances an autopsy is desirable, though purely as a matter of form."

Charles nodded comprehendingly.

On the preceding night, when the household was in bed, he had removed a certain wire which ran from the back of the radio cabinet to

his bedroom on the floor above. Also, since the evening had been a chilly one, he had asked Elizabeth to light a fire in his room, and in that fire he had burned a chestnut beard and whiskers. Some Victorian clothing belonging to his late uncle he replaced in the camphor-scented chest in the attic.

As far as he could see, he was perfectly safe. His plan, the shadowy outline of which had first formed in his brain when Doctor Meynell had told him that his aunt might with due care live for many years, had succeeded admirably. A sudden shock, Dr Meynell had said. Charles, that affectionate young man, beloved of old ladies, smiled to himself.

When the doctor had departed, Charles went about his duties mechanically. Certain funeral arrangements had to be finally settled. Relatives coming from a distance had to have trains looked out for them. In one or two cases they would have to stay the night. Charles went about it all efficiently and methodically, to the accompaniment of an undercurrent of his own thoughts.

A very good stroke of business! That was the burden of them. Nobody, least of all his dead aunt, had known in what perilous straits Charles stood. His activities, carefully concealed from the world, had landed him where the shadow of a prison loomed ahead.

Exposure and ruin had stared him in the face unless he could in a few short months raise a considerable sum of money. Well - that was all right now. Charles smiled to himself. Thanks to - yes, call it a practical joke - nothing criminal about that - he was saved. He was now a very

rich man. He had no anxieties on the subject, for Mrs Harter had never made any secret of her intentions.

Chiming in very appositely with these thoughts, Elizabeth put her head round the door and informed him that Mr Hopkinson was here and would like to see him.

About time, too, Charles thought. Repressing a tendency to whistle, he composed his face to one of suitable gravity and went to the library. There he greeted the precise old gentleman who had been for over a quarter of a century the late Mrs Harter's legal adviser.

The lawyer seated himself at Charles's invitation and with a dry little cough entered upon business matters.

"I did not quite understand your letter to me, Mr Ridgeway. You seemed to be under the impression that the late Mrs Harter's will was in our keeping?"

Charles stared at him.

"But surely - I've heard my aunt say as much."

"Oh! quite so, quite so. It was in our keeping."

"Was?"

"That is what I said. Mrs Harter wrote to us, asking that it might be forwarded to her on Tuesday last."

An uneasy feeling crept over Charles. He felt a far-off premonition of unpleasantness.

"Doubtless it will come to light among her papers," continued the lawyer smoothly.

Charles said nothing. He was afraid to trust his tongue. He had already been through Mrs Harter's papers pretty thoroughly, well enough to be quite certain that no will was among them. In a minute or two, when he had regained control of himself, he said so.

His voice sounded unreal to himself, and he had a sensation as of cold water trickling down his back.

"Has anyone been through her personal effects?" asked the lawyer.

Charles replied that the maid, Elizabeth, had done so. At Mr Hopkinson's suggestion Elizabeth was sent for. She came promptly, grim and upright, and answered the questions put to her.

She had been through all her mistress's clothes and personal belongings. She was quite sure that there had been no legal document such as a will among them. She knew what the will looked like - her poor mistress had had it in her hand only the morning of her death.

"You are sure of that?" asked the lawyer sharply.

"Yes, sir. She told me so. And she made me take fifty pounds in notes. The will was in a long blue envelope."

"Quite right," said Mr Hopkinson.

"Now I come to think of it." continued Elizabeth, "that same blue envelope was lying on this table the morning after - but empty. I laid it on the desk."

"I remember seeing it there," said Charles.

He got up and went over to the desk. In a minute or two he turned round with an envelope in his hand which he handed to Mr Hopkinson. The latter examined it and nodded his head.

"That is the envelope in which I dispatched the will on Tuesday last."

Both men looked hard at Elizabeth.

"Is there anything more, sir?" she inquired respectfully.

"Not at present, thank you."

Elizabeth went towards the door.

"One minute," said the lawyer. "Was there a fire in the grate that evening?"

"Yes, sir, there was always a fire."

"Thank you, that will do."

Elizabeth went out. Charles leaned forward, resting a shaking hand on the table.

"What do you think? What are you driving at?"

Mr Hopkinson shook his head.

"We must still hope the will may turn up. If it does not -"

"Well, if it does not?"

"I am afraid there is only one conclusion possible. Your aunt sent for that will in order to destroy it. Not wishing Elizabeth to lose by that, she gave her the amount of her legacy in cash."

"But why?" cried Charles wildly. "Why?"

Mr Hopkinson coughed. A dry cough.

"You have had no - er - disagreement with your aunt, Mr Ridgeway?" he murmured.

Charles gasped.

"No, indeed," he cried warmly. "We were on the kindliest, most affectionate terms, right up to the end."

"Ah!" said Mr Hopkinson, not looking at him.

It came to Charles with a shock that the lawyer did not believe him. Who knew what this dry old stick might not have heard? Rumors of Charles's doings might have come round to him. What more natural than that he should suppose that these same rumors had come to Mrs Harter, and that aunt and nephew should have had an altercation on the subject?

But it wasn't so! Charles knew one of the bitterest moments of his career. His lies had been believed. Now that he spoke the truth, belief was withheld. The irony of it!

Of course his aunt had never burned the will! Of course -

His thoughts came to a sudden check. What was that picture rising before his eyes? An old lady with one hand clasped to her heart... something slipping... a paper... falling on the red-hot embers...

Charles's face grew livid. He heard a hoarse voice - his own - asking:

"If that will's never found -?"

"There is a former will of Mrs Harter's still extant. Dated September, 1920. By it Mrs Harter leaves everything to her niece, Miriam Harter, now Miriam Robinson."

What was the old fool saying? Miriam? Miriam with her nondescript husband, and her four whining brats. All his cleverness - for Miriam!

The telephone rang sharply at his elbow. He took up the receiver. It was the doctor's voice, hearty and kindly.

"That you, Ridgeway? Thought you'd like to know. The autopsy's just concluded. Cause of death as I surmised. But as a matter of fact the cardiac trouble was much more serious than I suspected when she was alive. With the utmost care she couldn't have lived longer than two months at the outside. Thought you'd like to know. Might console you more or less."

"Excuse me," said Charles, "would you mind saying that again?"

"She couldn't have lived longer than two months," said the doctor in a slightly louder tone. "All things work out for the best, you know, my dear fellow -"

But Charles had slammed back the receiver on its hook. He was conscious of the lawyer's voice speaking from a long way off.

"Dear me, Mr Ridgeway, are you ill?"

Damn them all! The smug-faced lawyer. That poisonous old ass Meynell. No hope in front of him - only the shadow of the prison wall...

He felt that Somebody had been playing with him - playing with him like a cat with a mouse. Somebody must be laughing...

THE CALL OF WINGS

Silas Hamer heard it first on a wintry night in February. He and Dick Borrow had walked from a dinner given by Bernard Seldon, the nerve specialist. Borrow had been unusually silent, and Silas Hamer asked him with some curiosity what he was thinking about. Borrow's answer was unexpected.

"I was thinking that of all these men tonight, only two among them could lay claim to happiness. And that these two, strangely enough, were you and I!"

The word "strangely" was apposite, for no two men could be more dissimilar than Richard Borrow, the hard-working east-end parson, and Silas Hamer, the sleek, complacent man whose millions were a matter of household knowledge.

"It's odd, you know," mused Borrow. "I believe you're the only contented millionaire I've ever met."

Hamer was silent a moment. When he spoke, his tone had altered.

"I used to be a wretched shivering little newspaper boy. I wanted then - what I've got now! - the comfort and the luxury of money, not its power. I wanted money, not to wield as a force, but to spend lavishly - on myself! I'm frank about it, you see. Money can't buy everything, they say. Very

true. But it can buy everything I want - therefore I'm satisfied. I'm a materialist, Borrow, out and out a materialist!"

The broad glare of the lighted thoroughfare confirmed this confession of faith. The sleek lines of Silas Hamer's body were amplified by the heavy fur-lined coat and the white light emphasized the thick rolls of flesh beneath his chin. In contrast to him walked Dick Borrow with the thin ascetic face and the star-gazing fanatical eyes.

"It's you," said Hamer with emphasis, "that I can't understand."

Borrow smiled.

"I live in the midst of misery, want, starvation - all the ills of the flesh! And a predominant Vision upholds me. It's not easy to understand unless you believe in Visions, which I gather you don't."

"I don't believe," said Silas Hamer stolidly, "in any thing I can't see and hear and touch."

"Quite so. That's the difference between us. Well, good-bye, the earth now swallows me up!"

They had reached the doorway of a lighted tube station, which was Borrow's route home.

Hamer proceeded alone. He was glad he had sent away the car tonight and elected to walk home. The air was keen and frosty, his senses were delightfully conscious of the enveloping warmth of the fur-lined coat.

He paused for an instant on the curbstone before crossing the road. A great motor 'bus was heavily ploughing its way towards him. Hamer, with the feeling of infinite leisure, waited for it to pass. If he were to cross in front of it, he would have to hurry - and hurry was distasteful to him.

By his side a battered derelict of the human race rolled drunkenly off the pavement. Hamer was aware of a shout, an ineffectual swerve of the motor 'bus, and then - he was looking stupidly, with a gradually awakening horror, at a limp inert heap of rags in the middle of the road.

A crowd gathered magically, with a couple of policemen and the 'bus driver as its nucleus. But Hamer's eyes were riveted in horrified fascination on that lifeless bundle that had once been a man - a man like himself! He shuddered as at some menace.

"Dahn't yer blime yerself, guv'nor," remarked a rough-looking man at his side. "Yer couldn't 'a done nothin'. 'E was done for anyways."

Hamer stared at him. The idea that it was possible in any way to save the man had quite honestly never occurred to him. He scouted the notion now as an absurdity. Why, if he had been so foolish, he might at this moment... His thoughts broke off abruptly, and he walked away from the crowd. He felt himself shaking with a nameless unquenchable dread. He was forced to admit to himself that he was afraid - horribly afraid - of Death - Death that came with dreadful swiftness and remorseless certainty to rich and poor alike...

He walked faster, but the new fear was still with him, enveloping him in its cold and chilling grasp.

He wondered at himself, for he knew that by nature he was no coward. Five years ago, he reflected, this fear would not have attacked him. For then Life had not been so sweet... Yes, that was it; love of Life was the key to the mystery. The zest of living was at its height for him; it knew but one menace - Death, the destroyer!

He turned out of the lighted thoroughfare. A narrow passageway, between high walls, offered a short cut to the Square where his house, famous for its art treasures, was situated.

The noise of the streets behind him lessened and faded, the soft thud of his own footsteps was the only sound to be heard.

And then out of the gloom in front of him came another sound. Sitting against the wall was a man playing the flute. One of the enormous tribe of street musicians, of course, but why had he chosen such a peculiar spot? Surely at this time of night the police - Hamer's reflections were interrupted suddenly as he realized with a shock that the man had no legs. A pair of crutches rested against the wall beside him. Hamer saw now that it was not a flute he was playing but a strange instrument whose notes were much higher and clearer than those of a flute.

The man played on. He took no notice of Hamer's approach. His head was flung far back on his shoulders, as though uplifted in the joy of his own music, and the notes poured out clearly and joyously, rising higher and higher...

It was a strange tune - strictly speaking, it was not a tune at all, but a single phrase, not unlike the slow turn given out by the violins of Rienzi, repeated again and again, passing from key to key, from harmony to harmony, but always rising and attaining each time to a greater and more boundless freedom.

It was unlike anything Hamer had ever heard. There was something strange about it, something inspiring - and uplifting... it... He caught frantically with both hands to a projection in the wall beside him. He was conscious of one thing only - that he must keep down - at all costs he must keep down...

He suddenly realized that the music had stopped. The legless man was reaching out for his crutches. And here was he, Silas Hamer, clutching like a lunatic at a stone buttress, for the simple reason that he had had the utterly preposterous notion - absurd on the face of it! - that he was rising from the ground - that the music was carrying him upwards...

He laughed. What a wholly mad idea! Of course his feet had never left the earth for a moment, but what a strange hallucination! The quick tap-tapping of wood on the pavement told him that the cripple was moving away. He looked after him until the man's figure was swallowed up in the gloom. An odd fellow!

He proceeded on his way more slowly; he could not efface from his mind the memory of that strange, impossible sensation when the ground had failed beneath his feet...

And then on an impulse he turned and followed hurriedly in the direction the other had taken. The man could not have gone far - he would soon overtake him.

He shouted as soon as he caught sight of the maimed figure swinging itself slowly along.

"Hi! One minute."

The man stopped and stood motionless until Hamer came abreast of him. A lamp burned just over his head and revealed every feature. Silas Hamer caught his breath in involuntary surprise. The man possessed the most singularly beautiful head he had ever seen. He might have been any age; assuredly he was not a boy, yet youth was the most predominant characteristic - youth and vigour in passionate intensity!

Hamer found an odd difficulty in beginning his conversation.

"Look here," he said awkwardly, "I want to know - what was that thing you were playing just now?"

The man smiled... With his smile the world seemed suddenly to leap into joyousness...

"It was an old tune - a very old tune... Years old - centuries old."

He spoke with an odd purity and distinctness of enunciation, giving equal value to each syllable. He was clearly not an Englishman, yet Hamer was puzzled as to his nationality.

"You're not English? Where do you come from?"

Again the broad joyful smile.

"From over the sea, sir. I came - a long time ago - a very long time ago."

"You must have had a bad accident. Was it lately?"

"Some time now, sir."

"Rough luck to lose both legs."

"It was well," said the man very calmly. He turned his eyes with a strange solemnity on his interlocutor. "They were evil."

Hamer dropped a shilling in his hand and turned away. He was puzzled and vaguely disquieted. "They were evil!" What a strange thing to say! Evidently an operation for some form of disease, but - how odd it had sounded.

Hamer went home thoughtful. He tried in vain to dismiss the incident from his mind. Lying in bed, with the first incipient sensation of drowsiness stealing over him, he heard a neighbouring clock strike one. One clear stroke and then silence - silence that was broken by a faint familiar sound... Recognition came leaping. Hamer felt his heart beating quickly. It was the man in the passageway playing, somewhere not far distant...

The notes came gladly, the slow turn with its joyful call, the same haunting little phrase... "It's uncanny," murmured Hamer; "it's uncanny. It's got wings to it..."

Clearer and clearer, higher and higher - each wave rising above the last, and catching him up with it. This time he did not struggle; he let himself go... Up - up... The waves of sound were carrying him higher and higher... Triumphant and free, they swept on.

Higher and higher... They had passed the limits of human sound now, but they still continued - rising, ever rising... Would they reach the final goal, the full perfection of height?

Rising...

Something was pulling - pulling him downwards. Something big and heavy and insistent. It pulled remorselessly - pulled him back, and down... down...

He lay in bed gazing at the window opposite. Then, breathing heavily and painfully, he stretched an arm out of bed. The movement seemed curiously cumbrous to him. The softness of the bed was oppressive; oppressive, too, were the heavy curtains over the window that blocked out light and air. The ceiling seemed to press down upon him. He felt stifled and choked. He moved slightly under the bedclothes, and the weight of his body seemed to him the most oppressive of all...

II

"I want your advice, Seldon."

Seldon pushed back his chair an inch or so from the table. He had been wondering what was the object of this tête-à-tête dinner. He had seen little of Hamer since the winter, and he was aware tonight of some indefinable change in his friend.

"It's just this," said the millionaire. "I'm worried about myself."

Seldon smiled as he looked across the table.

"You're looking in the pink of condition."

"It's not that." Hamer paused a minute, then added quietly, "I'm afraid I'm going mad."

The nerve specialist glanced up with a sudden keen interest. He poured himself out a glass of port with a rather slow movement, and then said quietly, but with a sharp glance at the other man: "What makes you think that?"

"Something that's happened to me. Something inexplicable, unbelievable. It can't be true, so I must be going mad."

"Take your time," said Seldon, "and tell me about it."

"I don't believe in the supernatural," began Hamer. "I never have. But this thing... Well, I'd better tell you the whole story from the beginning. It began last winter one evening after I had dined with you."

Then briefly and concisely he narrated the events of his walk home and the strange sequel.

"That was the beginning of it all. I can't explain it to you properly - the feeling, I mean - but it was wonderful! Unlike anything I've ever felt or dreamed. Well, it's gone on ever since. Not every night, just now and then. The music, the feeling of being uplifted, the soaring flight... and then the terrible drag, the pull back to earth, and afterwards the pain, the actual physical pain of the awakening. It's like coming down from a high mountain - you know the pains in the ears one gets? Well, this is the same thing, but intensified - and with it goes the awful sense of weight - of being hemmed in, stifled..."

He broke off and there was a pause.

"Already the servants think I'm mad. I couldn't bear the roof and the walls - I've had a place arranged up at the top of the house, open to the sky, with no furniture or carpets, or any stifling things... But even then the houses all round are nearly as bad. It's open country I want, somewhere where one can breathe..." He looked across at Seldon. "Well, what do you say? Can you explain it?"

"H'm," said Seldon. "Plenty of explanations. You've been hypnotized, or you've hypnotized yourself. Your nerves have gone wrong. Or it may be merely a dream."

Hamer shook his head. "None of those explanations will do."

"And there are others," said Seldon slowly, "but they're not generally admitted."

"You are prepared to admit them?"

"On the whole, yes! There's a great deal we can't understand which can't possibly be explained normally. We've any amount to find out still, and I for one believe in keeping an open mind."

"What do you advise me to do?" asked Hamer after a silence.

Seldon leaned forward briskly. "One of several things. Go away from London, seek out your 'open country.' The dreams may cease."

"I can't do that," said Hamer quickly. "It's come to this that I can't do without them. I don't want to do without them."

"Ah! I guessed as much. Another alternative, find this fellow, this cripple. You're endowing him now with all sorts of supernatural attributes. Talk to him. Break the spell."

Hamer shook his head again.

"Why not?"

"I'm afraid," said Hamer simply.

Seldon made a gesture of impatience. "Don't believe in it all so blindly! This tune now, the medium that starts it all, what is it like?"

Hamer hummed it, and Seldon listened with a puzzled frown.

"Rather like a bit out of the overture to Rienzi. There is something uplifting about it - it had wings. But I'm not carried off the earth! Now, these flights of yours, are they all exactly the same?"

"No, no." Hamer leaned forward eagerly. "They develop. Each time I see a little more. It's difficult to explain. You see, I'm always conscious of reaching a certain point - the music carried me there - not direct, but by a succession of waves, each reaching higher than the last, until the highest point where one can go no further. I stay there until I'm dragged back. It isn't a place, it's more a state. Well, not just at first, but after a little while, I began to understand that there were other things all round me waiting until I was able to perceive them. Think of a kitten. It has eyes, but at first it can't see with them. It's blind and had to learn to see. Well, that was what it was to me. Mortal eyes and ears were no good to me, but there was something corresponding to them that hadn't yet been developed - something that wasn't bodily at all. And little by little that grew... here were sensations of light... then of sound... then of colour... All very vague and unformulated. It was more the knowledge of things than seeing or hearing them. First it was light, a light that grew

stronger and clearer... then sand, great stretches of reddish sand... and here and there straight, long lines of water like canals -"

Seldon drew in his breath sharply. "Canals! That's interesting. Go on."

"But these things didn't matter - they didn't count any longer. The real things were the things I couldn't see yet - but I heard them... It was a sound like the rushing of wings... Somehow, I can't explain why, it was glorious! There's nothing like it here. And then came another glory - I saw them - the Wings! Oh, Seldon, the Wings!"

"But what were they? Men - angels - birds?"

"I don't know. I couldn't see - not yet. But the colour of them! Wing colour - we haven't got it here - it's a wonderful colour."

"Wing colour?" repeated Seldon. "What's it like?"

Hamer flung up his hand impatiently. "How can I tell you? Explain the colour blue to a blind person! It's a colour you've never seen - Wing colour!"

"Well?"

"Well? That's all. That's as far as I've got. But each time the coming back has been worse - more painful. I can't understand that. I'm convinced my body never leaves the bed. In this place I get to I'm convinced I've got no physical presence. Why should it hurt so confoundedly then?"

Seldon shook his head in silence.

"It's something awful - the coming back. The pull of it - then the pain, pain in every limb and every nerve, and my ears feel as though they were bursting. Then everything presses so, the weight of it all, the dreadful sense of imprisonment. I want light, air, space - above all space to breathe in! And I want freedom."

"And what," asked Seldon, "of all the other things that used to mean so much to you?"

"That's the worst of it. I care for them still as much as, if not more than, ever. And these things, comfort, luxury, pleasure, seem to pull opposite ways to the Wings. It's a perpetual struggle between them - and I can't see how it's going to end."

Seldon sat silent. The strange tale he had been listening to was fantastic enough in all truth. Was it all a delusion, a wild hallucination - or could it by any possibility be true? And if so, why Hamer, of all men...? Surely the materialist, the man who loved the flesh and denied the spirit, was the last man to see the sights of another world.

Across the table Hamer watched him anxiously.

"I suppose," said Seldon slowly, "that you can only wait. Wait and see what happens."

"I can't! I tell you I can't! Your saying that shows you don't understand. It's tearing me in two, this awful struggle - this killing, long-drawn-out fight between - between -" He hesitated.

"The flesh and the spirit?" suggested Seldon.

Hamer stared heavily in front of him. "I suppose one might call it that. Anyway, it's unbearable... I can't get free..."

Again Bernard Seldon shook his head. He was caught up in the grip of the inexplicable. He made one more suggestion.

"If I were you," he advised, "I would get hold of that cripple."

But as he went home, he muttered to himself: "Canals - I wonder."

III

Silas Hamer went out of the house the following morning with a new determination in his step. He had decided to take Seldon's advice and find the legless man. Yet inwardly he was convinced that his search would be in vain and that the man would have vanished as completely as though the earth had swallowed him up.

The dark buildings on either side of the passageway shut out the sunlight and left it dark and mysterious. Only in one place, halfway up it, there was a break in the wall, and through it there fell a shaft of golden light that illuminated with radiance a figure sitting on the ground. A figure - yes, it was the man!

The instrument of pipes leaned against the wall beside his crutches, and he was covering the paving stones with designs in coloured chalk. Two were completed, sylvan scenes of marvellous beauty and delicacy, swaying trees and a leaping brook that seemed alive.

And again Hamer doubted. Was this man a mere street musician, a pavement artist? Or was he something more...?

Suddenly the millionaire's self-control broke down, and he cried fiercely and angrily: "Who are you? For God's sake, who are you?"

The man's eyes met his, smiling.

"Why don't you answer? Speak, man, speak!"

Then he noticed that the man was drawing with incredible rapidity on a bare slab of stone. Hamer followed the movement with his eyes... A few bold strokes, and giant trees took form. Then, seated on a boulder... a man... playing an instrument of pipes. A man with a strangely beautiful face - and goat's legs...

The cripple's hand made a swift movement. The man still sat on the rock, but the goat's legs were gone. Again his eyes met Hamer's.

"They were evil," he said.

Hamer stared, fascinated. For the face before him was the face of the picture, but strangely and incredibly beautified... Purified from all but an intense and exquisite joy of living.

Hamer turned and almost fled down the passageway into the bright sunlight, repeating to himself incessantly:

"It's impossible. Impossible... I'm mad - dreaming!" But the face haunted him - the face of Pan...

He went into the park and sat on a bench. It was a deserted hour. A few nursemaids with their charges sat in the shade of the trees, and dotted here and there in the stretches of green, like islands in a sea, lay the recumbent forms of men...

The words "a wretched tramp" were to Hamer an epitome of misery. But suddenly, today, he envied them...

They seemed to him of all created beings the only free ones. The earth beneath them, the sky above them, the world to wander in... they were not hemmed in or chained.

Like a flash it came to him that that which bound him so remorselessly was the thing he had worshipped and prized above all others - wealth! He had thought it the strongest thing on earth, and now, wrapped round

by its golden strength, he saw the truth of his words. It was his money that held him in bondage...

But was it? Was that really it? Was there a deeper and more pointed truth that he had not seen? Was it the money or was it his own love of the money? He was bound in fetters of his own making; not wealth itself, but love of wealth was the chain.

He knew now clearly the two forces that were tearing at him, the warm composite strength of materialism that enclosed and surrounded him, and, opposed to it, the clear imperative call - he named it to himself the Call of the Wings.

And while the one fought and clung, the other scorned war and would not stoop to struggle. It only called - called unceasingly... He heard it so clearly that it almost spoke in words.

"You cannot make terms with Me," it seemed to say. "For I am above all other things. If you follow my call, you must give up all else and cut away the forces that hold you. For only the Free shall follow where I lead..."

"I can't," cried Hamer. "I can't..."

A few people turned to look at the big man who sat talking to himself.

So sacrifice was being asked of him, the sacrifice of that which was most dear to him, that which was part of himself.

Part of himself - he remembered the man without legs...

IV

"What in the name of Fortune brings you here?" asked Borrow.

Indeed the east-end mission was an unfamiliar back- ground to Hamer.

"I've listened to a good many sermons," said the millionaire, "all saying what could be done if you people had funds. I've just come to tell you this: you can have the funds."

"Very good of you," answered Borrow, with some surprise. "A big subscription, eh?"

Hamer smiled dryly. "I should say so. Just every penny I've got."

"What?"

Hamer rapped out details in a brisk, businesslike manner. Borrow's head was whirling.

"You - you mean to say that you're making over your entire fortune to be devoted to the relief of the poor in the East End, with myself appointed as trustee?"

"That's it."

"But why - why?"

"I can't explain," said Hamer slowly. "Remember our talk about visions last February? Well, a vision has got hold of me."

"It's splendid!" Borrow leaned forward, his eyes gleaming.

"There's nothing particularly splendid about it," said Hamer grimly. "I don't care a button about poverty in the East End. All they want is grit! I was poor enough - and I got out of it. But I've got to get rid of the money, and these tom-fool societies shan't get hold of it. You're a man I can trust. Feed bodies or souls with it - preferably the former. I've been hungry, but you can do as you like."

"There's never been such a thing known," stammered Borrow.

"The whole thing's done and finished with," continued Hamer. "The lawyers have fixed it up at last, and I've signed everything. I can tell you I've been busy this last fortnight. It's almost as difficult getting rid of a fortune as making one."

"But you - you've kept something?"

"Not a penny," said Hamer cheerfully. "At least - that's not quite true. I've just twopence in my pocket."

He laughed.

He said good-bye to his bewildered friend and walked out of the mission into the narrow evil-smelling streets. The words he had said so gaily just now came back to him with an aching sense of loss. "Not a penny!" Of all his vast wealth he had kept nothing. He was afraid now - afraid of poverty and hunger and cold. Sacrifice had no sweetness for him.

Yet behind it all he was conscious that the weight and menace of things had lifted; he was no longer oppressed and bound down. The severing of the chain had seared and torn him, but the vision of freedom was there to strengthen him. His material needs might dim the Call, but they could not deaden it, for he knew it to be a thing of immortality that could not die.

There was a touch of autumn in the air, and the wind blew chill. He felt the cold and shivered, and then, too, he was hungry - he had forgotten to have any lunch. It brought the future very near to him. It was incredible that he should have given it all up; the ease, the comfort, the warmth! His body cried out impotently... And then once again there came to him a glad and uplifting sense of freedom.

Hamer hesitated. He was near a tube station. He had twopence in his pocket. The idea came to him to journey by it to the park where he had watched the recumbent idlers a fortnight ago. Beyond this whim he did not plan for the future. He believed honestly enough now that he was mad - sane people did not act as he had done. Yet, if so, madness was a wonderful and amazing thing.

Yes, he would go now to the open country of the park, and there was a special significance to him in reaching it by tube. For the tube represented to him all the horrors of buried, shut-in life... He would ascend from its imprisonment free to the wide green and the trees that concealed the menace of the pressing houses.

The lift bore him swiftly and relentlessly downward. The air was heavy and lifeless. He stood at the extreme end of the platform, away from the mass of people. On his left was the opening of the tunnel from which the train, snakelike, would presently emerge. He felt the whole place to be subtly evil. There was no one near him but a hunched-up lad sitting on a seat, sunk, it seemed, in a drunken stupor.

In the distance came the faint menacing roar of the train. The lad rose from his seat and shuffled unsteadily to Hamer's side, where he stood on the edge of the platform peering into the tunnel.

Then - it happened so quickly as to be almost incredible - he lost his balance and fell...

A hundred thoughts rushed simultaneously to Hamer's brain. He saw a huddled heap run over by a motor 'bus, and heard a hoarse voice saying: "Dahn't yer blime yerself, guv'nor. Yer couldn't 'a done nothin'." And with that came the knowledge that this life could only be saved, if it were saved, by himself. There was no one else near, and the train was close... It all passed through his mind with lightning rapidity. He experienced a curious calm lucidity of thought.

He had one short second in which to decide, and he knew in that moment that his fear of Death was unabated. He was horribly afraid. And then - was it not a forlorn hope? A useless throwing away of two lives?

To the terrified spectators at the other end of the platform there seemed no gap between the boy's fall and the man's jump after him - and then the train, rushing round the curve of the tunnel, powerless to pull up in time.

Swiftly Hamer caught up the lad in his arms. No natural gallant impulse swayed him, his shivering flesh was but obeying the command of the alien spirit that called for sacrifice. With a last effort he flung the lad forward onto the platform, falling himself...

Then suddenly his fear died. The material world held him down no longer. He was free of his shackles. He fancied for a moment that he heard the joyous piping of Pan. Then - nearer and louder - swallowing up all else - came the glad rushing of innumerable Wings... enveloping and encircling him...

THE GIPSY

Macfarlane had often noticed that his friend, Dickie Carpenter, had a strange aversion to gipsies. He had never known the reason for it. But

when Dickie's engagement to Esther Lawes was broken off, there was a momentary tearing down of reserves between the two men.

Macfarlane had been engaged to the younger sister, Rachel, for about a year. He had known both the Lawes girls since they were children. Slow and cautious in all things, he had been unwilling to admit to himself the growing attraction that Rachel's childlike face and honest brown eyes had for him. Not a beauty like Esther, no! But unutterably truer and sweeter. With Dickie's engagement to the elder sister, the bond between the two men seemed to be drawn closer.

And now, after a few brief weeks, the engagement was off again, and Dickie, simple Dickie, hard-hit. So far in his young life all had gone so smoothly. His career in the navy had been well chosen. His craving for the sea was inborn. There was something of the Viking about him, primitive and direct, a nature on which subtleties of thought were wasted. He belonged to that inarticulate order of young Englishmen who dislike any form of emotion, and who find it peculiarly hard to explain their mental processes in words...

Macfarlane, that dour Scot, with a Celtic imagination hidden away somewhere, listened and smoked while his friend floundered along in a sea of words. He had known an unburdening was coming. But he had expected the subject matter to be different. To begin with, anyway, there was no mention of Esther Lawes. Only, it seemed, the story of a childish terror.

"It all started with a dream I had when I was a kid. Not a nightmare exactly. She - the gipsy, you know - would just come into any old dream

- even a good dream (or a kid's idea of what's good - a party and crackers and things). I'd be enjoying myself no end, and then I'd feel, I'd know, that if I looked up, she'd be there, standing as she always stood, watching me... With sad eyes, you know, as though she understood something that I didn't... Can't explain why it rattled me so - but it did! Every time! I used to wake up howling with terror, and my old nurse used to say: 'There! Master Dickie's had one of his gipsy dreams again!'"

"Ever been frightened by real gipsies?"

"Never saw one till later. That was queer, too. I was chasing a pup of mine. He'd run away. I got out through the garden door, and along one of the forest paths. We lived in the New Forest then, you know. I came to a sort of clearing at the end, with a wooden bridge over a stream. And just beside it a gipsy was standing - with a red handkerchief over her head - just the same as in my dream. And at once I was frightened! She looked at me, you know... Just the same look - as though she knew something I didn't, and was sorry about it... And then she said quite quietly, nodding her head at me: 'I shouldn't go that way, if I were you.' I can't tell you why, but it frightened me to death. I dashed past her onto the bridge. I suppose it was rotten. Anyway, it gave way, and I was chucked into the stream. It was running pretty fast, and I was nearly drowned. Beastly to be nearly drowned. I've never forgotten it. And I felt it had all to do with the gipsy..."

"Actually, though, she warned you against it?"

"I suppose you could put it like that." Dickie paused, then went on: "I've told you about this dream of mine, not because it has anything to do with what happened after (at least, I suppose it hasn't), but because it's the jumping-off point, as it were. You'll understand now what I mean by the 'gipsy feeling.' So I'll go on to that first night at the Lawes'. I'd just come back from the west coast then. It was awfully rum to be in England again. The Lawes were old friends of my people's. I hadn't seen the girls since I was about seven, but young Arthur was a great pal of mine, and after he died, Esther used to write to me, and send me out papers. Awfully jolly letters, she wrote! Cheered me up no end. I always wished I was a better hand at writing back. I was awfully keen to see her. It seemed odd to know a girl quite well from her letters, and not otherwise. Well, I went down to the Lawes' place first thing. Esther was away when I arrived, but was expected back that evening. I sat next to Rachel at dinner, and as I looked up and down the long table, a queer feeling came over me. I felt someone was watching me, and it made me uncomfortable. Then I saw her -"

"Saw who?"

"Mrs Haworth - what I'm telling you about."

It was on the tip of Macfarlane's tongue to say: "I thought you were telling me about Esther Lawes." But he remained silent, and Dickie went on.

"There was something about her quite different from all the rest. She was sitting next to old Lawes - listening to him very gravely with her head bent down. She had some of that red tulle stuff round her neck. It

had got torn, I think; anyway, it stood up behind her head like little tongues of flame... I said to Rachel: 'Who's that woman over there? Dark - with a red scarf!'"

"Do you mean Alistair Haworth? She's got a red scarf. But she's fair. Very fair."

"So she was, you know. Her hair was a lovely pale shining yellow. Yet I could have sworn positively she was dark. Queer what tricks one's eyes play on one... After dinner, Rachel introduced us, and we walked up and down in the garden. We talked about reincarnation..."

"Rather out of your line, Dickie!"

"I suppose it is. I remember saying that it seemed to be a jolly sensible way of accounting for how one seems to know some people right off - as if you'd met them before. She said: 'You mean lovers...' There was something queer about the way she said it - something soft and eager. It reminded me of something - but I couldn't remember what. We went on jawing a bit, and then old Lawes called us from the terrace - said Esther had come and wanted to see me. Mrs Haworth put her hand on my arm and said: 'You're going in?' 'Yes,' I said. 'I suppose we'd better,' and then - then -"

"Well?"

"It sounds such rot. Mrs Haworth said: 'I shouldn't go in if I were you...'" He paused. "It frightened me, you know. It frightened me badly. That's why I told you - about the dream... Because, you see, she said it just the

same way - quietly, as though she knew something I didn't. It wasn't just a pretty woman who wanted to keep me out in the garden with her. Her voice was just kind - and very sorry. Almost as though she knew what was to come... I suppose it was rude, but I turned and left her - almost ran to the house. It seemed like safety. I knew then that I'd been afraid of her from the first. It was a relief to see old Lawes. Esther was there beside him..." He hesitated a minute, and then muttered rather obscurely: 'There was no question - the moment I saw her, I knew I'd got it in the neck."

Macfarlane's mind flew swiftly to Esther Lawes. He had once heard her summed up as "Six foot one of Jewish perfection." A shrewd portrait, he thought, as he remembered her unusual height and the long slenderness of her, the marble whiteness of her face with its delicate down-drooping nose, and the black splendour of hair and eyes. Yes, he did not wonder that the boyish simplicity of Dickie had capitulated. Esther could never have made his own pulses beat one jot faster, but he admitted her magnificence.

"And then," continued Dickie, "we got engaged."

"At once?"

"Well, after about a week. It took her about a fortnight after that to find out that she didn't care after all..." He gave a short bitter laugh.

"It was the last evening before I went back to the old ship. I was coming back from the village through the woods - and then I saw her - Mrs Haworth, I mean. She had on a red tam-o'-shanter, and - just for a

minute, you know - it made me jump! I've told you about my dream, so you'll understand... Then we walked along a bit. Not that there was a word Esther couldn't have heard, you know..."

"No?" Macfarlane looked at his friend curiously. Strange how people told you things of which they themselves were unconscious!

"And then, when I was turning to go back to the house, she stopped me. She said: 'You'll be home soon enough. I shouldn't go back too soon if I were you...' And then I knew - that there was something beastly waiting for me... and... as soon as I got back, Esther met me and told me - that she'd found out she didn't really care..."

Macfarlane grunted sympathetically. "And Mrs Haworth?" he asked.

"I never saw her again - until tonight."

"Tonight?"

"Yes. At that doctor Johnny's nursing home. They had a look at my leg, the one that got messed up in that torpedo business. It's worried me a bit lately. The old chap advised an operation - it'll be quite a simple thing. Then as I left the place, I ran into a girl in a red jumper over her nurse's things, and she said: 'I wouldn't have that operation, if I were you...' Then I saw it was Mrs Haworth. She passed on so quickly I couldn't stop her. I met another nurse, and asked about her. But she said there wasn't anyone of that name in the home... Queer..."

"Sure it was her?"

"Oh! Yes, you see - she's very beautiful..." He paused, and then added: "I shall have the old op. of course - but - but in case my number should be up -"

"Rot!"

"Of course it's rot. But all the same I'm glad I told you about this gipsy business... You know, there's more of it if only I could remember..."

II

Macfarlane walked up the steep moorland road. He turned in at the gate of a house near the crest of the hill. Setting his jaw squarely, he pulled the bell.

"Is Mrs Haworth in?"

"Yes, sir. I'll tell her." The maid left him in a low long room, with windows that gave on the wildness of the moorland. He frowned a little. Was he making a colossal ass of himself?

Then he started. A low voice was singing overhead:

"The gipsy woman

Lives on the moor -"

The voice broke off. Macfarlane's heart beat a shade faster. The door opened.

The bewildering, almost Scandinavian fairness of her came as a shock. In spite of Dickie's description, he had imagined her gipsy-dark... And he suddenly remembered Dickie's words, and the peculiar tone of them. "You see, she's very beautiful..." Perfect unquestionable beauty is rare, and perfect unquestionable beauty was what Alistair Haworth possessed.

He caught himself up, and advanced towards her. "I'm afraid you don't know me from Adam. I got your address from the Lawes. But - I'm a friend of Dickie Carpenter's."

She looked at him closely for a minute or two. Then she said: "I was going out. Up on the moor. Will you come too?"

She pushed open the window and stepped out on the hillside. He followed her. A heavy, rather foolish-looking man was sitting in a basket chair smoking.

"My husband! We're going out on the moor, Maurice. And then Mr Macfarlane will come back to lunch with us. You will, won't you?"

"Thanks very much." He followed her easy stride up the hill, and thought to himself: "Why? Why, on God's earth, marry that?"

Alistair made her way to some rocks. "We'll sit here. And you shall tell me - what you came to tell me."

"You knew?"

"I always know when bad things are coming. It is bad, isn't it? About Dickie?"

"He underwent a slight operation - quite successfully. But his heart must have been weak. He died under the anaesthetic."

What he expected to see on her face, he scarcely knew - hardly that look of utter eternal weariness... He heard her murmur: "Again - to wait - so long - so long..." She looked up: "Yes, what were you going to say?"

"Only this. Someone warned him against this operation. A nurse. He thought it was you. Was it?"

She shook her head. "No, it wasn't me. But I've got a cousin who is a nurse. She's rather like me in a dim light. I dare say that was it." She looked up at him again. "It doesn't matter, does it?" And then suddenly her eyes widened. She drew in her breath. "Oh!" she said. "Oh! How funny! You don't understand..."

Macfarlane was puzzled. She was still staring at him.

"I thought you did... You should. You look as though you'd got it, too..."

"Got what?"

"The gift - curse - call it what you like. I believe you have. Look hard at that hollow in the rocks. Don't think of anything, just look... Ah!" she marked his slight start. "Well - you saw something?"

"It must have been imagination. Just for a second I saw it full of - blood!"

She nodded. "I knew you had it. That's the place where the old sun-worshippers sacrificed victims. I knew that before anyone told me. And there are times when I know just how they felt about it - almost as though I'd been there myself... And there's something about the moor that makes me feel as though I were coming back home... Of course it's natural that I should have the gift. I'm a Ferguesson. There's second sight in the family. And my mother was a medium until my father married her. Cristine was her name. She was rather celebrated."

"Do you mean by 'the gift' the power of being able to see things before they happen?"

"Yes, forwards or backwards - it's all the same. For instance, I saw you wondering why I married Maurice - oh! yes, you did! It's simply because I've always known that there's something dreadful hanging over him... I

wanted to save him from it... Women are like that. With my gift, I ought to be able to prevent it happening... if one ever can... I couldn't help Dickie. And Dickie wouldn't understand... He was afraid. He was very young."

"Twenty-two."

"And I'm thirty. But I didn't mean that. There are so many ways of being divided, length and height and breadth... but to be divided by time is the worst way of all..." She fell into a long brooding silence.

The low peal of a gong from the house below roused them.

At lunch, Macfarlane watched Maurice Haworth. He was undoubtedly madly in love with his wife. There was the unquestioning happy fondness of a dog in his eyes. Macfarlane marked also the tenderness of her response, with its hint of maternity. After lunch he took his leave.

"I'm staying down at the inn for a day or so. May I come and see you again? Tomorrow, perhaps?"

"Of course. But -"

"But what -"

She brushed her hand quickly across her eyes. "I don't know. I - I fancied that we shouldn't meet again - that's all... Good-bye."

He went down the road slowly. In spite of himself, a cold hand seemed tightening round his heart. Nothing in her words, of course, but -

A motor swept round the corner. He flattened himself against the hedge... only just in time. A curious greyish pallor crept across his face...

III

"Good Lord, my nerves are in a rotten state," muttered Macfarlane, as he awoke the following morning. He reviewed the events of the afternoon before dispassionately. The motor, the short-cut to the inn and the sudden mist that had made him lose his way with the knowledge that a dangerous bog was no distance off. Then the chimney pot that had fallen off the inn, and the smell of burning in the night which he had traced to a cinder on his hearth rug. Nothing in it all! Nothing at all - but for her words, and that deep unacknowledged certainty in his heart that she knew...

He flung off the bedclothes with sudden energy. He must go up and see her first thing. That would break the spell. That is, if he got there safely... Lord, what a fool he was!

He could eat little breakfast. Ten o'clock saw him starting up the road. At ten-thirty his hand was on the bell. Then, and not till then, he permitted himself to draw a long breath of relief.

"Is Mrs Haworth in?"

It was the same elderly woman who had opened the door before. But her face was different - ravaged with grief.

"Oh! sir. Oh! sir. You haven't heard, then?"

"Heard what?"

"Miss Alistair, the pretty lamb. It was her tonic. She took it every night. The poor captain is beside himself; he's nearly mad. He took the wrong bottle off the shelf in the dark... They sent for the doctor, but he was too late -"

And swiftly there recurred to Macfarlane the words: "I've always known there was something dreadful hanging over him. I ought to be able to prevent it happening - if one ever can -" Ah! but one couldn't cheat Fate... Strange fatality of vision that had destroyed where it sought to save...

The old servant went on: "My pretty lamb! So sweet and gentle she was, and so sorry for anything in trouble. Couldn't bear anyone to be hurt." She hesitated, then added: "Would you like to go up and see her, sir? I think, from what she said, that you must have known her long ago. A very long time ago, she said..."

Macfarlane followed the old woman up the stairs into the room over the drawing room where he had heard the voice singing the day before. There was stained glass at the top of the windows. It threw a red light on the head of the bed... A gipsy with a red handkerchief over her head... Nonsense, his nerves were playing tricks again. He took a long last look at Alistair Haworth.

IV

"There's a lady to see you, sir."

"Eh?" Macfarlane looked at the landlady abstractedly. "Oh! I beg your pardon, Mrs Rowse, I've been seeing ghosts."

"Not really, sir? There's queer things to be seen on the moor after nightfall. I know. There's the white lady, and the Devil's blacksmith, and the sailor and the gipsy -"

"What's that? A sailor and a gipsy?"

"So they say, sir. It was quite a tale in my young days. Crossed in love they were, a while back... But they've not walked for many a long day now."

"No? I wonder if - perhaps - they will again now..."

"Lor'! sir, what things you do say! About that young lady -"

"What young lady?"

"The one that's waiting to see you. She's in the parlour. Miss Lawes, she said her name was."

"Oh!"

Rachel! He felt a curious feeling of contraction, a shifting of perspective. He had been peeping through at another world. He had forgotten Rachel, for Rachel belonged to this life only... Again that curious shifting of perspective, that slipping back to a world of three dimensions only.

He opened the parlour door. Rachel - with her honest brown eyes. And suddenly, like a man awakening from a dream, a warm rush of glad reality swept over him. He was alive - alive! He thought: "There's only one life one can be sure about! This one!"

"Rachel!" he said, and, lifting her chin, he kissed her lips.

It was from William P. Ryan, American newspaper correspondent, that I first heard of the affair. I was dining with him in London on the eve of his return to New York and happened to mention that on the morrow I was going down to Folbridge.

He looked up and said sharply: "Folbridge, Cornwall?"

Now only about one person in a thousand knows that there is a Folbridge in Cornwall. They always take it for granted that the Folbridge, Hampshire, is meant. So Ryan's knowledge aroused my curiosity.

"Yes," I said. "Do you know it?"

He merely replied that he was darned. He then asked if I happened to know a house called Trearne down there.

My interest increased.

"Very well indeed. In fact, it's to Trearne I'm going. It's my sister's house."

"Well," said William P. Ryan. "If that doesn't beat the band!"

I suggested that he should cease making cryptic remarks and explain himself.

"Well," he said. "To do that I shall have to go back to an experience of mine at the beginning of the war."

I sighed. The events which I am relating took place in 1921. To be reminded of the war was the last thing any man wanted. We were, thank God, beginning to forget... Besides, William P. Ryan on his war experiences was apt, as I knew, to be unbelievably long-winded.

But there was no stopping him now.

"At the start of the war, as I dare say you know, I was in Belgium for my paper - moving about some. Well, there's a little village - I'll call it X. A one-horse place if there ever was one, but there's quite a big convent there. Nuns in white what do you call 'em - I don't know the name of the order. Anyway, it doesn't matter. Well, this little burg was right in the way of the German advance. The Uhlans arrived -"

I shifted uneasily. William P. Ryan lifted a hand reassuringly.

"It's all right," he said. "This isn't a German atrocity story. It might have been, perhaps, but it isn't. As a matter of fact, the boot's on the other leg. The Huns made for that convent - they got there and the whole thing blew up."

"Oh!" I said, rather startled.

"Odd business, wasn't it? Of course, offhand, I should say the Huns had been celebrating and had monkeyed round with their own explosives. But it seems they hadn't anything of that kind with them. They weren't

the high explosive johnnies. Well, then, I ask you, what should a pack of nuns know about high explosive? Some nuns, I should say!"

"It is odd," I agreed.

"I was interested in hearing the peasants' account of the matter. They'd got it all cut and dried. According to them it was a slap-up, one hundred percent efficient first-class modern miracle. It seems one of the nuns had got something of a reputation - a budding saint - went into trances and saw visions. And according to them she worked the stunt. She called down the lightning to blast the impious Hun - and it blasted him, all right - and everything else within range. A pretty efficient miracle, that!

"I never really got at the truth of the matter - hadn't time. But miracles were all the rage just then - angels at Mons and all that. I wrote up the thing, put in a bit of sob stuff, and pulled the religious stop out well, and sent it to my paper. It went down very well in the States. They were liking that kind of thing just then.

"But (I don't know if you'll understand this) in writing, I got kind of interested. I felt I'd like to know what really had happened. There was nothing to see at the spot itself. Two walls still left standing, and on one of them was a black powder mark that was the exact shape of a great hound. The peasants round about were scared to death of that mark. They called it the Hound of Death and they wouldn't pass that way after dark.

"Superstition's always interesting. I felt I'd like to see the lady who worked the stunt. She hadn't perished, it seemed. She'd gone to England with a batch of other refugees. I took the trouble to trace her. I found she'd been sent to Trearne, Folbridge, Cornwall."

I nodded.

"My sister took in a lot of Belgian refugees the beginning of the war. About twenty."

"Well, I always meant, if I had time, to look up the lady. I wanted to hear her own account of the disaster. Then, what with being busy and one thing and another, it slipped my memory. Cornwall's a bit out of the way anyhow. In fact, I'd forgotten the whole thing till your mentioning Folbridge just now brought it back."

"I must ask my sister," I said. "She may have heard something about it. Of course, the Belgians have all been repatriated long ago."

"Naturally. All the same, in case your sister does know anything, I'll be glad if you'd pass it on to me."

"Of course I will," I said heartily.

And that was that.

II

It was the second day after my arrival at Trearne that the story recurred to me. My sister and I were having tea on the terrace.

"Kitty," I said. "Didn't you have a nun among your Belgians?"

"You don't mean Sister Marie Angelique, do you?"

"Possibly I do," I said cautiously. "Tell me about her."

"Oh, my dear! She was the most uncanny creature. She's still here, you know."

"What? In the house?"

"No, no in the village. Dr Rose - you remember Dr Rose?"

I shook my head.

"I remember an old man of about eighty-three."

"Dr Laird. Oh! He died. Dr Rose has only been here a few years. He's quite young and very keen on new ideas. He took the most enormous interest in Sister Marie Angelique. She has hallucinations and things, you know, and apparently is most frightfully interesting from a medical point of view. Poor thing, she'd nowhere to go - and really was in my opinion quite potty - only impressive, if you know what I mean - well, as I

say, she'd nowhere to go, and Dr Rose very kindly fixed her up in the village. I believe he's writing a monograph or whatever it is that doctors write, about her."

She paused and then said: "But what do you know about her?"

"I heard a rather curious story."

I passed on the story as I had received it from Ryan. Kitty was very much interested.

"She looks the sort of person who could blast you - if you know what I mean," she said.

"I really think," I said, my curiosity heightened, "that I must see this young woman."

"Do. I'd like to know what you think of her. Go and see Dr Rose first. Why not walk down to the village after tea?"

I accepted the suggestion.

I found Dr Rose at home and introduced myself. He seemed a pleasant young man, yet there was something about his personality that rather repelled me. It was too forceful to be altogether agreeable.

The moment I mentioned Sister Marie Angelique he stiffened to attention. He was evidently keenly interested. I gave him Ryan's account of the matter.

"Ah!" he said thoughtfully. "That explains a great deal."

He looked up quickly at me and went on.

"The case is really an extraordinarily interesting one. The woman arrived here having evidently suffered some severe mental shock. She was in a state of great mental excitement also. She was given to hallucinations of a most startling character. Her personality is most unusual. Perhaps you would like to come with me and call upon her. She is really well worth seeing."

I agreed readily.

We set out together. Our objective was a small cottage on the outskirts of the village. Folbridge is a most picturesque place. It lies in the mouth of the river Fol mostly on the east bank; the west bank is too precipitous for building, though a few cottages do cling to the cliffside there. The doctor's own cottage was perched on the extreme edge of the cliff on the west side. From it you looked down on the big waves lashing against the black rocks.

The little cottage to which we were now proceeding lay inland out of sight of the sea.

"The district nurse lives here," explained Dr Rose. "I have arranged for Sister Marie Angelique to board with her. It is just as well that she should be under skilled supervision."

"Is she quite normal in her manner?" I asked curiously.

"You can judge for yourself in a minute," he replied, smiling.

The district nurse, a dumpy, pleasant little body, was just setting out on her bicycle when we arrived.

"Good evening, nurse; how's your patient?" called out the doctor.

"She's much as usual, doctor. Just sitting there with her hands folded and her mind far away. Often enough she'll not answer when I speak to her, though for the matter of that it's little enough English she understands even now."

Rose nodded, and as the nurse bicycled away, he went up to the cottage door, rapped sharply and entered.

Sister Marie Angelique was lying in a long chair near the window. She turned her head as we entered.

It was a strange face - pale, transparent-looking, with enormous eyes. There seemed to be an infinitude of tragedy in those eyes.

"Good evening, my sister," said the doctor in French.

"Good evening, M. le docteur."

"Permit me to introduce a friend, Mr Anstruther."

I bowed and she inclined her head with a faint smile.

"And how are you today?" inquired the doctor, sitting down beside her.

"I am much the same as usual." She paused and then went on. "Nothing seems real to me. Are they days that pass - or months - or years? I hardly know. Only my dreams seem real to me."

"You still dream a lot, then?"

"Always - always - and, you understand? - the dreams seem more real than life."

"You dream of your own country - of Belgium?"

She shook her head.

"No. I dream of a country that never existed - never. But you know this, M. le docteur. I have told you many times." She stopped and then said abruptly: "But perhaps this gentleman is also a doctor - a doctor perhaps for the diseases of the brain?"

"No, no." Rose was reassuring, but as he smiled, I noticed how extraordinarily pointed his canine teeth were, and it occurred to me that there was something wolflike about the man. He went on:

"I thought you might be interested to meet Mr Anstruther. He knows something of Belgium. He has lately been hearing news of your convent."

Her eyes turned to me. A faint flush crept into her cheeks.

"It's nothing, really," I hastened to explain. "But I was dining the other evening with a friend who was describing the ruined walls of the convent to me."

"So it was ruined!"

It was a soft exclamation, uttered more to herself than to us. Then looking at me once more, she asked hesitatingly: "Tell me, monsieur, did your friend say how - in what way - it was ruined?"

"It was blown up," I said, and added: "The peasants are afraid to pass that way at night."

"Why are they afraid?"

"Because of a black mark on a ruined wall. They have a superstitious fear of it."

She leaned forward.

"Tell me, monsieur - quick - quick - tell me! What is that mark like?"

"It has the shape of a huge hound," I answered. "The peasants call it the Hound of Death."

"Ah!"

A shrill cry burst from her lips.

"It is true then - it is true. All that I remember is true. It is not some black nightmare. It happened! It happened!"

"What happened, my sister?" asked the doctor in a low voice.

She turned to him eagerly.

"I remembered. There on the steps, I remembered. I remembered the way of it. I used the power as we used to use it. I stood on the altar steps and I bade them to come no farther. I told them to depart in peace. They would not listen, they came on although I warned them. And so -" She leaned forward and made a curious gesture. "And so I loosed the Hound of Death on them..."

She lay back on her chair shivering all over, her eyes closed.

The doctor rose, fetched a glass from a cupboard, half filled it with water, added a drop or two from a little bottle which he produced from his pocket, then took the glass to her.

"Drink this," he said authoritatively.

She obeyed - mechanically as it seemed. Her eyes looked far away as though they contemplated some inner vision of her own.

"But then it is all true," she said. "Everything. The City of the Circles, the People of the Crystal - everything. It is all true."

"It would seem so," said Rose.

His voice was low and soothing, clearly designed to encourage and not to disturb her train of thought.

"Tell me about the City," he said. "The City of Circles, I think you said?"

She answered absently and mechanically.

"Yes - there were three circles. The first circle for the chosen, the second for the priestesses, and the outer circle for the priests."

"And in the center?"

She drew her breath sharply and her voice sank to a tone of indescribable awe.

"The House of the Crystal..."

As she breathed the words, her right hand went to her forehead and her finger traced some figure there.

Her figure seemed to grow more rigid, her eyes closed, she swayed a little - then suddenly she sat upright with a jerk, as though she had suddenly awakened.

"What is it?" she said confusedly. "What have I been saying?"

"It is nothing," said Rose. "You are tired. You want to rest. We will leave you."

She seemed a little dazed as we took our departure.

"Well," said Rose when we were outside. "What do you think of it?"

He shot a sharp glance sideways at me.

"I suppose her mind must be totally unhinged," I said slowly.

"It struck you like that?"

"No - as a matter of fact, she was - well, curiously convincing. When listening to her I had the impression that she actually had done what she claimed to do - worked a kind of gigantic miracle. Her belief that she did so seems genuine enough. That is why -"

"That is why you say her mind must be unhinged. Quite so. But now approach the matter from another angle. Supposing that she did actually work that miracle - supposing that she did, personally, destroy a building and several hundred human beings."

"By the mere exercise of will?" I said with a smile.

"I should not put it quite like that. You will agree that one person could destroy a multitude by touching a switch which controlled a system of mines."

"Yes, but that is mechanical."

"True, that is mechanical, but it is, in essence, the harnessing and controlling of natural forces. The thunderstorm and the powerhouse are, fundamentally, the same thing."

"Yes, but to control the thunderstorm we have to use mechanical means."

Rose smiled.

"I am going off at a tangent now. There is a substance called wintergreen. It occurs in nature in vegetable form. It can also be built up by man synthetically and chemically in the laboratory."

"Well?"

"My point is that there are often two ways of arriving at the same result. Ours is, admittedly, the synthetic way. There might be another. The extraordinary results arrived at by Indian fakirs, for instance, cannot be explained away in any easy fashion. The things we call supernatural are not necessarily supernatural at all. An electric flashlight would be supernatural to a savage. The supernatural is only the natural of which the laws are not yet understood."

"You mean?" I asked, fascinated.

"That I cannot entirely dismiss the possibility that a human being might be able to tap some vast destructive force and use it to further his or her ends. The means by which this was accomplished might seem to us supernatural - but would not be so in reality."

I stared at him.

He laughed.

"It's a speculation, that's all," he said lightly. "Tell me. Did you notice a gesture she made when she mentioned the House of the Crystal?"

"She put her hand to her forehead."

"Exactly. And traced a circle there. Very much as a Catholic makes the sign of the cross. Now, I will tell you something rather interesting, Mr Anstruther. The word crystal having occurred so often in my patient's rambling, I tried an experiment. I borrowed a crystal from someone and produced it unexpectedly one day to test my patient's reaction to it."

"Well?"

"Well, the result was very curious and suggestive. Her whole body stiffened. She stared at it as though unable to believe her eyes. Then she slid to her knees in front of it, murmured a few words - and fainted."

"What were the few words?"

"Very curious ones. She said: 'The Crystal! Then the Faith still lives!'"

"Extraordinary!"

"Suggestive, is it not? Now the next curious thing. When she came round from her faint, she had forgotten the whole thing. I showed her the crystal and asked her if she knew what it was. She replied that she supposed it was a crystal such as fortunetellers used. I asked her if she had ever seen one before? She replied: 'Never, M. e docteur.' But I saw a puzzled look in her eyes. 'What troubles you, my sister?' I asked. She replied: 'Because it is so strange. I have never seen a crystal before and yet - it seems to me that I know it well. There is something - if only I could remember...' The effort at memory was obviously so distressing to her that I forbade her to think any more. That was two weeks ago. I have purposely been biding my time. Tomorrow I shall proceed to a further experiment."

"With the crystal?"

"With the crystal. I shall get her to gaze into it. I think the result ought to be interesting."

"What do you expect to get hold of?" I asked curiously.

The words were idle ones but they had an unlooked-for result. Rose stiffened, flushed, and his manner when he spoke had changed insensibly. It was more formal, more professional.

"Light on certain mental disorders imperfectly understood. Sister Marie Angelique is a most interesting study."

So Rose's interest was purely professional? I wondered.

"Do you mind if I come along, too?" I asked.

It may have been my fancy, but I thought he hesitated before he replied. I had a sudden intuition that he did not want me.

"Certainly. I can see no objection."

He added:

"I suppose you're not going to be down here very long?"

"Only till the day after tomorrow."

I fancied that the answer pleased him. His brow cleared and he began talking of some recent experiments carried out on guinea pigs.

III

I met the doctor by appointment the following afternoon, and we went together to Sister Marie Angelique. Today the doctor was all geniality.

He was anxious, I thought, to efface the impression he had made the day before.

"You must not take what I said too seriously," he observed, laughing. "I shouldn't like you to believe me a dabbler in occult sciences. The worst of me is I have an infernal weakness for making out a case."

"Really?"

"Yes, and the more fantastic it is, the better I like it."

He laughed as a man laughs at an amusing weakness.

When we arrived at the cottage, the district nurse had something she wanted to consult Rose about, so I was left with Sister Marie Angelique.

I saw her scrutinizing me closely. Presently she spoke.

"The good nurse here, she tells me that you are the brother of the kind lady at the big house where I was brought when I came from Belgium?"

"Yes," I said.

"She was very kind to me. She is good."

She was silent, as though following out some train of thought. Then she said:

"M. le docteur, he, too, is a good man?"

I was a little embarrassed.

"Why, yes. I mean - I think so."

"Ah!" She paused and then said: "Certainly he has been very kind to me."

"I'm sure he has."

She looked up at me sharply.

"Monsieur - you - you who speak to me now - do you believe that I am mad?"

"Why, my sister, such an idea never -"

She shook her head slowly - interrupting my protest.

"Am I mad? I do not know - the things I remember - the things I forget..."

She sighed, and at that moment Rose entered the room.

He greeted her cheerily and explained what he wanted her to do.

"Certain people, you see, have a gift for seeing things in a crystal. I fancy you might have such a gift, my sister."

She looked distressed.

"No, no, I cannot do that. To try to read the future - that is sinful."

Rose was taken aback. It was the nun's point of view for which he had not allowed. He changed his ground cleverly.

"One should not look into the future. You are quite right. But to look into the past - that is different."

"The past?"

"Yes - there are many strange things in the past. Flashes come back to one - they are seen for a moment - then gone again. Do not seek to see anything in the crystal, since that is not allowed you. Just take it in your hands - so. Look into it - look deep. Yes - deeper - deeper still. You remember, do you not? You remember. You hear me speaking to you. You can answer my questions. Can you not hear me?"

Sister Marie Angelique had taken the crystal as bidden, handling it with a curious reverence. Then, as she gazed into it, her eyes became blank and unseeing, her head dropped. She seemed to sleep.

Gently the doctor took the crystal from her and put it on the table. He raised the corner of her eyelid. Then he came and sat by me.

"We must wait till she wakes. It won't be long, I fancy."

He was right. At the end of five minutes, Sister Marie Angelique stirred. Her eyes opened dreamily.

"Where am I?"

"You are here - at home. You have had a little sleep. You have dreamt, have you not?"

She nodded.

"Yes, I have dreamt."

"You have dreamt of the Crystal?"

"Yes."

"Tell us about it."

"You will think me mad, M. le docteur. For see you, in my dream, the Crystal was a holy emblem. I even figured to myself a second Christ, a Teacher of the Crystal who died for his faith, his followers hunted down - persecuted... But the faith endured."

"The faith endured?"

"Yes - for fifteen thousand full moons - I mean, for fifteen thousand years."

"How long was a full moon?"

"Thirteen ordinary moons. Yes, it was in the fifteenth thousandth full moon - of course, I was a Priestess of the Fifth Sign in the House of the Crystal. It was in the first days of the coming of the Sixth Sign..."

Her brows drew together, a look of fear passed over her head.

"Too soon," she murmured. "Too soon. A mistake... Ah, yes! I remember! The Sixth Sign!"

She half sprang to her feet, then dropped back, passing her hand over her face and murmuring:

"But what am I saying? I am raving. These things never happened."

"Now don't distress yourself."

But she was looking at him in anguished perplexity.

"M. le docteur, I do not understand. Why should I have these dreams - these fancies? I was only sixteen when I entered the religious life. I have never travelled. Yet I dream of cities, of strange people, of strange customs. Why?" She pressed both hands to her head.

"Have you ever been hypnotized, my sister? Or been in a state of trance?"

"I have never been hypnotized, M. le docteur. For the other, when at prayer in the chapel, my spirit has often been caught up from my body, and I have been as one dead for many hours. It was undoubtedly a

blessed state, the Reverend Mother said - a state of grace. Ah, yes!" She caught her breath. "I remember; we, too, called it a state of grace."

"I would like to try an experiment, my sister." Rose spoke in a matter-of-fact voice. "It may dispel those painful half-recollections. I will ask you to gaze once more in the crystal. I will then say a certain word to you. You will answer with another. We will continue in this way until you become tired. Concentrate your thoughts on the crystal, not upon the words."

As I once more unwrapped the crystal and gave it into Sister Marie Angelique's hands, I noticed the reverent way her hands touched it. Reposing on the black velvet, it lay between her slim palms. Her wonderful deep eyes gazed into it. There was a short silence, then the doctor said: "Hound."

Immediately Sister Marie Angelique answered: "Death."

IV

I do not propose to give a full account of the experiment. Many unimportant and meaningless words were purposely introduced by the doctor. Other words he repeated several times, sometimes getting the same answer to them, sometimes a different one.

That evening in the doctor's little cottage on the cliffs we discussed the result of the experiment.

He cleared his throat and drew his notebook closer to him.

"These results are very interesting - very curious. In answer to the words 'Sixth Sign,' we get variously Destruction, Purple, Hound, Power, then again Destruction, and finally Power. Later, as you may have noticed, I reversed the method, with the following results. In answer to Destruction, I get Hound; to Purple, Power; to Hound, Death again, and to Power, Hound. That all holds together, but on a second repetition of Destruction, I get Sea, which appears utterly irrelevant. To the words 'Fifth Sign,' I get Blue, Thoughts, Bird, Blue again, and finally the rather suggestive phrase Opening of mind to mind. From the fact that 'Fourth Sign' elicits the word Yellow, and later Light, and that 'First Sign' is answered by Blood, I deduce that each Sign had a particular col- our, and possibly a particular symbol, that of the Fifth Sign being a bird, and that of the Sixth a hound. However, I surmise that the Fifth Sign represented what is familiarly known as telepathy - the opening of mind to mind. The Sixth Sign undoubtedly stands for the Power of Destruction."

"What is the meaning of Sea?"

"That I confess I cannot explain. I introduced the word later and got the ordinary answer of Boat. To Seventh Sign I got first Life, the second time Love. To Eighth Sign, I got the answer None. I take it therefore that Seven was the sum and number of the signs."

"But the Seventh was not achieved," I said on a sudden inspiration. "Since through the Sixth came Destruction!"

"Ah! You think so? But we are taking these - mad ramblings very seriously. They are really only interesting from a medical point of view."

"Surely they will attract the attention of psychic investigators."

The doctor's eyes narrowed. "My dear sir, I have no intention of making them public."

"Then your interest?"

"Is purely personal. I shall make notes on the case, of course."

"I see." But for the first time I felt, like the blind man, that I didn't see at all. I rose to my feet.

"Well, I'll wish you good night, doctor. I'm off to town again tomorrow."

"Ah!" I fancied there was satisfaction, relief perhaps, behind the exclamation.

"I wish you good luck with your investigations," I continued lightly. "Don't loose the Hound of Death on me next time we meet!"

His hand was in mine as I spoke, and I felt the start it gave. He recovered himself quickly. His lips drew back from his long pointed teeth in a smile.

"For a man who loved power, what a power that would be!" he said. "To hold every human being's life in the hollow of your hand!"

And his smile broadened.

V

That was the end of my direct connection with the affair. Later, the doctor's notebook and diary came into my hands. I will reproduce the few scanty entries in it here, though you will understand that it did not really come into my possession until sometime afterwards.

Aug. 5th. Have discovered that by "the Chosen," Sister M.A. means those who reproduced the race. Apparently they were held in the highest honour, and exalted above the Priesthood. Contrast this with early Christians.

Aug. 7th. Persuaded Sister M.A. to let me hypnotize her. Succeeded in inducing hypnotic sleep and trance, but no rapport established.

Aug. 9th. Have there been civilizations in the past to which ours is as nothing? Strange if it should be so, and I the only man with the clue to it...

Aug. 12th. Sister M.A. not at all amenable to suggestion when hypnotized. Yet state of trance easily induced. Cannot understand it.

Aug. 13th. Sister M.A. mentioned today that in "state of grace" the "gate must be closed, lest another should command the body." Interesting - but baffling.

Aug. 18th. So the First Sign is none other than... (words erased here)... then how many centuries will it take to reach the Sixth? But if there should be a shortcut to Power...

Aug. 20th. Have arranged for M.A. to come here with Nurse. Have told her it is necessary to keep patient under morphia. Am I mad? Or shall I be the Superman, with the Power of Death in my hands?

(Here the entries cease.)

VI

It was, I think, on August 29 that I received the letter. It was directed to me, care of my sister-in-law, in a sloping foreign handwriting. I opened it with some curiosity. It ran as follows:

Cher Monsieur, - I have seen you but twice, but I have felt that I could trust you. Whether my dreams are real or not, they have grown clearer of late... And, monsieur, one thing at all events, the Hound of Death is no dream... In the days I told you of (whether they are real or not, I do not know) He Who was Guardian of the Crystal revealed the Sixth Sign to the People too soon... Evil entered into their hearts. They had the power to slay at will - and they slew without justice - in anger. They were drunk with the lust of Power. When we saw this, we who were yet pure, we knew that once again we should not complete the Circle and come to the Sign of Everlasting Life. He who would have been the next Guardian of the Crystal was bidden to act. That the old might die, and the new, after endless ages, might come again, he loosed the Hound of Death upon the sea (being careful not to close the Circle), and the sea rose up in the shape of a Hound and swallowed the land utterly...

Once before I remembered this - on the altar steps in Belgium...

The Dr Rose, he is of the Brotherhood. He knows the First Sign, and the form of the Second, though its meaning is hidden to all save a chosen few. He would learn of me the Sixth. I have withstood him so far - but I grow weak. Monsieur, it is not well that a man should come to power before his time. Many centuries must go by ere the world is ready to have the power of death delivered into its hand... I beseech of you,

monsieur, you who love goodness and truth, to help me... before it is too late.

Your sister in Christ,

Marie Angelique.

I let the paper fall. The solid earth beneath me seemed a little less solid than usual. Then I began to rally. The poor woman's belief, genuine enough, had almost affected me! One thing was clear. Dr Rose, in his zeal for a case, was grossly abusing his professional standing. I would run down and -

Suddenly I noticed a letter from Kitty among my other correspondence. I tore it open. I read:

Such an awful thing has happened. You remember Dr Rose's little cottage on the cliff? It was swept away by a landslide last night, and the doctor and that poor nun, Sister Marie Angelique, were killed. The debris on the beach is too awful - all piled up in a fantastic mass - from a distance it looks like a great hound...

The letter dropped from my hand.

The other facts may be coincidence. A Mr Rose, whom I discovered to be a wealthy relative of the doctor's, died suddenly that same night - it was said struck by lightning. As far as was known, no thunderstorm had occurred in the neighbourhood. but one or two people declared they had heard one peal of thunder. He had an electric burn on him "of a curious shape." His will left everything to his nephew, Dr Rose.

Now, supposing that Dr Rose succeeded in obtaining the secret of the Sixth Sign from Sister Marie Angelique. I had always felt him to be an unscrupulous man - he would not shrink at taking his uncle's life if he were sure it could not be brought home to him. But one sentence of Sister Marie Angelique's letter rings in my brain: "... being careful not to close the Circle..." Dr Rose did not exercise that care - was perhaps unaware of the steps to take, or even of the need for them. So the Force he employed returned, completing its circuit...

But of course it is all nonsense! Everything can be accounted for quite naturally. That the doctor believed in Sister Marie Angelique's hallucinations merely proves that his mind, too, was slightly unbalanced.

Yet sometimes I dream of a continent under the seas where men once lived and attained to a degree of civilization far ahead of ours...

Or did Sister Marie Angelique remember backwards - as some say is possible - and is this City of the Circles in the future and not the past?

Nonsense - of course the whole thing was mere hallucination!

THE LAMP

It was undoubtedly an old house. The whole square was old, with that disapproving dignified old age often met with in a cathedral town. But No. 19 gave the impression of an elder among elders; it had a veritable patriarchal solemnity; it towered greyest of the grey, haughtiest of the haughty, chillest of the chill. Austere, forbidding, and stamped with that particular desolation attaching to all houses that have been long untenanted, it reigned above the other dwellings.

In any other town it would have been freely labelled "haunted," but Weyminster was averse from ghosts and considered them hardly respectable except as the appanage of a "county family." So No. 19 was never alluded to as a haunted house; but nevertheless it remained, year after year, "To Be Let or Sold."

Mrs Lancaster looked at the house with approval as she drove up with the talkative house agent, who was in an unusually hilarious mood at the idea of getting No. 19 off his books. He inserted the key in the door without ceasing his appreciative comments.

"How long has the house been empty?" inquired Mrs Lancaster, cutting short his flow of language rather brusquely.

Mr Raddish (of Raddish and Foplow) became slightly confused.

"Er - er - some time," he remarked blandly.

"So I should think," said Mrs Lancaster dryly.

The dimly lighted hall was chill with a sinister chill. A more imaginative woman might have shivered, but this woman happened to be eminently practical. She was tall, with much dark brown hair just tinged with grey and rather cold blue eyes.

She went over the house from attic to cellar, asking a pertinent question from time to time. The inspection over, she came back into one of the front rooms looking out on the square and faced the agent with a resolute mien.

"What is the matter with the house?"

Mr Raddish was taken by surprise.

"Of course, an unfurnished house is always a little gloomy," he parried feebly.

"Nonsense," said Mrs Lancaster. "The rent is ridiculously low for such a house - purely nominal. There must be some reason for it. I suppose the house is haunted?"

Mr Raddish gave a nervous little start but said nothing.

Mrs Lancaster eyed him keenly. After a few moments she spoke again.

"Of course that is all nonsense. I don't believe in ghosts or anything of that sort, and personally it is no deterrent to my taking the house; but servants, unfortunately, are very credulous and easily frightened. It would be kind of you to tell me exactly what - what thing is supposed to haunt this place."

"I - er - really don't know," stammered the house agent.

"I am sure you must," said the lady quietly. "I cannot take the house without knowing. What was it? A murder?"

"Oh, no!" cried Mr Raddish, shocked by the idea of anything so alien to the respectability of the square. "It's - it's - only a child."

"A child?"

"Yes."

"I don't know the story exactly," he continued reluctantly. "Of course, there are all kinds of different versions, but I believe that about thirty years ago a man going by the name of Williams took Number Nineteen.

Nothing was known of him; he kept no servants; he had no friends; he seldom went out in the daytime. He had one child, a little boy. After he had been there about two months, he went up to London, and had barely set foot in the metropolis before he was recognized as being a man 'wanted' by the police on some charge - exactly what, I do not know. But it must have been a grave one, because, sooner than give himself up, he shot himself. Meanwhile, the child lived on here, alone in the house. He had food for a little time, and he waited day after day for his father's return. Unfortunately, it had been impressed upon him that he was never under any circumstances to go out of the house or to speak to anyone. He was a weak, ailing, little creature, and did not dream of disobeying this command. In the night, the neighbours, not knowing that his father had gone away, often heard him sobbing in the awful loneliness and desolation of the empty house."

Mr Raddish paused.

"And - er - the child starved to death," he concluded in the same tones as he might have announced that it had just begun to rain.

"And it is the child's ghost that is supposed to haunt the place?" asked Mrs Lancaster.

"It is nothing of consequence really," Mr Raddish hastened to assure her. "There's nothing seen, not seen, only people say, ridiculous, of course, but they do say they hear - the child - crying, you know."

Mrs Lancaster moved towards the front door.

"I like the house very much," she said. "I shall get nothing as good for the price. I will think it over and let you know."

"It really looks very cheerful, doesn't it, Papa?"

Mrs Lancaster surveyed her new domain with approval. Gay rugs, well-polished furniture, and many knickknacks, had quite transformed the gloomy aspect of No. 19.

She spoke to a thin, bent old man with stooping shoulders and a delicate mystical face. Mr Winburn did not resemble his daughter; indeed no greater contrast could be imagined than that presented by her resolute practicalness and his dreamy abstraction.

"Yes," he answered with a smile, "no one would dream the house was haunted."

"Papa, don't talk nonsense! On our first day, too."

Mr Winburn smiled.

"Very well, my dear, we will agree that there are no such things as ghosts."

"And please," continued Mrs Lancaster, "don't say a word before Geoff. He's so imaginative."

Geoff was Mrs Lancaster's little boy. The family consisted of Mr Winburn, his widowed daughter, and Geoffrey.

Rain had begun to beat against the window - pitter-patter, pitter-patter.

"Listen," said Mr Winburn. "Is it not like little footsteps?"

"It's more like rain," said Mrs Lancaster, with a smile.

"But that, that is a footstep," cried her father, bending forward to listen.

Mrs Lancaster laughed outright.

"That's Geoff coming downstairs."

Mr Winburn was obliged to laugh, too. They were having tea in the hall, and he had been sitting with his back to the staircase. He now turned his chair round to face it.

Little Geoffrey was coming down, rather slowly and sedately, with a child's awe of a strange place. The stairs were of polished oak, uncarpeted. He came across and stood by his mother. Mr Winburn gave a slight start. As the child was crossing the floor, he distinctly heard another pair of footsteps on the stairs, as of someone following Geoffrey. Dragging footsteps, curiously painful they were. Then he shrugged his shoulders incredulously. "The rain, no doubt," he thought.

"I'm looking at the sponge cakes," remarked Geoff with the admirably detached air of one who points out an interesting fact.

His mother hastened to comply with the hint.

"Well, Sonny, how do you like your new home?" she asked.

"Lots," replied Geoffrey with his mouth generously filled. "Pounds and pounds and pounds." After this last assertion, which was evidently expressive of the deepest contentment, he relapsed into silence, only anxious to remove the sponge cake from the sight of man in the least time possible.

Having bolted the last mouthful, he burst forth into speech.

"Oh! Mummy, there's attics here, Jane says; and can I go at once and eggzplore them? And there might be a secret door. Jane says there isn't, but I think there must be, and, anyhow, I know there'll be pipes, water pipes (with a face full of ecstasy), and can I play with them, and, oh! can I go and see the boi-i-ler?" He spun out the last word with such evident rapture that his grandfather felt ashamed to reflect that this peerless delight of childhood only conjured up to his imagination the picture of hot water that wasn't hot, and heavy and numerous plumber's bills.

"We'll see about the attics tomorrow, darling," said Mrs Lancaster. "Suppose you fetch your bricks and build a nice house, or an engine."

"Don't want to build an 'ouse."

"House."

"House, or h'engine h'either."

"Build a boiler," suggested his grandfather.

Geoffrey brightened.

"With pipes?"

"Yes, lots of pipes."

Geoffrey ran away happily to fetch his bricks.

The rain was still falling. Mr Winburn listened. Yes, it must have been the rain he had heard; but it did sound like footsteps.

He had a queer dream that night.

He dreamt that he was walking through a town, a great city it seemed to him. But it was a children's city; there were no grown-up people there, nothing but children, crowds of them. In his dream they all rushed to the stranger crying: "Have you brought him?" It seemed that he understood what they meant and shook his head sadly. When they saw this, the children turned away and began to cry, sobbing bitterly.

The city and the children faded away and he awoke to find himself in bed, but the sobbing was still in his ears. Though wide awake, he heard it distinctly; and he remembered that Geoffrey slept on the floor below,

while this sound of a child's sorrow descended from above. He sat up and struck a match. Instantly the sobbing ceased.

Mr Winburn did not tell his daughter of the dream or its sequel. That it was no trick of his imagination, he was convinced; indeed soon afterwards he heard it again in the daytime. The wind was howling in the chimney but this was a separate sound - distinct, unmistakable: pitiful little heartbroken sobs.

He found out, too, that he was not the only one to hear them. He overheard the housemaid saying to the parlourmaid that she "didn't think as that there nurse was kind to Master Geoffrey, she'd 'eard 'im crying 'is little 'eart out only that very morning." Geoffrey had come down to breakfast and lunch beaming with health and happiness; and Mr Winburn knew that it was not Geoff who had been crying, but that other child whose dragging footsteps had startled him more than once.

Mrs Lancaster alone never heard anything. Her ears were not perhaps attuned to catch sounds from another world.

Yet one day she also received a shock.

"Mummy," said Geoff plaintively. "I wish you'd let me play with that little boy."

Mrs Lancaster looked up from her writing table with a smile.

"What little boy, dear?"

"I don't know his name. He was in a attic, sitting on the floor crying, but he ran away when he saw me. I suppose he was shy (with slight contempt), not like a big boy, and then, when I was in the nursery building, I saw him standing in the door watching me build, and he looked so awful lonely and as though he wanted to play wiv me. I said: 'Come and build a h'engine,' but he didn't say nothing, just looked as - as though he saw a lot of chocolates, and his mummy had told him not to touch them." Geoff sighed, sad personal reminiscences evidently recurring to him. "But when I asked Jane who he was and told her I wanted to play wiv him, she said there wasn't no little boy in the 'ouse and not to tell naughty stories. I don't love Jane at all."

Mrs Lancaster got up.

"Jane was right. There was no little boy."

"But I saw him. Oh! Mummy, do let me play wiv him, he did look so awful lonely and unhappy. I do want to do something to 'make him better.'"

Mrs Lancaster was about to speak again, but her father shook his head.

"Geoff," he said very gently, "that poor little boy is lonely, and perhaps you may do something to comfort him; but you must find out how by yourself - like a puzzle - do you see?"

"Is it because I am getting big I must do it all my lone?"

"Yes, because you are getting big."

As the boy left the room, Mrs Lancaster turned to her father impatiently.

"Papa, this is absurd. To encourage the boy to believe the servants' idle tales!"

"No servant has told the child anything," said the old man gently. "He's seen - what I hear, what I could see perhaps if I were his age."

"But it's such nonsense! Why don't I see it or hear it?"

Mr Winburn smiled, a curiously tired smile, but did not reply.

"Why?" repeated his daughter. "And why did you tell him he could help - the - the - thing. It's - it's all so impossible."

The old man looked at her with his thoughtful glance.

"Why not?" he said. "Do you remember these words:

"What Lamp has Destiny to guide

Her little Children stumbling in the Dark?"

"A Blind Understanding," Heaven replied.

"Geoffrey has that - a blind understanding. All children possess it. It is only as we grow older that we lose it, that we cast it away from us. Sometimes, when we are quite old, a faint gleam comes back to us, but the Lamp burns brightest in childhood. That is why I think Geoffrey may help."

"I don't understand," murmured Mrs Lancaster feebly.

"No more do I. That - that child is in trouble and wants - to be set free. But how? I do not know, but - it's awful to think of it - sobbing its heart out - a child."

A month after this conversation Geoffrey fell very ill. The east wind had been severe, and he was not a strong child. The doctor shook his head and said that it was a grave case. To Mr Winburn he divulged more and confessed that the case was quite hopeless. "The child would never have lived to grow up, under any circumstances," he added. "There has been serious lung trouble for a long time."

It was when nursing Geoff that Mrs Lancaster became aware of that - other child. At first the sobs were an indistinguishable part of the wind, but gradually they became more distinct, more unmistakable. Finally she heard them in moments of dead calm: a child's sobs - dull, hopeless, heartbroken.

Geoff grew steadily worse and in his delirium he spoke of the "little boy" again and again. "I do want to help him get away, I do!" he cried.

Succeeding the delirium there came a state of lethargy. Geoffrey lay very still, hardly breathing, sunk in oblivion. There was nothing to do but wait and watch. Then there came a still night, dear and calm, without one breath of wind.

Suddenly the child stirred. His eyes opened. He looked past his mother towards the open door. He tried to speak and she bent down to catch the half-breathed words.

"All right, I'm comin'," he whispered; then he sank back.

The mother felt suddenly terrified; she crossed the room to her father. Somewhere near them the other child was laughing. Joyful, contented, triumphant, the silvery laughter echoed through the room.

"I'm frightened; I'm frightened," she moaned.

He put his arm round her protectingly. A sudden gust of wind made them both start, but it passed swiftly and left the air quiet as before.

The laughter had ceased and there crept to them a faint sound, so faint as hardly to be heard, but growing louder till they could distinguish it. Footsteps - light footsteps, swiftly departing.

Pitter-patter, pitter-patter, they ran - those well-known halting little feet. Yet - surely - now other footsteps suddenly mingled with them, moving with a quicker and a lighter tread.

With one accord they hastened to the door.

Down, down, down, past the door, close to them, pitter-patter, pitter-patter, went the unseen feet of the little children together.

Mrs Lancaster looked up wildly.

"There are two of them - two!"

Grey with sudden fear, she turned towards the cot in the corner, but her father restrained her gently and pointed away.

"There," he said simply.

Pitter-patter, pitter-patter - fainter and fainter.

And then - silence.

THE LAST SÉANCE

Raoul Daubreuil crossed the Seine humming a little tune to himself. He was a good-looking young Frenchman of about thirty-two, with a fresh-colored face and a little black moustache. By profession he was an engineer. In due course he reached the Cardonet and turned in at the door of No. 17. The concierge looked out from her lair and gave him a grudging "Good-morning," to which he replied cheerfully. Then he mounted the stairs to the apartment on the third floor. As he stood there waiting for his ring at the bell to be answered he hummed once more his little tune. Raoul Daubreuil was feeling particularly cheerful this morning. The door was opened by an elderly Frenchwoman, whose wrinkled face broke into smiles when she saw who the visitor was.

"Good-morning, monsieur."

"Good-morning, Elise," said Raoul.

He passed into the vestibule, pulling off his gloves as he did so.

"Madame expects me, does she not?" he asked over his shoulder.

"Ah, yes, indeed, monsieur."

Elise shut the front door and turned towards him.

"If Monsieur will pass into the little salon, Madame will be with him in a few minutes. At the moment she reposes herself."

Raoul looked up sharply. "Is she not well?"

"Well!"

Elise gave a snort. She passed in front of Raoul and opened the door of the little salon for him. He went in and she followed him.

"Well!" she continued. "How should she be well, poor lamb? Séances, séances, and always séances! It is not right - not natural, not what the good God intended for us. For me, I say straight out, it is trafficking with the devil."

Raoul patted her on the shoulder reassuringly.

"There, there, Elise," he said soothingly, "do not excite yourself, and do not be too ready to see the devil in everything you do not understand."

Elise shook her head doubtingly.

"Ah, well," she grumbled under her breath, "Monsieur may say what he pleases, I don't like it. Look at Madame, every day she gets whiter and thinner, and the headaches!"

She held up her hands. "Ah, no, it is not good, all this spirit business. Spirits indeed! All the good spirits are in paradise, and the others are in purgatory."

"Your view of the life after death is refreshingly simple, Elise," said Raoul as he dropped into a chair.

The old woman drew herself up. "I am a good Catholic, monsieur."

She crossed herself, went towards the door, then paused, her hand on the handle.

"Afterwards when you are married, monsieur," she said pleadingly, "it will not continue - all this?"

Raoul smiled at her affectionately.

"You are a good faithful creature, Elise," he said, "and devoted to your mistress. Have no fear, once she is my wife, all this 'spirit business' as you call it, will cease. For Madame Daubreuil there will be no more séances."

Elise's face broke into smiles.

"Is it true what you say?" she asked eagerly.

The other nodded gravely.

"Yes," he said, speaking almost more to himself than to her. "Yes, all this must end. Simone has a wonderful gift and she has used it freely, but now she has done her part. As you have justly observed, Elise, day by day she gets whiter and thinner. The life of a medium is a particularly trying and arduous one, involving a terrible nervous strain. All the same,

Elise, your mistress is the most wonderful medium in Paris - more, in France. People from all over the world come to her because they know that with her there is no trickery, no deceit."

Elise gave a snort of contempt.

"Deceit! Ah, no, indeed. Madame could not deceive a new-born babe if she tried."

"She is an angel," said the young Frenchman with fervor. "And I - I shall do everything a man can to make her happy. You believe that?"

Elise drew herself up, and spoke with a certain simple dignity.

"I have served Madame for many years, monsieur. With all respect I may say that I love her. If I did not believe that you adored her as she deserves to be adored - eh bien, monsieur! I should be willing to tear you limb from limb."

Raoul laughed. "Bravo, Elise! You are a faithful friend, and you must approve of me now that I have told you Madame is going to give up the spirits."

He expected the old woman to receive this pleasantry with a laugh, but somewhat to his surprise she remained grave.

"Supposing, monsieur," she said hesitatingly, lithe spirits will not give her up?"

Raoul stared at her. "Eh! What do you mean?"

"I said," repeated Elise, "supposing the spirits will not give her up?"

"I thought you didn't believe in the spirits, Elise?"

"No more I do," said Elise stubbornly. "It is foolish to believe in them. All the same..."

"Well?"

"It is difficult for me to explain, monsieur. You see, me, I always thought that these mediums, as they call themselves, were just clever cheats who imposed on the poor souls who had lost their dear ones. But Madame is not like that. Madame is good. Madame is honest, and..."

She lowered her voice and spoke in a tone of awe.

"Things happen. It is not trickery, things happen, and that is why I am afraid. For I am sure of this, monsieur, it is not right. It is against nature and le bon Dieu, and somebody will have to pay."

Raoul got up from his chair and came and patted her on the shoulder.

"Calm yourself, my good Elise," he said, smiling. "See, I will give you some good news. Today is the last of these séances; after today there will be no more."

"There is one today, then?" asked the old woman suspiciously.

"The last, Elise, the last."

Elise shook her head disconsolately. "Madame is not fit..." she began.

But her words were interrupted, the door opened and a tall, fair woman came in. She was slender and graceful, with the face of a Botticelli Madonna. Raoul's face lighted up, and Elise withdrew quickly and discreetly.

"Simone!"

He took both her long, white hands in his and kissed each in turn. She murmured his name very softly.

"Raoul, my dear one."

Again he kissed her hands and then looked intently into her face.

"Simone, how pale you are! Elise told me you were resting; you are not ill, my well-beloved?"

"No, not ill..." she hesitated.

He led her over to the sofa and sat down on it beside her.

"But tell me then."

The medium smiled faintly. "You will think me foolish," she murmured.

"I? Think you foolish? Never."

Simone withdrew her hand from his grasp. She sat perfectly still for a moment or two gazing down at the carpet. Then she spoke in a low, hurried voice.

"I am afraid, Raoul."

He waited for a minute or two expecting her to go on, but as she did not he said encouragingly:

"Yes, afraid of what?"

"Just afraid... that is all."

"But..."

He looked at her in perplexity, and she answered the look quickly.

"Yes, it is absurd, isn't it, and yet I feel just that. Afraid, nothing more. I don't know what of, or why, but all the time I am possessed with the idea that something terrible - terrible, is going to happen to me..."

She stared out in front of her. Raoul put an arm gently round her.

"My dearest," he said, "come, you must not give way. I know what it is, the strain, Simone, the strain of a medium's life. All you need is rest - rest and quiet."

She looked at him gratefully. "Yes, Raoul, you are right. That is what I need, rest and quiet."

She closed her eyes and leant back a little against his arm.

"And happiness," murmured Raoul in her ear.

His arm drew her closer. Simone, her eyes still closed, drew a deep breath.

"Yes," she murmured, "yes. When your arms are round me I feel safe. I forget my life - the terrible life - of a medium. You know much, Raoul, but even you do not know all it means."

He felt her body grow rigid in his embrace. Her eyes opened again, staring in front of her.

"One sits in the cabinet in the darkness, waiting, and the darkness is terrible, Raoul, for it is the darkness of emptiness, of nothingness. Deliberately one gives oneself up to be lost in it. After that one knows nothing, one feels nothing, but at last there comes the slow, painful return, the awakening out of sleep, but so tired - so terribly tired."

"I know," murmured Raoul, "I know."

"So tired," murmured Simone again. Her whole body seemed to droop as she repeated the words.

"But you are wonderful, Simone."

He took her hands in his, trying to rouse her to share his enthusiasm.

"You are unique - the greatest medium the world has ever known."

She shook her head, smiling a little at that.

"Yes, yes," Raoul insisted.

He drew two letters from his pocket.

"See here, from Professor Roche of the Salpetriere, and this one from Dr Genir at Nancy, both imploring that you will continue to sit for them occasionally."

"Ah, no!"

Simone sprang suddenly to her feet.

"I will not, I will not. It is to be all finished - all done with. You promised me, Raoul."

Raoul stared at her in astonishment as she stood wavering, facing him almost like a creature at bay. He got up and took her hand.

"Yes, yes," he said. "Certainly it is finished, that is understood. But I am so proud of you, Simone, that is why I mentioned those letters."

She threw him a swift sideways glance of suspicion.

"It is not that you will ever want me to sit again?"

"No, no," said Raoul, "unless perhaps you yourself would care to, just occasionally for these old friends..."

But she interrupted him, speaking excitedly. "No, no, never again. There is danger. I tell you I can feel it, great danger."

She clasped her hands on her forehead a minute, then walked across to the window.

"Promise me never again," she said in a quieter voice over her shoulder.

Raoul followed her and put his arms round her shoulders.

"My dear one," he said tenderly, "I promise you after today you shall never sit again."

He felt the sudden start she gave.

"Today," she murmured. "Ah, yes - I had forgotten Madame Exe."

Raoul looked at his watch. "She is due any minute now; but perhaps, Simone, if you do not feel well..."

Simone hardly seemed to be listening to him; she was following out her own train of thought.

"She is - a strange woman, Raoul, a very strange woman. Do you know - I have almost a horror of her."

"Simone!"

There was reproach in his voice, and she was quick to feel it.

"Yes, yes, I know, you are like all Frenchmen, Raoul. To you a mother is sacred and it is unkind of me to feel like that about her when she grieves so for her lost child. But - I cannot explain it, she is so big and black, and her hands - have you ever noticed her hands, Raoul? Great big strong hands, as strong as a man's. Ah!"

She gave a little shiver and closed her eyes. Raoul withdrew his arm and spoke almost coldly.

"I really cannot understand you, Simone. Surely you, a woman, should have nothing but sympathy for another woman, a mother bereft of her only child."

Simone made a gesture of impatience.

"Ah, it is you who do not understand, my friend! One cannot help these things. The first moment I saw her I felt..."

She flung her hand out. "Fear! You remember, it was a long time before I would consent to sit for her? I felt sure in some way she would bring me misfortune."

Raoul shrugged his shoulders. "Whereas, in actual fact, she brought you the exact opposite," he said dryly. "All the sittings have been attended with marked success. The spirit of the little Amelie was able to control you at once, and the materializations have really been striking. Professor Roche ought really to have been present at the last one."

"Materializations," said Simone in a low voice. "Tell me, Raoul (you know that I know nothing of what takes place while I am in the trance), are the materializations really so wonderful?"

He nodded enthusiastically. "At the first few sittings the figure of the child was visible in a kind of nebulous haze," he explained, "but at the last séance..."

"Yes?"

He spoke very softly. "Simone, the child that stood there was an actual living child of flesh and blood. I even touched her - but seeing that the touch was acutely painful to you, I would not permit Madame Exe to do the same. I was afraid that her self-control might break down, and that some harm to you might result."

Simone turned away again towards the window.

"I was terribly exhausted when I woke," she murmured. "Raoul, are you sure - are you really sure that all this is right? You know what dear old Elise thinks, that I am trafficking with the devil?" She laughed rather uncertainly.

"You know what I believe," said Raoul gravely. "In the handling of the unknown there must always be danger, but the cause is a noble one, for it is the cause of Science. All over the world there have been martyrs to Science, pioneers who have paid the price so that others may follow safely in their footsteps. For ten years now you have worked for Science at the cost of a terrific nervous strain. Now your part is done, from today onward you are free to be happy."

She smiled at him affectionately, her calm restored. Then she glanced quickly up at the clock.

"Madame Exe is late," she murmured. "She may not come."

"I think she will," said Raoul. "Your clock is a little fast, Simone."

Simone moved about the room, rearranging an ornament here and there.

"I wonder who she is, this Madame Exe?" she observed. "Where she comes from, who her people are? It is strange that we know nothing about her."

Raoul shrugged his shoulders. "Most people remain incognito if possible when they come to a medium," he observed. "It is an elementary precaution."

"I suppose so," agreed Simone listlessly.

A little china vase she was holding slipped from her fingers and broke to pieces on the tiles of the fireplace. She turned sharply on Raoul.

"You see," she murmured, "I am not myself. Raoul, would you think me very - very cowardly if I told Madame Exe I could not sit today?"

His look of pained astonishment made her redden.

"You promised, Simone..." he began gently.

She backed against the wall. "I won't do it, Raoul. I won't do it."

And again that glance of his, tenderly reproachful, made her wince.

"It is not of the money I am thinking, Simone, though you must realize that the money this woman has offered you for a last sitting is enormous - simply enormous."

She interrupted him defiantly. "There are things that matter more than money."

"Certainly there are," he agreed warmly. "That is just what I am saying. Consider - this woman is a mother, a mother who has lost her only child. If you are not really ill, if it is only a whim on your part - you can deny a rich woman a caprice, but can you deny a mother one last sight of her child?"

The medium flung her hands out despairingly in front of her.

"Oh, you torture me," she murmured. "All the same you are right. I will do as you wish, but I know now what I am afraid of - it is the word 'mother.'"

"Simone!"

"There are certain primitive elementary forces, Raoul. Most of them have been destroyed by civilization, but motherhood stands where it stood at the beginning. Animals - human beings, they are all the same. A mother's love for her child is like nothing else in the world. It knows no law, no pity, it dares all things and crushes down remorselessly all that stands in its path."

She stopped, panting a little, then turned to him with a quick, disarming smile.

"I am foolish today, Raoul. I know it."

He took her hand in his. "Lie down for a minute or two," he urged. "Rest till she comes."

"Very well." She smiled at him and left the room. Raoul remained for a minute or two lost in thought, then he strode to the door, opened it, and crossed the little hall. He went into a room the other side of it, a sitting-room very much like the one he had left, but at one end was an alcove with a big armchair set in it. Heavy black velvet curtains were arranged so as to pull across the alcove. Elise was busy arranging the room. Close to the alcove she had set two chairs and a small round table. On the table was a tambourine, a horn, and some paper and pencils.

"The last time," murmured Elise with grim satisfaction. "Ah, monsieur, I wish it were over and done with."

The sharp ting of an electric bell sounded.

"There she is, that great gendarme of a woman," continued the old servant. "Why can't she go and pray decently for her little one's soul in a church, and burn a candle to Our Blessed Lady? Does not the good God know what is best for us?"

"Answer the bell, Elise," said Raoul peremptorily.

She threw him a look, but obeyed. In a minute or two she returned ushering in the visitor.

"I will tell my mistress you are here, madame."

Raoul came forward to shake hands with Madame Exe. Simone's words floated back to his memory.

"So big and so black."

She was a big woman, and the heavy black of French mourning seemed almost exaggerated in her case. Her voice when she spoke was very deep.

"I fear I am a little late, monsieur."

"A few minutes only," said Raoul, smiling. "Madame Simone is lying down. I am sorry to say she is far from well, very nervous and overwrought."

Her hand, which she was just withdrawing, closed on his suddenly like a vise.

"But she will sit?" she demanded sharply.

"Oh, yes, madame."

Madame Exe gave a sigh of relief, and sank into a chair, loosening one of the heavy black veils that floated round her.

"Ah, monsieur!" she murmured, "you cannot imagine, you cannot conceive the wonder and the joy of these séances to me! My little one! My Amelie! To see her, to hear her, even - perhaps - yes, perhaps to be even able to - stretch out my hand and touch her."

Raoul spoke quickly and peremptorily.

"Madame Exe - how can I explain? - on no account must you do anything except under my express directions, otherwise there is the gravest danger."

"Danger to me?"

"No, madame," said Raoul, "to the medium. You must understand that the phenomena that occur are explained by Science in a certain way. I will put the matter very simply, using no technical terms. A spirit, to manifest itself, has to use the actual physical substance of the medium. You have seen the vapor of fluid issuing from the lips of the medium. This finally condenses and is built up into the physical semblance of the spirit's dead body. But this ectoplasm we believe to be the actual substance of the medium. We hope to prove this some day by careful weighing and testing - but the great difficulty is the danger and pain which attends the medium on any handling of the phenomena. Were anyone to seize hold of the materialization roughly, the death of the medium might result."

Madame Exe had listened to him with close attention.

"That is very interesting, monsieur. Tell me, shall not a time come when the materialization shall advance so far that it shall be capable of detachment from its parent, the medium?"

"That is a fantastic speculation, madame."

She persisted. "But, on the facts, not impossible?"

"Quite impossible today."

"But perhaps in the future?"

He was saved from answering, for at that moment Simone entered. She looked languid and pale, but had evidently regained entire control of

herself. She came forward and shook hands with Madame Exe, though Raoul noticed the faint shiver that passed through her as she did so.

"I regret, madame, to hear that you are indisposed," said Madame Exe.

"It is nothing," said Simone rather brusquely. "Shall we begin?"

She went to the alcove and sat down in the armchair. Suddenly Raoul in his turn felt a wave of fear pass over him.

"You are not strong enough," he exclaimed. "We had better cancel the séance. Madame Exe will understand."

"Monsieur!"

Madame Exe rose indignantly.

"Yes, yes, it is better not, I am sure of it."

"Madame Simone promised me one last sitting."

"That is so," agreed Simone quietly, "and I am prepared to carry out my promise."

"I hold you to it, madame," said the other woman.

"I do not break my word," said Simone coldly. "Do not fear, Raoul," she added gently, "after all, it is for the last time - the last time, thank God."

At a sign from her Raoul drew the heavy black curtains across the alcove. He also pulled the curtains of the window so that the room was in semi-obscurity. He indicated one of the chairs to Madame Exe and prepared himself to take the other. Madame Exe, however, hesitated.

"You will pardon me, monsieur, but - you understand I believe absolutely in your integrity and in that of Madame Simone. All the same, so that my testimony may be the more valuable, I took the liberty of bringing this with me."

From her handbag she drew a length of fine cord.

"Madame!" cried Raoul. "This is an insult!"

"A precaution."

"I repeat it is an insult."

"I don't understand your objection, monsieur," said Madame Exe coldly. "If there is no trickery you have nothing to fear."

Raoul laughed scornfully. "I can assure you that I have nothing to fear, madame. Bind me hand and foot if you will."

His speech did not produce the effect he hoped, for Madame Exe merely murmured unemotionally:

"Thank you, monsieur," and advanced upon him with her roll of cord.

Suddenly Simone from behind the curtain gave a cry.

"No, no, Raoul, don't let her do it."

Madame Exe laughed derisively. "Madame is afraid," she observed sarcastically.

"Yes, I am afraid."

"Remember what you are saying, Simone," cried Raoul. "Madame Exe is apparently under the impression that we are charlatans."

"I must make sure," said Madame Exe grimly.

She went methodically about her task, binding Raoul securely to his chair.

"I must congratulate you on your knots, madame," he observed ironically when she had finished. "Are you satisfied now?" Madame Exe did not reply. She walked round the room examining the panelling of the walls closely. Then she locked the door leading into the hall, and, removing the key, returned to her chair.

"Now," she said in an indescribable voice. "I am ready."

The minutes passed. From behind the curtain the sound of Simone's breathing became heavier and more stertorous. Then it died away altogether, to be succeeded by a series of moans. Then again there was silence for a little while, broken by the sudden clattering of the

tambourine. The horn was caught up from the table and dashed to the ground. Ironic laughter was heard. The curtains of the alcove seemed to have been pulled back a little, the medium's figure was just visible through the opening, her head fallen forward on her breast. Suddenly Madame Exe drew in her breath sharply. A ribbon-like stream of mist was issuing from the medium's mouth. It condensed and began gradually to assume a shape, the shape of a little child.

"Amelie! My little Amelie!"

The hoarse whisper came from Madame Exe. The hazy figure condensed still further. Raoul stared almost incredulously. Never had there been a more successful materialization: Now, surely it was a real child, a real flesh and blood child standing there.

"Maman!" The soft childish voice spoke.

"My child!" cried Madame Exe. "My child!" She half-rose from her seat.

"Be careful, madame," cried Raoul warningly.

The materialization came hesitatingly through the curtains. It was a child. She stood there, her arms held out.

"Maman!"

"Ah!" cried Madame Exe. Again she half-rose from her seat.

"Madame," cried Raoul, alarmed, "the medium..."

"I must touch her," cried Madame Exe hoarsely.

She moved a step forward.

"For God's sake, madame, control yourself," cried Raoul.

He was really alarmed now. "Sit down at once."

"My little one, I must touch her."

"Madame, I command you, sit down!"

He was writhing desperately with his bonds, but Madame Exe had done her work well; he was helpless. A terrible sense of impending disaster swept over him.

"In the name of God, madame, sit down!" he shouted. "Remember the medium."

Madame Exe paid no attention to him. She was like a woman transformed. Ecstasy and delight showed plainly in her face. Her outstretched hand touched the little figure that stood in the opening of the curtains. A terrible moan came from the medium.

"My God!" cried Raoul. "My God! This is terrible. The medium..."

Madame Exe turned on him with a harsh laugh.

"What do I care for your medium?" she cried. "I want my child."

"You are mad!"

"My child, I tell you. Mine! My own flesh and blood! My little one come back to me from the dead, alive and breathing."

Raoul opened his lips, but no words would come. She was terrible, this woman! Remorseless, savage, absorbed by her own passion. The baby lips parted, and for the third time the same word echoed:

"Maman!"

"Come then, my little one," cried Madame Exe.

With a sharp gesture she caught up the child in her arms. From behind the curtains came a long-drawn scream of utter anguish.

"Simone!" cried Raoul. "Simone!"

He was aware vaguely of Madame Exe rushing past him, of the unlocking of the door, of retreating footsteps down the stairs.

From behind the curtain there still sounded the terrible, high, long-drawn scream, such a scream, as Raoul had never heard. It died away in a horrible kind of gurgle. Then there came the thud of a body falling...

Raoul was working like a maniac to free himself from his bonds. In his frenzy he accomplished the impossible, snapping the rope by sheer strength. As he struggled to his feet, Elise rushed in, crying, "Madame!"

"Simone!" cried Raoul.

Together they rushed forward and pulled the curtain. Raoul staggered back.

"My God!" he murmured. "Red - all red..."

Elise's voice came beside him harsh and shaking.

"So Madame is dead. It is ended. But tell me, monsieur, what has happened. Why is Madame all shrunken away - why is she half her usual size? What has been happening here?"

"I do not know," said Raoul.

His voice rose to a scream.

"I do not know. I do not know. But I think - I am going mad... Simone! Simone!"

Jack Hartington surveyed his topped drive ruefully. Standing by the ball, he looked back to the tee, measuring the distance. His face was eloquent of the disgusted contempt which he felt. With a sigh he drew out his iron, executed two vicious swings with it, annihilating in turn a dandelion and a tuft of grass, and then addressed himself firmly to the ball.

It is hard when you are twenty-four years of age, and your one ambition in life is to reduce your handicap at golf, to be forced to give time and attention to the problem of earning your living. Five and a half days out of the seven saw Jack imprisoned in a kind of mahogany tomb in the city. Saturday afternoon and Sunday were religiously devoted to the real business of life, and in an excess of zeal he had taken rooms at the small hotel near Stourton Heath links, and rose daily at the hour of six a.m. to get in an hour's practice before catching the 8.46 to town.

The only disadvantage to the plan was that he seemed constitutionally unable to hit anything at that hour in the morning. A foozled iron succeeded a muffed drive. His mashie shots ran merrily along the ground, and four putts seemed to be the minimum on any green.

Jack sighed, grasped his iron firmly, and repeated to himself the magic words, "Left arm right through, and don't look up."

He swung back - and then stopped, petrified, as a shrill cry rent the silence of the summer's morning.

"Murder," it called. "Help! Murder!"

It was a woman's voice, and it died away at the end into a sort of gurgling sigh.

Jack flung down his club and ran in the direction of the sound. It had come from somewhere quite near at hand. This particular part of the course was quite wild country, and there were few houses about. In fact, there was only one near at hand, a small picturesque cottage, which Jack had often noticed for its air of Old World daintiness. It was towards this cottage that he ran. It was hidden from him by a heather-covered slope, but he rounded this and in less than a minute was standing with his hand on the small latched gate.

There was a girl standing in the garden, and for a moment Jack jumped to the natural conclusion that it was she who had uttered the cry for help. But he quickly changed his mind.

She had a little basket in her hand, half-full of weeds, and had evidently just straightened herself up from weeding a wide border of pansies. Her eyes, Jack noticed, were just like pansies themselves, velvety and soft and dark, and more violet than blue. She was like a pansy altogether, in her straight purple linen gown.

The girl was looking at Jack with an expression midway between annoyance and surprise.

"I beg your pardon," said the young man. "But did you cry out just now?"

"I? No, indeed."

Her surprise was so genuine that Jack felt confused. Her voice was very soft and pretty with a slight foreign inflection.

"But you must have heard it," he exclaimed. "It came from somewhere just near here."

She stared at him.

"I heard nothing at all."

Jack in his turn stared at her. It was perfectly incredible that she should not have heard that agonized appeal for help. And yet her calmness was so evident that he could not believe she was lying to him.

"It came from somewhere close at hand," he insisted.

She was looking at him suspiciously now.

"What did it say?" she asked.

"Murder - help! Murder!"

"Murder - help, murder," repeated the girl. "Somebody has played a trick on you, Monsieur. Who could be murdered here?"

Jack looked about him with a confused idea of discovering a dead body upon a garden path. Yet he was still perfectly sure that the cry he had

heard was real and not a product of his imagination. He looked up at the cottage windows. Everything seemed perfectly still and peaceful.

"Do you want to search our house?" asked the girl dryly.

She was so clearly sceptical that Jack's confusion grew deeper than ever. He turned away.

"I'm sorry," he said. "It must have come from higher up in the woods."

He raised his cap and retreated. Glancing back over his shoulder, he saw that the girl had calmly resumed her weeding.

For some time he hunted through the woods, but could find no sign of anything unusual having occurred. Yet he was as positive as ever that he had really heard the cry. In the end, he gave up the search and hurried home to bolt his breakfast and catch the 8.46 by the usual narrow margin of a second or so. His conscience pricked him a little as he sat in the train. Ought he not to have immediately reported what he had heard to the police? That he had not done so was solely owing to the pansy girl's incredulity. She had clearly suspected him of romancing - possibly the police might do the same. Was he absolutely certain that he had heard the cry?

By now he was not nearly so positive as he had been - the natural result of trying to recapture a lost sensation. Was it some bird's cry in the distance that he had twisted into the resemblance of a woman's voice?

But he rejected the suggestion angrily. It was a woman's voice, and he had heard it. He remembered looking at his watch just before the cry had come. As nearly as possible it must have been five and twenty minutes past seven when he had heard the call. That might be a fact useful to the police if - if anything should be discovered.

Going home that evening, he scanned the evening papers anxiously to see if there were any mention of a crime having been committed. But there was nothing, and he hardly knew whether to be relieved or disappointed.

The following morning was wet - so wet that even the most ardent golfer might have his enthusiasm damped. Jack rose at the last possible moment, gulped his breakfast, ran for the train, and again eagerly scanned the papers. Still no mention of any gruesome discovery having been made. The evening papers told the same tale.

"Queer," said Jack to himself, "but there it is. Probably some blinking little boys having a game together up in the woods."

He was out early the following morning. As he passed the cottage, he noted out of the tail of his eye that the girl was out in the garden again weeding. Evidently a habit of hers. He did a particularly good approach shot, and hoped that she had noticed it. As he teed up on the next tee, he glanced at his watch.

"Just five and twenty past seven," he murmured. "I wonder -"

The words were frozen on his lips. From behind him came the same cry which had so startled him before. A woman's voice, in dire distress.

"Murder - help, murder!"

Jack raced back. The pansy girl was standing by the gate. She looked startled, and Jack ran up to her triumphantly, crying out:

"You heard it this time, anyway."

Her eyes were wide with some emotion he could not fathom but he noticed that she shrank back from him as he approached, and even glanced back at the house, as though she meditated running to it for shelter.

She shook her head, staring at him.

"I heard nothing at all," she said wonderingly.

It was as though she had struck him a blow between the eyes. Her sincerity was so evident that he could not disbelieve her. Yet he couldn't have imagined it - he couldn't - he couldn't -

He heard her voice speaking gently - almost with sympathy.

"You have had the shell-shock, yes?"

In a flash he understood her look of fear, her glance back at the house. She thought that he suffered from delusions...

And then, like a douche of cold water, came the horrible thought, was she right? Did he suffer from delusions? Obsessed by the horror of the thought, he turned and stumbled away without vouchsafing a word. The girl watched him go, sighed, shook her head, and bent down to her weeding again.

Jack endeavored to reason matters out with himself. "If I hear the damned thing again, at twenty-five minutes past seven," he said to himself, "it's clear that I've got hold of a hallucination of some sort. But I won't hear it."

He was nervous all day, and went to bed early, determined to put the matter to the proof the following morning.

As was perhaps natural in such a case, he remained awake half the night and finally overslept himself. It was twenty past seven by the time he was clear of the hotel and running towards the links. He realized that he would not be able to get to the fatal spot by twenty-five past, but surely, if the voice were a hallucination pure and simple, he would hear it anywhere. He ran on, his eyes fixed on the hands of his watch.

Twenty-five past. From far off came the echo of a woman's voice, calling. The words could not be distinguished, but he was convinced that it was the same cry he had heard before, and that it came from the same spot, somewhere in the neighborhood of the cottage.

Strangely enough, that fact reassured him. It might, after all, be a hoax. Unlikely as it seemed, the girl herself might be playing a trick on him.

He set his shoulders resolutely, and took out a club from his golf bag. He would play the few holes up to the cottage.

The girl was in the garden as usual. She looked up this morning, and when he raised his cap to her, said good morning rather shyly... She looked, he thought, lovelier than ever.

"Nice day, isn't it?" Jack called out cheerily, cursing the unavoidable banality of the observation.

"Yes, indeed, it is lovely."

"Good for the garden, I expect?"

The girl smiled a little, disclosing a fascinating dimple.

"Alas, no! For my flowers the rain is needed. See, they are all dried up."

Jack accepted the invitation of her gesture, and came up to the low hedge dividing the garden from the course, looking over it into the garden.

"They seem all right," he remarked awkwardly, conscious as he spoke of the girl's slightly pitying glance running over him.

"The sun is good, is it not?" she said. "For the flowers one can always water them. But the sun gives strength and repairs the health. Monsieur is much better today, I can see."

Her encouraging tone annoyed Jack intensely.

"Curse it all," he said to himself. "I believe she's trying to cure me by suggestion.

"I'm perfectly well," he said irritably.

"That is good then," returned the girl, quickly and soothingly.

Jack had the irritating feeling that she didn't believe him.

He played a few more holes and hurried back to breakfast. As he ate it, he was conscious, not for the first time, of the close scrutiny of a man who sat at the table next to him. He was a man of middle-age, with a powerful, forceful face. He had a small dark beard and very piercing gray eyes, and an ease and assurance of manner which placed him among the higher ranks of the professional classes. His name, Jack knew, was Lavington, and he had heard vague rumors as to his being a well-known medical specialist, but as Jack was not a frequenter of Harley Street, the name had conveyed little or nothing to him.

But this morning he was very conscious of the quiet observation under which he was being kept, and it frightened him a little. Was his secret written plainly in his face for all to see? Did this man, by reason of his professional calling, know that there was something amiss in the hidden gray matter?

Jack shivered at the thought. Was it true? Was he really going mad? Was the whole thing a hallucination, or was it a gigantic hoax?

And suddenly a very simple way of testing the solution occurred to him. He had hitherto been alone on his round. Supposing someone else was with him? Then one out of three things might happen. The voice might be silent. They might both hear it. Or - he only might hear it.

That evening he proceeded to carry his plan into effect. Lavington was the man he wanted with him. They fell into conversation easily enough - the older man might have been waiting for such an opening. It was clear that for some reason or other Jack interested him. The latter was able to come quite easily and naturally to the suggestion that they might play a few holes together before breakfast. The arrangement was made for the following morning.

They started out a little before seven. It was a perfect day, still and cloudless, but not too warm. The doctor was playing well, Jack wretchedly. His whole mind was intent on the forthcoming crisis. He kept glancing surreptitiously at his watch. They reached the seventh tee, between which and the hole the cottage was situated, about twenty past seven.

The girl, as usual, was in the garden as they passed. She did not look up as they passed.

The two balls lay on the green, Jack's near the hole, the doctor's some little distance away.

"I've got this for it," said Lavington. "I must go for it, I suppose."

He bent down, judging the line he should take. Jack stood rigid, his eyes glued on his watch. It was exactly twenty-five minutes past seven.

The ball ran swiftly along the grass, stopped on the edge of the hole, hesitated, and dropped in.

"Good putt," said Jack. His voice sounded hoarse and unlike himself... He shoved his wrist watch farther up his arm with a sigh of overwhelming relief. Nothing had happened. The spell was broken.

"If you don't mind waiting a minute," he said, "I think I'll have a pipe."

They paused a while on the eighth tee. Jack filled and lit the pipe with fingers that trembled a little in spite of himself. An enormous weight seemed to have lifted from his mind.

"Lord, what a good day it is," he remarked, staring at the prospect ahead of him with great contentment. "Go on, Lavington, your swipe."

And then it came. Just at the very instant the doctor was hitting. A woman's voice, high and agonized.

"Murder - Help! Murder!"

The pipe fell from Jack's nerveless hand, as he spun round in the direction of the sound, and then, remembering, gazed breathlessly at his companion.

Lavington was looking down the course, shading his eyes.

"A bit short - just cleared the bunker, though, I think."

He had heard nothing.

The world seemed to spin round with Jack. He took a step or two, lurching heavily. When he recovered himself, he was lying on the short turf, and Lavington was bending over him.

"There, take it easy now, take it easy."

"What did I do?"

"You fainted, young man - or gave a very good try at it."

"My God!" said Jack, and groaned.

"What's the trouble? Something on your mind?"

"I'll tell you in one minute, but I'd like to ask you something first."

The doctor lit his own pipe and settled himself on the bank.

"Ask anything you like," he said comfortably.

"You've been watching me for the last day or two. Why?"

Lavington's eyes twinkled a little.

"That's rather an awkward question. A cat can look at a king, you know."

"Don't put me off. I'm in earnest. Why was it? I've a vital reason for asking."

Lavington's face grew serious.

"I'll answer you quite honestly. I recognized in you all the signs of a man laboring under a sense of acute strain, and it intrigued me what that strain could be."

"I can tell you that easily enough," said Jack bitterly. "I'm going mad."

He stopped dramatically, but his statement not seeming to arouse the interest and consternation he expected, he repeated it.

"I tell you I'm going mad."

"Very curious," murmured Lavington. "Very curious indeed."

Jack felt indignant.

"I suppose that's all it does seem to you. Doctors are so damned callous."

"Come, come, my young friend, you're talking at random. To begin with, although I have taken my degree, I do not practice medicine. Strictly speaking, I am not a doctor - not a doctor of the body, that is."

Jack looked at him keenly.

"Of the mind?"

"Yes, in a sense, but more truly I call myself a doctor of the soul."

"Oh!"

"I perceive the disparagement in your tone, and yet we must use some word to denote the active principle which can be separated and exist independently of its fleshy home, the body. You've got to come to terms with the soul, you know, young man; it isn't just a religious term invented by clergymen. But we'll call it the mind, or the subconscious self, or any term that suits you better. You took offense at my tone just now, but I can assure you that it really did strike me as very curious that such a well-balanced and perfectly normal young man as yourself should suffer from the delusion that he was going out of his mind."

"I'm out of my mind all right. Absolutely balmy."

"You will forgive me for saying so, but I don't believe it."

"I suffer from delusions."

"After dinner?"

"No, in the morning."

"Can't be done," said the doctor, relighting his pipe which had gone out.

"I tell you I hear things that no one else hears."

"One man in a thousand can see the moons of Jupiter. Because the other nine hundred and ninety-nine can't see them there's no reason to doubt that the moons of Jupiter exist, and certainly no reason for calling the thousandth man a lunatic."

"The moons of Jupiter are a proved scientific fact."

"It's quite possible that the delusions of today may be the proved scientific facts of tomorrow."

In spite of himself, Lavington's matter-of-fact manner was having its effect upon Jack. He felt immeasurably soothed and cheered. The doctor looked at him attentively for a minute or two and then nodded.

"That's better," he said. "The trouble with you young fellows is that you're so cocksure nothing can exist outside your own philosophy that you get the wind up when something occurs to jolt you out of that opinion. Let's hear your grounds for believing that you're going mad, and we'll decide whether or not to lock you up afterwards."

As faithfully as he could, Jack narrated the whole series of occurrences.

"But what I can't understand," he ended, "is why this morning it should come at half-past seven - five minutes late."

Lavington thought for a minute or two. Then -

"What's the time now by your watch?" he asked.

"Quarter to eight," replied Jack, consulting it.

"That's simple enough, then. Mine says twenty to eight. Your watch is five minutes fast. That's a very interesting and important point - to me. In fact, it's invaluable."

"In what way?"

Jack was beginning to get interested.

"Well, the obvious explanation is that on the first morning you did hear some such cry - may have been a joke, may not. On the following mornings, you suggestioned yourself to hear it exactly the same time."

"I'm sure I didn't."

"Not consciously, of course, but the subconscious plays us some funny tricks, you know. But, anyway, that explanation won't wash. If it were a case of suggestion, you would have heard the cry at twenty-five minutes past seven by your watch, and you could never have heard it when the time, as you thought, was past."

"Well, then?"

"Well - it's obvious, isn't it? This cry for help occupies a perfectly definite place and time in space. The place is the vicinity of that cottage and the time is twenty-five minutes past seven."

"Yes, but why should I be the one to hear it? I don't believe in ghosts and all that spook stuff - spirits rapping and all the rest of it. Why should I hear the damned thing?"

"Ah! that we can't tell at present. It's a curious thing that many of the best mediums are made out of confirmed sceptics. It isn't the people who are interested in occult phenomena who get the manifestations. Some people see and hear things that other people don't - we don't know why, and nine times out of ten they don't want to see or hear them, and are convinced that they are suffering from delusions - just as you were. It's like electricity. Some substances are good conductors, and for a long time we didn't know why, and had to be content just to accept the fact. Nowadays we do know why. Some day, no doubt, we shall know why you hear this thing and I and the girl don't. Everything's governed by natural law, you know - there's no such thing really as the supernatural. Finding out the laws that govern so-called psychic phenomena is going to be a tough job - but every little helps."

"But what am I going to do?" asked Jack.

Lavington chuckled.

"Practical, I see. Well, my young friend, you are going to have a good breakfast and get off to the city without worrying your head further about things you don't understand. I, on the other hand, am going to

poke about, and see what I can find out about that cottage back there. That's where the mystery centers, I dare swear."

Jack rose to his feet

"Right, sir. I'm on, but, I say -"

"Yes?"

Jack flushed awkwardly.

"I'm sure the girl's all right," he muttered.

Lavington looked amused.

"You didn't tell me she was a pretty girl! Well, cheer up, I think the mystery started before her time."

Jack arrived home that evening in a perfect fever of curiosity. He was by now pinning his faith blindly to Lavington. The doctor had accepted the matter so naturally, had been so matter-of-fact and unperturbed by it, that Jack was impressed.

He found his new friend waiting for him in the hall when he came down for dinner, and the doctor suggested that they should dine together at the same table.

"Any news, sir?" asked Jack anxiously.

"I've collected the life history of Heather Cottage all right. It was tenanted first by an old gardener and his wife. The old man died, and the old woman went to her daughter. Then a builder got hold of it, and modernized it with great success, selling it to a city gentleman who used it for week ends. About a year ago, he sold it to some people called Turner - Mr and Mrs Turner. They seem to have been rather a curious couple from all I can make out. He was an Englishman, his wife was popularly supposed to be partly Russian, and was a very handsome, exotic-looking woman. They lived very quietly, seeing no one, and hardly ever going outside the cottage garden. The local rumor goes that they were afraid of something - but I don't think we ought to rely on that.

"And then suddenly one day they departed, cleared out one morning early, and never came back. The agents here got a letter from Mr Turner, written from London, instructing him to sell the place as quickly as possible. The furniture was sold off, and the house itself was sold to a Mr Mauleverer. He only actually lived in it a fortnight - then he advertised it to be let furnished. The people who have it now are a consumptive French professor and his daughter. They have been there just ten days."

Jack digested this in silence.

"I don't see that that gets us any forrader," he said at last. "Do you?"

"I rather want to know more about the Turners," said Lavington quietly. "They left very early in the morning, you remember. As far as I can

make out, nobody actually saw them go. Mr Turner has been seen since - but I can't find anybody who has seen Mrs Turner."

Jack paled.

"It can't be - you don't mean -"

"Don't excite yourself, young man. The influence of anyone at the point of death - and especially of violent death - upon their surroundings is very strong. Those surroundings might conceivably absorb that influence, transmitting it in turn to a suitably tuned receiver - in this case yourself."

"But why me?" murmured Jack rebelliously. "Why not someone who could do some good?"

"You are regarding the force as intelligent and purposeful, instead of blind and mechanical. I do not believe myself in earth-bound spirits, haunting a spot for one particular purpose. But the thing I have seen, again and again, until I can hardly believe it to be pure coincidence, is a kind of blind groping towards justice - a subterranean moving of blind forces, always working obscurely towards that end..."

He shook himself, as though casting off some obsession that preoccupied him, and turned to Jack with a ready smile.

"Let us banish the subject - for tonight at all events," he suggested.

Jack agreed readily enough, but did not find it so easy to banish the subject from his own mind.

During the week end, he made vigorous inquiries of his own, but succeeded in eliciting little more than the doctor had done. He had definitely given up playing golf before breakfast.

The next link in the chain came from an unexpected quarter. On getting back one day, Jack was informed that a young lady was waiting to see him. To his intense surprise it proved to be the girl of the garden - the pansy girl, as he always called her in his own mind. She was very nervous and confused.

"You will forgive me, Monsieur, for coming to seek you like this? But there is something I want to tell you - I -"

She looked around uncertainly.

"Come in here," said Jack promptly, leading the way into the now deserted "Ladies' Drawing-room" of the hotel, a dreary apartment, with a good deal of red plush about it. "Now, sit down, Miss, Miss -"

"Marchaud, Monsieur. Felise Marchaud."

"Sit down, Mademoiselle Marchaud, and tell me all about it."

Felise sat down obediently. She was dressed in dark green today, and the beauty and charm of the proud little face was more evident than ever. Jack's heart beat faster as he sat down beside her.

"It is like this," explained Felise. "We have been here but a short time, and from the beginning we hear the house - our so sweet little house - is haunted. No servant will stay in it. That does not matter so much - me, I can do the ménage and cook easily enough."

"Angel," thought the infatuated young man. "She's wonderful."

But he maintained an outward semblance of business-like attention.

"This talk of ghosts, I think it is all folly - that is until four days ago. Monsieur, four nights running, I have had the same dream. A lady stands there - she is beautiful, tall and very fair. In her hands she holds a blue china jar. She is distressed - very distressed, and continually she holds out the jar to me, as though imploring me to do something with it. But alas! she cannot speak, and I - I do not know what she asks. That was the dream for the first two nights - but the night before last, there was more of it. She and the blue jar faded away, and suddenly I heard her voice crying out - I know it is her voice, you comprehend - and, oh! Monsieur, the words she says are those you spoke to me that morning. 'Murder - help! Murder!' I awoke in terror. I say to myself - it is a nightmare, the words you heard are an accident. But last night the dream came again. Monsieur, what is it? You too have heard. What shall we do?"

Felise's face was terrified. Her small hands clasped themselves together, and she gazed appealingly at Jack. The latter affected an unconcern he did not feel.

"That's all right, Mademoiselle Marchaud. You mustn't worry. I tell you what I'd like you to do, if you don't mind. Repeat the whole story to a friend of mine who is staying here, a Dr Lavington."

Felise signified her willingness to adopt this course, and Jack went off in search of Lavington. He returned with him a few minutes later.

Lavington gave the girl a keen scrutiny as he acknowledged Jack's hurried introductions. With a few reassuring words, he soon put the girl at her ease, and he, in his turn, listened attentively to her story.

"Very curious," he said, when she had finished. "You have told your father this?"

Felise shook her head.

"I have not liked to worry him. He is very ill still -" her eyes filled with tears - "I keep from him anything that might excite or agitate him."

"I understand," said Lavington kindly. "And I am glad you came to us, Mademoiselle Marchaud. Hartington here, as you know, had an experience something similar to yours. I think I may say that we are well on the track now. There is nothing else that you can think of?"

Felise gave a quick movement.

"Of course! How stupid I am. It is the point of the whole story. Look, Monsieur, at what I found at the back of one of the cupboards where it had slipped behind the shelf."

She held out to them a dirty piece of drawing-paper on which was executed roughly in water colors a sketch of a woman. It was a mere daub, but the likeness was probably good enough. It represented a tall fair woman, with something subtly un-English in her face. She was standing by a table on which was standing a blue china jar.

"I only found it this morning," explained Felise. "Monsieur le docteur, that is the face of the woman I saw in my dream, and that is the identical blue jar."

"Extraordinary," commented Lavington. "The key to the mystery is evidently the blue jar. It looks like a Chinese jar to me, probably an old one. It seems to have a curious raised pattern over it."

"It is Chinese," declared Jack. "I have seen an exactly similar one in my uncle's collection - he is a great collector of Chinese porcelain, you know, and I remember noticing a jar just like this a short time ago."

"The Chinese jar," mused Lavington. He remained a minute or two lost in thought, then raised his head suddenly, a curious light shining in his eyes. "Hartington, how long has your uncle had that jar?"

"How long? I really don't know."

"Think. Did he buy it lately?"

"I don't know - yes, I believe he did, now I come to think of it. I'm not very interested in porcelain myself, but I remember his showing me his 'recent acquisitions,' and this was one of them."

"Less than two months ago? The Turners left Heather Cottage just two months ago."

"Yes, I believe it was."

"Your uncle attends country sales sometimes?"

"He's always tooling round to sales."

"Then there is no inherent improbability in our assuming that he bought this particular piece of porcelain at the sale of the Turners' things. A curious coincidence - or perhaps what I call the groping of blind justice. Hartington, you must find out from your uncle at once where he bought this jar."

Jack's face fell.

"I'm afraid that's impossible. Uncle George is away on the Continent. I don't even know where to write to him."

"How long will he be away?"

"Three weeks to a month at least."

There was a silence. Felise sat looking anxiously from one man to the other.

"Is there nothing that we can do?" she asked timidly.

"Yes, there is one thing," said Lavington, in a tone of suppressed excitement. "It is unusual, perhaps, but I believe that it will succeed. Hartington, you must get hold of that jar. Bring it down here and, if Mademoiselle permits, we will spend a night in Heather Cottage, taking the blue jar with us."

Jack felt his skin creep uncomfortably.

"What do you think will happen?" he asked uneasily.

"I have not the slightest idea - but I honestly believe that the mystery will be solved and the ghost laid. Quite possibly there may be a false bottom to the jar and something is concealed inside it. If no phenomenon occurs, we must use our own ingenuity."

Felise clasped her hands.

"It is a wonderful idea," she exclaimed.

Her eyes were alight with enthusiasm. Jack did not feel nearly so enthusiastic - in fact, he was inwardly funking it badly, but nothing would have induced him to admit the fact before Felise. The doctor acted as though his suggestion were the most natural one in the world.

"When can you get the jar?" asked Felise, turning to Jack.

"Tomorrow," said the latter, unwillingly.

He had to go through with it now, but the memory of that frenzied cry for help that had haunted him each morning was something to be ruthlessly thrust down and not thought about more than could be helped.

He went to his uncle's house the following evening, and took away the jar in question. He was more than ever convinced when he saw it again that it was the identical one pictured in the water color sketch, but carefully as he looked it over he could see no sign that it contained a secret receptacle of any kind.

It was eleven o'clock when he and Lavington arrived at Heather Cottage. Felise was on the lookout for them, and opened the door softly before they had time to knock.

"Come in," she whispered. "My father is asleep upstairs, and we must not wake him. I have made coffee for you in here."

She led the way into a small cosy sitting-room. A spirit lamp stood in the grate, and bending over it, she brewed them both some fragrant coffee.

Then Jack unfastened the Chinese jar from its many wrappings. Felise gasped as her eyes fell on it.

"But yes, but yes," she cried eagerly. "That is it - I would know it anywhere."

Meanwhile Lavington was making his own preparations. He removed all the ornaments from a small table and set it in the middle of the room. Round it he placed three chairs. Then, taking the blue jar from Jack, he placed it in the center of the table.

"Now," he said, "we are ready. Turn off the lights, and let us sit round the table in the darkness."

The others obeyed him. Lavington's voice spoke again out of the darkness.

"Think of nothing - or of everything. Do not force the mind. It is possible that one of us has mediumistic powers. If so, that person will go into a trance. Remember, there is nothing to fear. Cast out fear from your hearts, and drift - drift -"

His voice died away and there was silence. Minute by minute, the silence seemed to grow more pregnant with possibilities. It was all very well for Lavington to say "Cast out fear." It was not fear that Jack felt - it was panic. And he was almost certain that Felise felt the same way. Suddenly he heard her voice, low and terrified.

"Something terrible is going to happen. I feel it."

"Cast out fear," said Lavington. "Do not fight against the influence."

The darkness seemed to get darker and the silence more acute. And nearer and nearer came that indefinable sense of menace.

Jack felt himself choking - stifling - the evil thing was very near...

And then the moment of conflict passed. He was drifting - drifting downstream - his lids closed - peace - darkness...

Jack stirred slightly. His head was heavy - heavy as lead. Where was he?

Sunshine... birds... He lay staring up at the sky.

Then it all came back to him. The sitting. The little room. Felise and the doctor. What had happened?

He sat up, his head throbbing unpleasantly, and looked round him. He was lying in a little copse not far from the cottage. No one else was near him. He took out his watch. To his amazement it registered half-past twelve.

Jack struggled to his feet, and ran as fast as he could in the direction of the cottage. They must have been alarmed by his failure to come out of the trance, and carried him out into the open air.

Arrived at the cottage, he knocked loudly on the door. But there was no answer, and no signs of life about it. They must have gone off to get

help. Or else - Jack felt an indefinable fear invade him. What had happened last night?

He made his way back to the hotel as quickly as possible. He was about to make some inquiries at the office, when he was diverted by a colossal punch in the ribs which nearly knocked him off his feet. Turning in some indignation, he beheld a white-haired old gentleman wheezing with mirth.

"Didn't expect me, my boy. Didn't expect me, hey?" said this individual.

"Why, Uncle George, I thought you were miles away - in Italy somewhere."

"Ah! but I wasn't. Landed at Dover last night. Thought I'd motor up to town and stop here to see you on the way. And what did I find. Out all night, hey? Nice goings on -"

"Uncle George," Jack checked him firmly. "I've got the most extraordinary story to tell you. I dare say you won't believe it."

He narrated the whole story.

"And God knows what's become of them," he ended.

His uncle seemed on the verge of apoplexy.

"The jar," he managed to ejaculate at last. "THE BLUE JAR! What's become of that?"

Jack stared at him in non-comprehension, but submerged in the torrent of words that followed he began to understand.

It came with a rush: "Ming - unique - gem of my collection - worth ten thousand pounds at least - offer from Hoggenheimer, the American millionaire - only one of its kind in the world. - Confound it, sir, what have you done with my BLUE JAR?"

Jack rushed to the office. He must find Lavington. The young lady in the office eyed him coldly.

"Dr Lavington left late last night - by motor. He left a note for you."

Jack tore it open. It was short and to the point.

My Dear Young Friend:

Is the day of the supernatural over? Not quite - especially when tricked out in new scientific language. Kindest regards from Felise, invalid father, and myself. We have twelve hours start, which ought to be ample.

Yours ever,

Ambrose Lavington,

Doctor of the Soul

THE STRANGE CASE OF SIR ARTHUR CARMICHAEL

(Taken from the notes of the late Dr Edward Carstairs, M.D., the eminent psychologist.)

I am perfectly aware that there are two distinct ways of looking at the strange and tragic events which I have set down here. My own opinion has never wavered. I have been persuaded to write the story out in full, and indeed I believe it to be due to science that such strange and inexplicable facts should not be buried in oblivion.

It was a wire from my friend, Dr Settle, that first introduced me to the matter. Beyond mentioning the name Carmichael, the wire was not explicit, but in obedience to it I took the 12:20 train from Paddington to Wolden, in Herefordshire.

The name of Carmichael was not unfamiliar to me. I had been slightly acquainted with the late Sir William Carmichael of Wolden, though I had seen nothing of him for the last eleven years. He had, I knew, one son, the present baronet, who must now be a young man of about twenty-three. I remembered vaguely having heard some rumours about Sir William's second marriage, but could recall nothing definite unless it were a vague impression detrimental to the second Lady Carmichael.

Settle met me at the station.

"Good of you to come," he said as he wrung my hand.

"Not at all. I understand this is something in my line?"

"Very much so."

"A mental case, then?" I hazarded. "Possessing some unusual features?"

We had collected my luggage by this time and were seated in a dogcart driving away from the station in the direction of Wolden, which lay about three miles away. Settle did not answer for a minute or two. Then he burst out suddenly.

"The whole thing's incomprehensible! Here is a young man, twenty-three years of age, thoroughly normal in every respect. A pleasant amiable boy, with no more than his fair share of conceit, not brilliant intellectually perhaps, but an excellent type of the ordinary upper-class young Englishman. Goes to bed in his usual health one evening, and is

found the next morning wandering about the village in a semi-idiotic condition, incapable of recognizing his nearest and dearest."

"Ah!" I said, stimulated. This case promised to be interesting. "Complete loss of memory? And this occurred -?"

"Yesterday morning. The ninth of August."

"And there has been nothing - no shock that you know of - to account for this state?"

"Nothing."

I had a sudden suspicion.

"Are you keeping anything back?"

"N-no."

His hesitation confirmed my suspicion.

"I must know everything."

"It's nothing to do with Arthur. It's to do with - with the house."

"With the house," I repeated, astonished.

"You've had a great deal to do with that sort of thing, haven't you, Carstairs? You've 'tested' so-called haunted houses. What's your opinion of the whole thing?"

"In nine cases out of ten, fraud," I replied. "But the tenth - well, I have come across phenomena that is absolutely unexplainable from the ordinary materialistic standpoint. I am a believer in the occult."

Settle nodded. We were just turning in at the Park gates. He pointed with his whip at a low-lying white mansion on the side of a hill.

"That's the house," he said. "And - there's something in that house, something uncanny - horrible. We all feel it... And I'm not a superstitious man..."

"What form does it take?" I asked.

He looked straight in front of him. "I'd rather you knew nothing. You see, if you - coming here unbiased - knowing nothing about it - see it too - well -"

"Yes," I said, "it's better so. But I should be glad if you will tell me a little more about the family."

"Sir William," said Settle, "was twice married. Arthur is the child of his first wife. Nine years ago he married again, and the present Lady Carmichael is something of a - mystery. She is only half English, and, I suspect, has Asiatic blood in her veins."

He paused.

"Settle," I said, "you don't like Lady Carmichael."

He admitted it frankly. "No, I don't. There has always seemed to me to be something sinister about her. Well, to continue; by his second wife Sir William had another child, also a boy, who is now eight years old. Sir William died three years ago, and Arthur came into the title and place. His stepmother and half-brother continued to live with him at Wolden. The estate, I must tell you, is very much impoverished. Nearly the whole of Sir Arthur's income goes to keeping it up. A few hundreds a year was all Sir William could leave his wife, but fortunately Arthur has always got on splendidly with his stepmother, and has been only too delighted to have her live with him. Now -"

"Yes?"

"Two months ago Arthur became engaged to a charming girl, a Miss Phyllis Patterson." He added, lowering his voice with a touch of emotion: "They were to have been married next month. She is staying here now. You can imagine her distress -"

I bowed my head silently.

We were driving up close to the house now. On our right the green lawn sloped gently away. And suddenly I saw a most charming picture. A young girl was coming slowly across the lawn to the house. She wore no hat, and the sunlight enhanced the gleam of her glorious golden hair.

She carried a great basket of roses, and a beautiful grey Persian cat twined itself lovingly round her feet as she walked.

I looked at Settle interrogatively.

"That is Miss Patterson," he said.

"Poor girl," I said, "poor girl. What a picture she makes with her roses and her grey cat."

I heard a faint sound and looked quickly round at my friend. The reins had slipped out of his fingers, and his face was quite white.

"What's the matter?" I exclaimed.

He recovered himself with an effort.

"Nothing," he said, "nothing."

In a few moments more we had arrived, and I was following him into the green drawing room, where tea was laid out.

A middle-aged but still beautiful woman rose as we entered and came forward with an outstretched hand.

"This is my friend, Dr Carstairs, Lady Carmichael."

I cannot explain the instinctive wave of repulsion that swept over me as I took the proffered hand of this charming and stately woman who

moved with the dark and languorous grace that recalled Settle's surmise of Oriental blood.

"It is very good of you to come, Dr Carstairs," she said in a low musical voice, "and to try and help us in our great trouble."

I made some trivial reply and she handed me my tea.

In a few minutes the girl I had seen on the lawn outside entered the room. The cat was no longer with her, but she still carried the basket of roses in her hand. Settle introduced me and she came forward impulsively.

"Oh! Dr Carstairs, Dr Settle has told us so much about you. I have a feeling that you will be able to do something for poor Arthur."

Miss Patterson was certainly a very lovely girl, though her cheeks were pale, and her frank eyes were outlined with dark circles.

"My dear young lady," I said reassuringly, "indeed you must not despair. These cases of lost memory, or secondary personality, are often of very short duration. At any minute the patient may return to his full powers."

She shook her head. "I can't believe in this being a second personality," she said. "This isn't Arthur at all. It is no personality of his. It isn't him. I - "

"Phyllis, dear," said Lady Carmichael's soft voice, "here is your tea."

And something in the expression of her eyes as they rested on the girl told me that Lady Carmichael had little love for her prospective daughter-in-law.

Miss Patterson declined the tea, and I said, to ease the conversation: "Isn't the pussycat going to have a saucer of milk?"

She looked at me rather strangely.

"The - pussycat?"

"Yes, your companion of a few moments ago in the garden -"

I was interrupted by a crash. Lady Carmichael had upset the tea kettle, and the hot water was pouring all over the floor. I remedied the matter, and Phyllis Patterson looked questioningly at Settle. He rose.

"Would you like to see your patient now, Carstairs?"

I followed him at once. Miss Patterson came with us. We went upstairs and Settle took a key from his pocket.

"He sometimes has a fit of wandering," he explained. "So I usually lock the door when I'm away from the house."

He turned the key in the lock and we went in.

A young man was sitting on the window seat where the last rays of the westerly sun struck broad and yellow. He sat curiously still, rather

hunched together, with every muscle relaxed. I thought at first that he was quite unaware of our presence until I suddenly saw that, under immovable lids, he was watching us closely. His eyes dropped as they met mine, and he blinked. But he did not move.

"Come, Arthur," said Settle cheerfully. "Miss Patterson and a friend of mine have come to see you."

But the young fellow on the window seat only blinked. Yet a moment or two later I saw him watching us again - furtively and secretly.

"Want your tea?" asked Settle, still loudly and cheerfully, as though talking to a child.

He set on the table a cup full of milk. I lifted my eyebrows in surprise, and Settle smiled.

"Funny thing," he said, "the only drink he'll touch is milk."

In a moment or two, without undue haste, Sir Arthur uncoiled himself, limb by limb, from his huddled position and walked slowly over to the table. I recognized suddenly that his movements were absolutely silent, his feet made no sound as they trod. Just as he reached the table, he gave a tremendous stretch, poised on one leg forward, the other stretching out behind him. He prolonged this exercise to its utmost extent, and then yawned. Never have I seen such a yawn! It seemed to swallow up his entire face.

He now turned his attention to the milk, bending down to the table until his lips touched the fluid.

Settle answered my inquiring look.

"Won't make use of his hands at all. Seems to have returned to a primitive state. Odd, isn't it?"

I felt Phyllis Patterson shrink against me a little, and I laid my hand soothingly on her arm.

The milk was finished at last, and Arthur Carmichael stretched himself once more, and then with the same quiet noiseless footsteps he regained the window seat, where he sat, huddled up as before, blinking at us.

Miss Patterson drew us out into the corridor. She was trembling all over.

"Oh! Dr Carstairs," she cried. "It isn't him - that thing in there isn't Arthur! I should feel - I should know -"

I shook my head sadly.

"The brain can play strange tricks, Miss Patterson."

I confess that I was puzzled by the case. It presented unusual features. Though I had never seen young Carmichael before, there was something about his peculiar manner of walking, and the way he

blinked, that reminded me of someone or something that I could not quite place.

Our dinner that night was a quiet affair, the burden of conversation being sustained by Lady Carmichael and myself. When the ladies had withdrawn, Settle asked me my impression of my hostess.

"I must confess," I said, "that for no cause or reason I dislike her intensely. You were quite right, she has Eastern blood, and, I should say, possesses marked occult powers. She is a woman of extraordinary magnetic force."

Settle seemed on the point of saying something, but checked himself and merely remarked after a minute or two: "She is absolutely devoted to her little son."

We sat in the green drawing room again after dinner. We had just finished coffee and were conversing rather stiffly on the topics of the day when the cat began to miaw piteously for admission outside the door. No one took any notice, and, as I am fond of animals, after a moment or two I rose.

"May I let the poor thing in?" I asked Lady Carmichael.

Her face seemed very white, I thought, but she made a faint gesture of the head which I took as assent and, going to the door, I opened it. But the corridor outside was quite empty.

"Strange," I said; "I could have sworn I heard a cat."

As I came back to my chair, I noticed they were all watching me intently. It somehow made me feel a little uncomfortable.

We retired to bed early. Settle accompanied me to my room.

"Got everything you want?" he asked, looking round.

"Yes, thanks."

He still lingered rather awkwardly as though there was something he wanted to say but could not quite get out.

"By the way," I remarked, "you said there was something uncanny about this house? As yet it seems most normal."

"You call it a cheerful house?"

"Hardly that, under the circumstances. It is obviously under the shadow of a great sorrow. But as regards any abnormal influence, I should give it a clean bill of health."

"Good night," said Settle abruptly. "And pleasant dreams."

Dream I certainly did. Miss Patterson's grey cat seemed to have impressed itself upon my brain. All night long, it seemed to me, I dreamt of the wretched animal.

Awaking with a start, I suddenly realized what had brought the cat so forcibly into my thoughts. The creature was miawing persistently outside my door. Impossible to sleep with that racket going on. I lit my candle and went to the door. But the passage outside my room was empty, though the miawing still continued. A new idea struck me. The unfortunate animal was shut up somewhere, unable to get out. To the left was the end of the passage, where Lady Carmichael's room was situated. I turned therefore to the right, but had taken but a few paces when the noise broke out again from behind me. I turned sharply and the sound came again, this time distinctly on the right of me.

Something, probably a draught in the corridor, made me shiver, and I went sharply back to my room. Everything was silent now, and I was soon asleep once more - to wake to another glorious summer's day.

As I was dressing, I saw from my window the disturber of my night's rest. The grey cat was creeping slowly and stealthily across the lawn. I judged its object of attack to be a small flock of birds who were busy chirruping and preening themselves not far away.

And then a very curious thing happened. The cat came straight on and passed through the midst of the birds, its fur almost brushing against them - and the birds did not fly away. I could not understand it - the thing seemed incomprehensible.

So vividly did it impress me that I could not refrain from mentioning it at breakfast.

"Do you know," I said to Lady Carmichael, "that you have a very unusual cat?"

I heard the quick rattle of a cup on a saucer, and I saw Phyllis Patterson, her lips parted and her breath coming quickly, gazing earnestly at me.

There was a moment's silence, and then Lady Carmichael said in a distinctly disagreeable manner: "I think you must have made a mistake. There is no cat here. I have never had a cat."

It was evident that I had managed to put my foot in it badly, so I hastily changed the subject.

But the matter puzzled me. Why had Lady Carmichael declared there was no cat in the house? Was it perhaps Miss Patterson's, and its presence concealed from the mistress of the house? Lady Carmichael might have one of those strange antipathies to cats which are so often met with nowadays. It hardly seemed a plausible explanation, but I was forced to rest content with it for the moment.

Our patient was still in the same condition. This time I made a thorough examination and was able to study him more closely than the night before. At my suggestion it was arranged that he should spend as much time with the family as possible. I hoped not only to have a better opportunity of observing him when he was off his guard, but that the ordinary everyday routine might awaken some gleam of intelligence. His demeanour, however, remained unchanged. He was quiet and docile, seemed vacant, but was, in point of fact, intensely and rather slyly watchful. One thing certainly came as a surprise to me - the

intense affection he displayed towards his stepmother. Miss Patterson he ignored completely, but he always managed to sit as near Lady Carmichael as possible, and once I saw him rub his head against her shoulder in a dumb expression of love.

I was worried about the case. I could not but feel that there was some clue to the whole matter which had so far escaped me.

"This is a very strange case," I said to Settle.

"Yes," said he, "it's very - suggestive."

He looked at me - rather furtively, I thought.

"Tell me," he said. "He doesn't - remind you of anything?"

The words struck me disagreeably, reminding me of my impression of the day before.

"Remind me of what?" I asked.

He shook his head.

"Perhaps it's my fancy," he muttered. "Just my fancy."

And he would say no more on the matter.

Altogether there was mystery shrouding the affair. I was still obsessed with that baffling feeling of having missed the clue that should elucidate

it to me. And concerning a lesser matter there was also mystery. I mean that trifling affair of the grey cat. For some reason or other the thing was getting on my nerves. I dreamed of cats - I continually fancied I heard them. Now and then in the distance I caught a glimpse of the beautiful animal. And the fact that there was some mystery connected with it fretted me unbearably. On a sudden impulse I applied one afternoon to the footman for information.

"Can you tell me anything," I said, "about the cat I see?"

"The cat, sir?" He appeared politely surprised.

"Wasn't there - isn't there - a cat?"

"Her ladyship had a cat sir. A great pet. Had to be put away though. A great pity, as it was a beautiful animal."

"A grey cat?" I asked slowly.

"Yes, sir. A Persian."

"And you say it was destroyed?"

"Yes, sir."

"You're quite sure it was destroyed?"

"Oh, quite sure, sir! Her ladyship wouldn't have him sent to the vet - but did it herself. A little less than a week ago now. He's buried out there

under the copper beech, sir." And he went out of the room. leaving me to my meditations.

Why had Lady Carmichael affirmed so positively that she had never had a cat?

I felt an intuition that this trifling affair of the cat was in some way significant. I found Settle and took him aside.

"Settle," I said, "I want to ask you a question. Have you, or have you not, both seen and heard a cat in this house?"

He did not seem surprised at the question. Rather did he seem to have been expecting it.

"I've heard it," he said. "I've not seen it."

"But that first day," I cried. "On the lawn with Miss Patterson!"

He looked at me very steadily.

"I saw Miss Patterson walking across the lawn. Nothing else."

I began to understand. "Then," I said, "the cat -?"

He nodded.

"I wanted to see if you - unprejudiced - would hear what we all hear...?"

"You all hear it then?"

He nodded again.

"It's strange," I murmured thoughtfully. "I never heard of a cat haunting a place before."

I told him what I had learned from the footman, and he expressed surprise.

"That's news to me. I didn't know that."

"But what does it mean?" I asked helplessly.

He shook his head. "Heaven only knows! But I'll tell you, Carstairs - I'm afraid. The - thing's voice sounds - menacing."

"Menacing?" I said sharply. "To whom?"

He spread out his hands. "I can't say."

It was not till that evening after dinner that I realized the meaning of his words. We were sitting in the green drawing room, as on the night of my arrival, when it came - the loud insistent miawing of a cat outside the door. But this time it was unmistakably angry in its tone - a fierce cat yowl, long-drawn and menacing. And then as it ceased, the brass hook outside the door was rattled violently as by a cat's paw.

Settle started up.

"I swear that's real," he cried.

He rushed to the door and flung it open.

There was nothing there.

He came back mopping his brow. Phyllis was pale and trembling, Lady Carmichael deathly white. Only Arthur, squatting contentedly like a child, his head against his stepmother's knee, was calm and undisturbed.

Miss Patterson laid her hand on my arm as we went upstairs.

"Oh! Dr Carstairs," she cried. "What is it? What does it all mean?"

"We don't know yet, my dear young lady," I said. "But I mean to find out. But you mustn't be afraid. I am convinced there is no danger to you personally."

She looked at me doubtfully. "You think that?"

"I am sure of it," I answered firmly. I remembered the loving way the grey cat had twined itself round her feet, and I had no misgivings. The menace was not for her.

I was some time dropping off to sleep, but at length I fell into an uneasy slumber from which I awoke with a sense of shock. I heard a scratching, sputtering noise as of something being violently ripped or torn. I sprang

out of bed and rushed out into the passage. At the same moment Settle burst out of his room opposite. The sound came from our left.

"You hear it, Carstairs?" he cried. "You hear it?"

We came swiftly up to Lady Carmichael's door. Nothing had passed us, but the noise had ceased. Our candles glittered blankly on the shiny panels of Lady Carmichael's door. We stared at one another.

"You know what it was?" he half whispered.

I nodded. "A cat's claws ripping and tearing something." I shivered a little. Suddenly I gave an exclamation and lowered the candle I held.

"Look here, Settle."

"Here" was a chair that rested against the wall - and the seat of it was ripped and torn in long strips...

We examined it closely. He looked at me and I nodded.

"Cat's claws," he said, drawing in his breath sharply. "Unmistakable." His eyes went from the chair to the closed door. "That's the person who is menaced. Lady Carmichael!"

I slept no more that night. Things had come to a pass where something must be done. As far as I knew, there was only one person who had the key to the situation. I suspected Lady Carmichael of knowing more than she chose to tell.

She was deathly pale when she came down the next morning, and only toyed with the food on her plate. I was sure that only an iron determination kept her from breaking down. After breakfast I requested a few words with her. I went straight to the point.

"Lady Carmichael," I said. "I have reason to believe that you are in very grave danger."

"Indeed?" She braved it out with wonderful unconcern.

"There is in this house," I continued, "a Thing - a Presence - that is obviously hostile to you."

"What nonsense," she murmured scornfully. "As if I believed in any rubbish of that kind."

"The chair outside your door," I remarked dryly, "was ripped to ribbons last night."

"Indeed?" With raised eyebrows she pretended surprise, but I saw that I had told her nothing she did not know. "Some stupid practical joke, I suppose."

"It was not that," I replied with some feeling. "And I want you to tell me - for your own sake -" I paused.

"Tell you what?" she queried.

"Anything that can throw light on the matter," I said gravely.

She laughed.

"I know nothing," she said. "Absolutely nothing."

And no warnings of danger could induce her to relax the statement. Yet I was convinced that she did know a great deal more than any of us, and held some clue to the affair of which we were absolutely ignorant. But I saw that it was quite impossible to make her speak. I determined, however, to take every precaution that I could, convinced as I was that she was menaced by a very real and immediate danger. Before she went to her room the following night, Settle and I made a thorough examination of it. We had agreed that we would take it in turns to watch in the passage.

I took the first watch, which passed without incident, and at three o'clock Settle relieved me. I was tired after my sleepless night the day before, and dropped off at once. And I had a very curious dream.

I dreamed that the grey cat was sitting at the foot of my bed and that its eyes were fixed on mine with a curious pleading. Then, with the ease of dreams, I knew that the creature wanted me to follow it. I did so, and it led me down the great staircase and right to the opposite wing of the house to a room which was obviously the library. It paused there at one side of the room and raised its front paws till they rested on one of the lower shelves of books, while it gazed at me once more with that same moving look of appeal.

Then - cat and library faded, and I awoke to find that morning had come.

Settle's watch had passed without incident, but he was keenly interested to hear of my dream. At my request he took me to the library, which coincided in every particular with my vision of it. I could even point out the exact spot where the animal had given me that last sad look.

We both stood there in silent perplexity. Suddenly an idea occurred to me, and I stooped to read the titles of the books in that exact place. I noticed that there was a gap in the line.

"Some book had been taken out of here," I said to Settle.

He stooped also to the shelf.

"Hallo," he said. "There's a nail at the back here that has torn off a fragment of the missing volume."

He detached the little scrap of paper with care. It was not more than an inch square - but on it were printed two significant words: "The cat..."

We looked at each other.

"This thing gives me the creeps," said Settle. "It's simply horribly uncanny."

"I'd give anything to know," I said, "what book it is that is missing from here. Do you think there is any way of finding out?"

"May be a catalogue somewhere. Perhaps Lady Carmichael -"

I shook my head.

"Lady Carmichael will tell you nothing."

"You think so?"

"I am sure of it. While we are guessing and feeling about in the dark, Lady Carmichael knows. And for reasons of her own she will say nothing. She prefers to run a most horrible risk sooner than break silence."

The day passed with an uneventfulness that reminded me of the calm before a storm. And I had a strange feeling that the problem was near solution. I was groping about in the dark, but soon I should see. The facts were all there, ready, waiting for the little flash of illumination that should weld them together and show out their significance.

And come it did! In the strangest way!

It was when we were all sitting together in the green drawing room as usual after dinner. We had been very silent. So noiseless indeed was the room that a little mouse ran across the floor - and in an instant the thing happened.

With one long spring Arthur Carmichael leapt from his chair. His quivering body was swift as an arrow on the mouse's track. It had

disappeared behind the wainscoting, and there he crouched - watchful - his body still trembling with eagerness.

It was horrible! I have never known such a paralyzing moment. I was no longer puzzled as to that something that Arthur Carmichael reminded me of with his stealthy feet and watching eyes. And in a flash an explanation, wild, incredible, unbelievable, swept into my mind. I rejected it as impossible - unthinkable! But I could not dismiss it from my thoughts.

I hardly remember what happened next. The whole thing seemed blurred and unreal. I know that somehow we got upstairs and said our good nights briefly, almost with a dread of meeting each other's eyes, lest we should see there some confirmation of our own fears.

Settle established himself outside Lady Carmichael's door to take the first watch, arranging to call me at 3 A.M. I had no special fears for Lady Carmichael; I was too taken up with my fantastic impossible theory. I told myself it was impossible - but my mind returned to it, fascinated.

And then suddenly the stillness of the night was disturbed. Settle's voice rose in a shout, calling me. I rushed out into the corridor.

He was hammering and pounding with all his might on Lady Carmichael's door.

"Devil take the woman!" he cried. "She's locked it!"

"But -"

"It's in there, man! Can't you hear it?"

From behind the locked door a long-drawn cat yowl sounded fiercely. And then following it a horrible scream - and another... I recognized Lady Carmichael's voice.

"The door!" I yelled. "We must break it in. In another minute we shall be too late."

We set our shoulders against it, and heaved with all our might. It gave with a crash - and we almost fell into the room.

Lady Carmichael lay on the bed bathed in blood. I have seldom seen a more horrible sight. Her heart was still beating, but her injuries were terrible, for the skin of the throat was all ripped and torn... Shuddering, I whispered: "The Claws..." A thrill of superstitious horror ran over me.

I dressed and bandaged the wounds carefully and suggested to Settle that the exact nature of the injuries had better be kept secret, especially from Miss Patterson. I wrote out a telegram for a hospital nurse to be despatched as soon as the telegraph office was open. The dawn was now stealing in at the window. I looked out on the lawn below.

"Get dressed and come out," I said abruptly to Settle. "Lady Carmichael will be all right now."

He was soon ready, and we went out into the garden together.

"What are you going to do?"

"Dig up the cat's body," I said briefly. "I must be sure -"

I found a spade in a tool shed and we set to work beneath the large copper beech tree. At last our digging was rewarded. It was not a pleasant job. The animal had been dead a week. But I saw what I wanted to see.

"That's the cat," I said. "The identical cat I saw the first day I came here."

Settle sniffed. An odour of bitter almonds was still perceptible.

"Prussic acid," he said.

I nodded.

"What are you thinking?" he asked curiously.

"What you think, too!"

My surmise was no new one to him - it had passed through his brain also, I could see.

"It's impossible," he murmured. "Impossible! It's against all science - all nature..." His voice tailed off in a shudder. "That mouse last night," he said. "But - oh, it couldn't be!"

"Lady Carmichael," I said, "is a very strange woman. She has occult powers - hypnotic powers. Her forebears came from the East. Can we know what use she might have made of these powers over a weak lovable nature such as Arthur Carmichael's? And remember, Settle, if Arthur Carmichael remains a hopeless imbecile, devoted to her, the whole property is practically hers and her son's - whom you have told me she adores. And Arthur was going to be married!"

"But what are we going to do, Carstairs?"

"There's nothing to be done," I said. "We'll do our best, though, to stand between Lady Carmichael and vengeance."

Lady Carmichael improved slowly. Her injuries healed themselves as well as could be expected - the scars of that terrible assault she would probably bear to the end of her life.

I had never felt more helpless. The power that defeated us was still at large, undefeated, and though quiescent for the minute we could hardly regard as doing otherwise than biding its time. I was determined upon one thing. As soon as Lady Carmichael was well enough to be moved, she must be taken away from Wolden. There was just a chance that the terrible manifestation might be unable to follow her. So the days went on.

I had fixed September 18 as the date of Lady Carmichael's removal. It was on the morning of the 14th when the unexpected crisis arose.

I was in the library discussing details of Lady Carmichael's case with Settle when an agitated housemaid rushed into the room.

"Oh, sir!" she cried. "Be quick! Mr Arthur - he's fallen into the pond. He stepped on the punt and it pushed off with him, and he overbalanced and fell in! I saw it from the window."

I waited for no more, but ran straight out of the room followed by Settle. Phyllis was just outside and had heard the maid's story. She ran with us.

"But you needn't be afraid," she cried. "Arthur is a magnificent swimmer."

I felt forebodings, however, and redoubled my pace. The surface of the pond was unruffled. The empty punt floated lazily about - but of Arthur there was no sign.

Settle pulled off his coat and his boots. "I'm going in," he said. "You take the boat hook and fish about from the other punt. It's not very deep."

Very long the time seemed as we searched vainly.

Minute followed minute. And then, just as we were despairing, we found him, and bore the apparently lifeless body of Arthur Carmichael to shore.

As long as I live I shall never forget the hopeless agony of Phyllis's face.

"Not - not -" Her lips refused to frame the dreadful word.

"No, no, my dear," I cried. "We'll bring him round, never fear."

But inwardly I had little hope. He had been under water for half an hour. I sent off Settle to the house for hot blankets and other necessaries, and began myself to apply artificial respiration.

We worked vigorously with him for over an hour, but there was no sign of life. I motioned to Settle to take my place again, and I approached Phyllis.

"I'm afraid," I said gently, "that it is no good. Arthur is beyond our help."

She stayed quite still for a moment and then suddenly flung herself down on the lifeless body.

"Arthur!" she cried desperately. "Arthur! Come back to me! Arthur - come back - come back!"

Her voice echoed away into silence. Suddenly I touched Settle's arm. "Look!" I said.

A faint tinge of colour had crept into the drowned man's face. I felt his heart.

"Go on with the respiration," I cried. "He's coming round!"

The moments seemed to fly now. In a marvellously short time his eyes opened.

Then suddenly I realized a difference. These were intelligent eyes, human eyes...

They rested on Phyllis.

"Hallo! Phil," he said weakly. "Is it you? I thought you weren't coming until tomorrow."

She could not yet trust herself to speak, but she smiled at him. He looked around with increasing bewilderment.

"But, I say, where am I? And - how rotten I feel! What's the matter with me? Hallo, Dr Settle!"

"You've been nearly drowned - that's what's the matter," returned Settle grimly.

Sir Arthur made a grimace.

"I've always heard it was beastly coming back afterwards! But how did it happen? Was I walking in my sleep?"

Settle shook his head.

"We must get him to the house," I said, stepping forward.

He stared at me, and Phyllis introduced me. "Dr Carstairs, who is staying here."

We supported him between us and started for the house. He looked up suddenly as though struck by an idea.

"I say, doctor, this won't knock me up for the twelfth, will it?"

"The twelfth?" I said slowly, "you mean the twelfth of August?"

"Yes - next Friday."

"Today is the fourteenth of September," said Settle abruptly.

His bewilderment was evident.

"But - but I thought it was the eighth of August? I must have been ill then?"

Phyllis interposed rather quickly in her gentle voice.

"Yes," she said, "you've been very ill."

He frowned. "I can't understand it. I was perfectly all right when I went to bed last night - at least of course it wasn't really last night. I had dreams, though. I remember, dreams..." His brow furrowed itself still more as he strove to remember. "Something - what was it? - something dreadful - someone had done it to me - and I was angry - desperate... And then I dreamed I was a cat - yes, a cat! Funny, wasn't it? But it

wasn't a funny dream. It was more - horrible! But I can't remember. It all goes when I think."

I laid my hand on his shoulder. "Don't try to think, Sir Arthur, I said gravely. "Be content - to forget."

He looked at me in a puzzled way and nodded. I heard Phyllis draw a breath of relief. We had reached the house.

"By the way," said Sir Arthur suddenly, "where's the mater?"

"She has been - ill," said Phyllis after a momentary pause.

"Oh! Poor old mater!" His voice rang with genuine concern. "Where is she? In her room?"

"Yes," I said, "but you had better not disturb -"

The words froze on my lips. The door of the drawing room opened and Lady Carmichael, wrapped in a dressing gown, came out into the hall.

Her eyes were fixed on Arthur, and if ever I have seen a look of absolute guilt-stricken terror, I saw it then. Her face was hardly human in its frenzied terror. Her hand went to her throat.

Arthur advanced towards her with boyish affection.

"Hallo, mater! So you've been ill too? I say, I'm awfully sorry."

She shrank back before him, her eyes dilating. Then suddenly, with the shriek of a doomed soul, she fell backwards through the open door.

I rushed and bent over her, then beckoned to Settle.

"Hush," I said. "Take him upstairs quietly and then come down again. Lady Carmichael is dead."

He returned in a few minutes.

"What was it?" he asked. "What caused it?"

"Shock." I said grimly. "The shock of seeing Arthur Carmichael, the real Arthur Carmichael, restored to life! Or you may call it, as I prefer to, the judgment of God!"

"You mean -" He hesitated.

I looked at him in the eyes so that he understood.

"A life for a life," I said significantly.

"But -"

"Oh! I know that a strange and unforeseen accident permitted the spirit of Arthur Carmichael to return to his body. But, nevertheless, Arthur Carmichael was murdered."

He looked at me half fearfully. "With prussic acid?" he asked in a low tone.

"Yes," I answered. "With prussic acid."

Settle and I have never spoken of our belief. It is not one likely to be credited. According to the orthodox point of view Arthur Carmichael merely suffered from loss of memory, Lady Carmichael lacerated her own throat in a temporary fit of mania, and the apparition of the Grey Cat was mere imagination.

But there are two facts that to my mind are unmistakable. One is the ripped chair in the corridor. The other is even more significant. A catalogue of the library was found, and after exhaustive search it was proved that the missing volume was an ancient and curious work on the possibilities of the metamorphosis of human beings into animals!

One thing more. I am thankful to say that Arthur knows nothing. Phyllis has locked the secret of those weeks in her own heart, and she will never, I am sure, reveal them to the husband she loves so dearly, and who came back across the barrier of the grave at the call of her voice.

Mr Mayherne adjusted his pince-nez and cleared his throat with a little dry-as-dust cough that was wholly typical of him. Then he looked again at the man opposite him, the man charged with willful murder.

Mr Mayherne was a small man, precise in manner, neatly, not to say foppishly dressed, with a pair of very shrewd and piercing gray eyes. By no means a fool. Indeed, as a solicitor, Mr Mayherne's reputation stood very high. His voice, when he spoke to his client, was dry but not unsympathetic.

"I must impress upon you again that you are in very grave danger, and that the utmost frankness is necessary."

Leonard Vole, who had been staring in a dazed fashion at the blank wall in front of him, transferred his glance to the solicitor.

"I know," he said hopelessly. "You keep telling me so. But I can't seem to realize yet that I'm charged with murder - murder. And such a dastardly crime too."

Mr Mayherne was practical, not emotional. He coughed again, took off his pince-nez, polished them carefully, and replaced them on his nose. Then he said:

"Yes, yes, yes. Now, my dear Mr Vole, we're going to make a determined effort to get you off - and we shall succeed - we shall

succeed. But I must have all the facts. I must know just how damaging the case against you is likely to be. Then we can fix upon the best line of defense."

Still the young man looked at him in the same dazed, hopeless fashion. To Mr Mayherne the case had seemed black enough, and the guilt of the prisoner assured. Now, for the first time, he felt a doubt.

"You think I'm guilty," said Leonard Vole, in a low voice. "But, by God, I swear I'm not! It looks pretty black against me, I know that. I'm like a man caught in a net - the meshes of it all round me, entangling me whichever way I turn. But I didn't do it, Mr Mayherne, I didn't do it!"

In such a position a man was bound to protest his innocence. Mr Mayherne knew that. Yet, in spite of himself, he was impressed. It might be, after all, that Leonard Vole was innocent

"You are right, Mr Vole," he said gravely. "The case does look very black against you. Nevertheless, I accept your assurance. Now, let us get to facts. I want you to tell me in your own words exactly how you came to make the acquaintance of Miss Emily French."

"It was one day in Oxford Street. I saw an elderly lady crossing the road. She was carrying a lot of parcels. In the middle of the street she dropped them, tried to recover them, found a bus was almost on top of her and just managed to reach the curb safely, dazed and bewildered by people having shouted at her. I recovered her parcels, wiped the mud off them as best I could, retied the string of one, and returned them to her."

"There was no question of your having saved her life?"

"Oh, dear me, no! All I did was to perform a common act of courtesy. She was extremely grateful, thanked me warmly, and said something about my manners not being those of most of the younger generation - I can't remember the exact words. Then I lifted my hat and went on. I never expected to see her again. But life is full of coincidences. That very evening I came across her at a party at a friend's house. She recognized me at once and asked that I should be introduced to her. I then found out that she was a Miss Emily French and that she lived at Cricklewood. I talked to her for some time. She was, I imagine, an old lady who took sudden and violent fancies to people. She took one to me on the strength of a perfectly simple action which anyone might have performed. On leaving, she shook me warmly by the hand, and asked me to come and see her. I replied, of course, that I should be very pleased to do so, and she then urged me to name a day. I did not want particularly to go, but it would have seemed churlish to refuse, so I fixed on the following Saturday. After she had gone, I learned something about her from my friends. That she was rich, eccentric, lived alone with one maid and owned no less than eight cats."

"I see," said Mr Mayherne. "The question of her being well off came up as early as that?"

"If you mean that I inquired -" began Leonard Vole hotly, but Mr Mayherne stilled him with a gesture.

"I have to look at the case as it will be presented by the other side. An ordinary observer would not have supposed Miss French to be a lady of means. She lived poorly, almost humbly. Unless you had been told the contrary, you would in all probability have considered her to be in poor circumstances - at any rate to begin with. Who was it exactly who told you that she was well off?"

"My friend, George Harvey, at whose house the party took place."

"Is he likely to remember having done so?"

"I really don't know. Of course it is some time ago now."

"Quite so, Mr Vole. You see, the first aim of the prosecution will be to establish that you were in low water financially - that is true, is it not?"

Leonard Vole flushed.

"Yes," he said, in a low voice. "I'd been having a run of infernal bad luck just then."

"Quite so," said Mr Mayherne again. "That being, as I say, in low water financially, you met this rich old lady and cultivated her acquaintance assiduously. Now if we are in a position to say that you had no idea she was well off, and that you visited her out of pure kindness of heart -"

"Which is the case."

"I dare say. I am not disputing the point. I am looking at it from the outside point of view. A great deal depends on the memory of Mr Harvey. Is he likely to remember that conversation or is he not? Could he be confused by counsel into believing that it took place later?"

Leonard Vole reflected for some minutes. Then he said steadily enough, but with a rather paler face:

"I do not think that that line would be successful, Mr Mayherne. Several of those present heard his remark, and one or two of them chaffed me about my conquest of a rich old lady."

The solicitor endeavored to hide his disappointment with a wave of the hand.

"Unfortunate," he said. "But I congratulate you upon your plain speaking, Mr Vole. It is to you I look to guide me. Your judgment is quite right. To persist in the line I spoke of would have been disastrous. We must leave that point. You made the acquaintance of Miss French, you called upon her, the acquaintanceship progressed. We want a clear reason for all this. Why did you, a young man of thirty-three, good-looking, fond of sport, popular with your friends, devote so much of your time to an elderly woman with whom you could hardly have anything in common?"

Leonard Vole flung out his hands in a nervous gesture.

"I can't tell you - I really can't tell you. After the first visit, she pressed me to come again, spoke of being lonely and unhappy. She made it

difficult for me to refuse. She showed so plainly her fondness and affection for me that I was placed in an awkward position. You see, Mr Mayherne, I've got a weak nature - I drift - I'm one of those people who can't say 'No.' And believe me or not, as you like, after the third or fourth visit I paid her I found myself getting genuinely fond of the old thing. My mother died when I was young, an aunt brought me up, and she too died before I was fifteen. If I told you that I genuinely enjoyed being mothered and pampered, I dare say you'd only laugh."

Mr Mayherne did not laugh. Instead he took off his pince-nez again and polished them, a sign with him that he was thinking deeply.

"I accept your explanation, Mr Vole," he said at last "I believe it to be psychologically probable. Whether a jury would take that view of it is another matter. Please continue your narrative. When was it that Miss French first asked you to look into her business affairs?"

"After my third or fourth visit to her. She understood very little of money matters, and was worried about some investments."

Mr Mayherne looked up sharply.

"Be careful, Mr Vole. The maid, Janet Mackenzie, declares that her mistress was a good woman of business and transacted all her own affairs, and this is borne out by the testimony of her bankers."

"I can't help that," said Vole earnestly. "That's what she said to me."

Mr Mayherne looked at him for a moment or two in silence. Though he had no intention of saying so, his belief in Leonard Vole's innocence was at that moment strengthened. He knew something of the mentality of elderly ladies. He saw Miss French, infatuated with the good-looking young man, hunting about for pretexts that would bring him to the house. What more likely than that she should plead ignorance of business, and beg him to help her with her money affairs? She was enough of a woman of the world to realize that any man is slightly flattered by such an admission of his superiority. Leonard Vole had been flattered. Perhaps, too, she had not been averse to letting this young man know that she was wealthy. Emily French had been a strong-willed old woman, willing to pay her price for what she wanted. All this passed rapidly through Mr Mayherne's mind, but he gave no indication of it, and asked instead a further question.

"And you did handle her affairs for her at request?"

"I did."

"Mr Vole," said the solicitor, "I am going to ask you a very serious question, and one to which it is vital I should have a truthful answer. You were in low water financially. You had the handling of an old lady's affairs - an old lady who, according to her own statement, knew little or nothing of business. Did you at any time, or in any manner, convert to your own use the securities which you handled? Did you engage in any transaction for your own pecuniary advantage which will not bear the light of day?" He quelled the other's response. "Wait a minute before you answer. There are two courses open to us. Either we can make a feature of your probity and honesty in conducting her affairs whilst

pointing out how unlikely it is that you would commit murder to obtain money which you might have obtained by such infinitely easier means. If, on the other hand, there is anything in your dealings which the prosecution will get hold of - if, to put it baldly, it can be proved that you swindled the old lady in any way, we must take the line that you had no motive for the murder, since she was already a profitable source of income to you. You perceive the distinction. Now, I beg of you, take your time before you reply."

But Leonard Vole took no time at all.

"My dealings with Miss French's affairs were all perfectly fair and above board. I acted for her interests to the very best of my ability, as anyone will find who looks into the matter."

"Thank you," said Mr Mayherne. "You relieve my mind very much. I pay you the compliment of believing that you are far too clever to lie to me over such an important matter."

"Surely," said Vole eagerly, "the strongest point in my favor is the lack of motive. Granted that I cultivated the acquaintanceship of a rich old lady in the hopes of getting money out of her - that, I gather, is the substance of what you have been saying - surely her death frustrates all my hopes?"

The solicitor looked at him steadily. Then, very deliberately, he repeated his unconscious trick with his pince-nez. It was not until they were firmly replaced on his nose that he spoke.

"Are you not aware, Mr Vole, that Miss French left a will under which you are the principal beneficiary?"

"What?" The prisoner sprang to his feet. His dismay was obvious and unforced. "My God! What are you saying? She left her money to me?"

Mr Mayherne nodded slowly. Vole sank down again, his head in his hands.

"You pretend you know nothing of this will?"

"Pretend? There's no pretense about it I knew nothing about it."

"What would you say if I told you that the maid, Janet Mackenzie, swears that you did know? That her mistress told her distinctly that she had consulted you in the matter, and told you of her intentions?"

"Say? That she's lying! No, I go too fast. Janet is an elderly woman. She was a faithful watchdog to her mistress, and she didn't like me. She was jealous and suspicious. I should say that Miss French confided her intentions to Janet, and that Janet either mistook something she said, or else was convinced in her own mind that I had persuaded the old lady into doing it. I dare say that she herself believes now that Miss French actually told her so."

"You don't think she dislikes you enough to lie deliberately about the matter?"

Leonard Vole looked shocked and startled.

"No, indeed! Why should she?"

"I don't know," said Mr Mayherne thoughtfully. "But she's very bitter against you."

The wretched young man groaned again.

"I'm beginning to see," he muttered. "It's frightful. I made up to her, that's what they'll say, I got her to make a will leaving her money to me, and then I go there that night, and there's nobody in the house - they find her the next day - oh! my God, it's awful!"

"You are wrong about there being nobody in the house," said Mr Mayherne. "Janet, as you remember, was to go out for the evening. She went, but about half-past nine she returned to fetch the pattern of a blouse sleeve which she had promised to a friend. She let herself in by the back door, went upstairs and fetched it, and went out again. She heard voices in the sitting-room, though she could not distinguish what they said, but she will swear that one of them was Miss French's and one was a man's."

"At half-past nine," said Leonard Vole. "At half-past nine..." He sprang to his feet. "But then I'm saved - saved -"

"What do you mean, saved?" cried Mr Mayherne, astonished.

"By half-past nine I was at home again! My wife can prove that. I left Miss French about five minutes to nine. I arrived home about twenty

past nine. My wife was there waiting for me. Oh, thank God - thank God! And bless Janet Mackenzie's sleeve pattern."

In his exuberance, he hardly noticed that the grave expression on the solicitor's face had not altered. But the latter's words brought him down to earth with a bump.

"Who, then, in your opinion, murdered Miss French?"

"Why, a burglar, of course, as was thought at first. The window was forced, you remember. She was killed with a heavy blow from a crowbar, and the crowbar was found lying on the floor beside the body. And several articles were missing. But for Janet's absurd suspicions and dislike of me, the police would never have swerved from the right track."

"That will hardly do, Mr Vole," said the solicitor. "The things that were missing were mere trifles of no value, taken as a blind. And the marks on the window were not at all conclusive. Besides, think for yourself. You say you were no longer in the house by half-past nine. Who, then, was the man Janet heard talking to Miss French in the sitting-room? She would hardly be having an amicable conversation with a burglar?"

"No," said Vole. "No -" He looked puzzled and discouraged. "But, anyway," he added with reviving spirit, "it lets me out I've got an alibi. You must see Romaine - my wife - at once."

"Certainly," acquiesced the lawyer. "I should already have seen Mrs Vole but for her being absent when you were arrested. I wired to Scotland at once, and I understand that she arrives back tonight. I am going to call upon her immediately I leave here."

Vole nodded, a great expression of satisfaction settling down over his face.

"Yes, Romaine will tell you. My God! it's a lucky chance that."

"Excuse me, Mr Vole, but you are very fond of your wife?"

"Of course."

"And she of you?"

"Romaine is devoted to me. She'd do anything in the world for me."

He spoke enthusiastically, but the solicitor's heart sank a little lower. The testimony of a devoted wife - would it gain credence?

"Was there anyone else who saw you return at nine-twenty. A maid, for instance?"

"We have no maid."

"Did you meet anyone in the street on the way back?"

"Nobody I knew. I rode part of the way in a bus. The conductor might remember."

Mr Mayherne shook his head doubtfully.

"There is no one, then, who can confirm your wife's testimony?"

"No. But it isn't necessary, surely?"

"I dare say not. I dare say not," said Mr Mayherne hastily. "Now there's just one thing more. Did Miss French know that you were a married man?"

"Oh, yes."

"Yet you never took your wife to see her. Why was that?"

For the first time, Leonard Vole's answer came halting and uncertain.

"Well - I don't know."

"Are you aware that Janet Mackenzie says her mistress believed you to be single, and contemplated marrying you in the future?"

Vole laughed.

"Absurd! There was forty years' difference in age between us."

"It has been done," said the solicitor drily. "The fact remains. Your wife never met Miss French?"

"No -" Again the constraint.

"You will permit me to say," said the lawyer, "that I hardly understand your attitude in the matter."

Vole flushed, hesitated, and then spoke.

"I'll make a clean breast of it. I was hard up, as you know. I hoped that Miss French might lend me some money. She was fond of me, but she wasn't at all interested in the struggles of a young couple. Early on, I found that she had taken it for granted that my wife and I didn't get on - were living apart. Mr Mayherne - I wanted the money - for Romaine's sake. I said nothing, and allowed the old lady to think what she chose. She spoke of my being an adopted son to her. There was never any question of marriage - that must be just Janet's imagination."

"And that is all?"

"Yes - that is all."

Was there just a shade of hesitation in the words? The lawyer fancied so. He rose and held out his hand.

"Good-bye, Mr Vole." He looked into the haggard young face and spoke with an unusual impulse. "I believe in your innocence in spite of the

multitude of facts arrayed against you. I hope to prove it and vindicate you completely."

Vole smiled back at him.

"You'll find the alibi is all right," he said cheerfully.

Again he hardly noticed that the other did not respond.

"The whole thing hinges a good deal on the testimony of Janet Mackenzie," said Mr Mayherne. "She hates you. That much is clear."

"She can hardly hate me," protested the young man.

The solicitor shook his head as he went out.

"Now for Mrs Vole," he said to himself.

He was seriously disturbed by the way the thing was shaping.

The Voles lived in a small shabby house near Paddington Green. It was to this house that Mr Mayherne went.

In answer to his ring, a big slatternly woman, obviously a charwoman, answered the door.

"Mrs Vole? Has she returned yet?"

"Got back an hour ago. But I dunno if you can see her."

"If you will take my card to her," said Mr Mayherne quietly, "I am quite sure that she will do so."

The woman looked at him doubtfully, wiped her hand on her apron and took the card. Then she closed the door in his face and left him on the step outside. In a few minutes, however, she returned with a slightly altered manner.

"Come inside, please."

She ushered him into a tiny drawing-room. Mr Mayherne, examining a drawing on the wall, started up suddenly to face a tall, pale woman who had entered so quietly that he had not heard her.

"Mr Mayherne? You are my husband's solicitor, are you not? You have come from him? Will you please sit down?"

Until she spoke he had not realized that she was not English. Now, observing her more closely, he noticed the high cheekbones, the dense blue-black of the hair, and an occasional very slight movement of the hands that was distinctly foreign. A strange woman, very quiet. So quiet as to make one uneasy. From the very first Mr Mayherne was conscious that he was up against something that he did not understand.

"Now, my dear Mrs Vole," he began, "you must not give way -"

He stopped. It was so very obvious that Romaine Vole had not the slightest intention of giving way. She was perfectly calm and composed.

"Will you please tell me about it?" she said. "I must know everything. Do not think to spare me. I want to know the worst." She hesitated, then repeated in a lower tone, with a curious emphasis which the lawyer did not understand: "I want to know the worst."

Mr Mayherne went over his interview with Leonard Vole. She listened attentively, nodding her head now and then.

"I see," she said, when he had finished. "He wants me to say that he came in at twenty minutes past nine that night?"

"He did come in at that time?" said Mr Mayherne sharply.

"That is not the point," she said coldly. "Will my saying so acquit him? Will they believe me?"

Mr Mayherne was taken aback. She had gone so quickly to the core of the matter.

"That is what I want to know," she said. "Will it be enough? Is there anyone else who can support my evidence?"

There was a suppressed eagerness in her manner that made him vaguely uneasy.

"So far there is no one else," he said reluctantly.

"I see," said Romaine Vole.

She sat for a minute or two perfectly still. A little smile played over her lips.

The lawyer's feeling of alarm grew stronger and stronger.

"Mrs Vole -" he began. "I know what you must feel -"

"Do you?" she asked. "I wonder."

"In the circumstances -"

"In the circumstances - I intend to play a lone hand."

He looked at her in dismay.

"But, my dear Mrs Vole - you are overwrought. Being so devoted to your husband -"

"I beg your pardon?"

The sharpness of her voice made him start. He repeated in a hesitating manner:

"Being so devoted to your husband -"

Romaine Vole nodded slowly, the same strange smile on her lips.

"Did he tell you that I was devoted to him?" she asked softly. "Ah! yes, I can see he did. How stupid men are! Stupid - stupid - stupid -"

She rose suddenly to her feet. All the intense emotion that the lawyer had been conscious of in the atmosphere was now concentrated in her tone.

"I hate him, I tell you! I hate him. I hate him. I hate him! I would like to see him hanged by the neck till he is dead."

The lawyer recoiled before her and the smoldering passion in her eyes.

She advanced a step nearer, and continued vehemently:

"Perhaps I shall see it. Supposing I tell you that he did not come in that night at twenty past nine, but at twenty past ten? You say that he tells you he knew nothing about the money coming to him. Supposing I tell you he knew all about it, and counted on it, and committed murder to get it? Supposing I tell you that he admitted to me that night when he came in what he had done? That there was blood on his coat? What then? Supposing that I stand up in court and say all these things?"

Her eyes seemed to challenge him. With an effort, he concealed his growing dismay, and endeavored to speak in a rational tone.

"You cannot be asked to give evidence against your husband -"

"He is not my husband!"

The words came out so quickly that he fancied he had misunderstood her.

"I beg your pardon? I -"

"He is not my husband."

The silence was so intense that you could have heard a pin drop.

"I was an actress in Vienna. My husband is alive but in a madhouse. So we could not marry. I am glad now."

She nodded defiantly.

"I should like you to tell me one thing," said Mr Mayherne. He contrived to appear as cool and unemotional as ever. "Why are you so bitter against Leonard Vole?"

She shook her head, smiling a little.

"Yes, you would like to know. But I shall not tell you. I will keep my secret..."

Mr Mayherne gave his dry little cough and rose.

"There seems no point in prolonging this interview," he remarked. "You will hear from me again after I have communicated with my client."

She came closer to him, looking into his eyes with her own wonderful dark ones.

"Tell me," she said, "did you believe - honestly- that he was innocent when you came here today?"

"I did," said Mr Mayherne.

"You poor little man," she laughed.

"And I believe so still," finished the lawyer. "Good evening, madam."

He went out of the room, taking with him the memory of her startled face.

"This is going to be the devil of a business," said Mr Mayherne to himself as he strode along the street.

Extraordinary, the whole thing. An extraordinary woman. A very dangerous woman. Women were the devil when they got their knife into you.

What was to be done? That wretched young man hadn't a leg to stand upon. Of course, possibly he did commit the crime...

"No," said Mr Mayherne to himself. "No - there's almost too much evidence against him. I don't believe this woman. She was trumping up the whole story. But she'll never bring it into court."

He wished he felt more conviction on the point.

The police court proceedings were brief and dramatic. The principal witnesses for the prosecution were Janet Mackenzie, maid to the dead woman, and Romaine Heilger, Austrian subject, the mistress of the prisoner.

Mr Mayherne sat in court and listened to the damning story that the latter told. It was on the lines she had indicated to him in their interview.

The prisoner reserved his defense and was committed for trial.

Mr Mayherne was at his wits' end. The case against Leonard Vole was black beyond words. Even the famous K.C. who was engaged for the defense held out little hope.

"If we can shake that Austrian woman's testimony, we might do something," he said dubiously. "But it's a bad business."

Mr Mayherne had concentrated his energies on one single point. Assuming Leonard Vole to be speaking the truth, and to have left the murdered woman's house at nine o'clock, who was the man Janet heard talking to Miss French at half-past nine?

The only ray of light was in the shape of a scape-grace nephew who had in bygone days cajoled and threatened his aunt out of various sums of money. Janet Mackenzie, the solicitor learned, had always been

attached to this young man, and had never ceased urging his claims upon her mistress. It certainly seemed possible that it was this nephew who had been with Miss French after Leonard Vole left, especially as he was not to be found in any of his old haunts.

In all other directions, the lawyer's researches had been negative in their result. No one had seen Leonard Vole entering his own house, or leaving that of Miss French. No one had seen any other man enter or leave the house in Cricklewood. All inquiries drew blank.

It was the eve of the trial when Mr Mayherne received the letter which was to lead his thoughts in an entirely new direction.

It came by the six o'clock post. An illiterate scrawl, written on common paper and enclosed in a dirty envelope with the stamp stuck on crooked.

Mr Mayherne read it through once or twice before he grasped its meaning.

Dear Mister:

Youre the lawyer chap wot acts for the young feller. If you want that painted foreign hussy showd up for wot she is an her pack of lies you

come to 16 Shaw's Rents Stepney tonight It ull cawst you 2 hundred quid Arsk for Misses Mogson.

The solicitor read and reread this strange epistle. It might, of course, be a hoax, but when he thought it over, he became increasingly convinced that it was genuine, and also convinced that it was the one hope for the prisoner. The evidence of Romaine Heilger damned him completely, and the line the defense meant to pursue, the line that the evidence of a woman who had admittedly lived an immoral life was not to be trusted, was at best a weak one.

Mr Mayherne's mind was made up. It was his duty to save his client at all costs. He must go to Shaw's Rents.

He had some difficulty in finding the place, a ramshackle building in an evil-smelling slum, but at last he did so, and on inquiry for Mrs Mogson was sent up to a room on the third floor. On this door he knocked, and getting no answer, knocked again.

At this second knock, he heard a shuffling sound inside, and presently the door was opened cautiously half an inch and a bent figure peered out.

Suddenly the woman, for it was a woman, gave a chuckle and opened the door wider.

"So it's you, dearie," she said, in a wheezy voice. "Nobody with you, is there? No playing tricks? That's right. You can come in - you can come in."

With some reluctance the lawyer stepped across the threshold into the small dirty room, with its flickering gas jet. There was an untidy unmade bed in a corner, a plain deal table and two rickety chairs. For the first time Mr Mayherne had a full view of the tenant of this unsavory apartment. She was a woman of middle age, bent in figure, with a mass of untidy gray hair and a scarf wound tightly round her face.

She saw him looking at this and laughed again, the same curious, toneless chuckle.

"Wondering why I hide my beauty, dear? He, he, he. Afraid it may tempt you, eh? But you shall see - you shall see."

She drew aside the scarf and the lawyer recoiled involuntarily before the almost formless blur of scarlet. She replaced the scarf again.

"So you're not wanting to kiss me, dearie? He, he, I don't wonder. And yet I was a pretty girl once - not so long ago as you'd think, either. Vitriol, dearie, vitriol - that's what did that. Ah! but I'll be even with 'em - "

She burst into a hideous torrent of profanity which Mr Mayherne tried vainly to quell. She fell silent at last, her hands clenching and unclenching themselves nervously.

"Enough of that," said the lawyer sternly. "I've come here because I have reason to believe you can give me information which will clear my client, Leonard Vole. Is that the case?"

Her eyes leered at him cunningly.

"What about the money, dearie?" she wheezed. "Two hundred quid, you remember."

"It is your duty to give evidence, and you can be called upon to do so."

"That won't do, dearie. I'm an old woman, and I know nothing. But you give me two hundred quid, and perhaps I can give you a hint or two. See?"

"What kind of hint?"

"What should you say to a letter? A letter from her. Never mind how I got hold of it. That's my business. It'll do the trick. But I want my two hundred quid."

Mr Mayherne looked at her coldly, and made up his mind.

"I'll give you ten pounds, nothing more. And only that if this letter is what you say it is."

"Ten pounds?" She screamed and raved at him.

"Twenty," said Mr Mayherne, "and that's my last word."

He rose as if to go. Then, watching her closely, he drew out a pocketbook, and counted out twenty one-pound notes.

"You see," he said. "That is all I have with me. You can take it or leave it."

But already he knew that the sight of the money was too much for her. She cursed and raved impotently, but at last she gave in. Going over to the bed, she drew something out from beneath the tattered mattress.

"Here you are, damn you!" she snarled. "It's the top one you want."

It was a bundle of letters that she threw to him, and Mr Mayherne untied them and scanned them in his usual cool, methodical manner. The woman, watching him eagerly, could gain no clue from his impassive face.

He read each letter through, then returned again to the top one and read it a second time. Then he tied the whole bundle up again carefully.

They were love letters, written by Romaine Heilger, and the man they were written to was not Leonard Vole. The top letter was dated the day of the latter's arrest.

"I spoke true, dearie, didn't I?" whined the woman. "It'll do for her, that letter?"

Mr Mayherne put the letters in his pocket, then he asked a question.

"How did you get hold of this correspondence?"

"That's telling," she said with a leer. "But I know something more. I heard in court what that hussy said. Find out where she was at twenty past ten, the time she says she was at home. Ask at the Lion Road Cinema. They'll remember - a fine upstanding girl like that - curse her!"

"Who is the man?" asked Mr Mayherne. "There's only a Christian name here."

The other's voice grew thick and hoarse, her hands clenched and unclenched. Finally she lifted one to her face.

"He's the man that did this to me. Many years ago now. She took him away from me - a chit of a girl she was then. And when I went after him - and went for him too - he threw the cursed stuff at me! And she laughed - damn her! I've had it in for her for years. Followed her, I have, spied upon her. And now I've got her! She'll suffer for this, won't she, Mr Lawyer? She'll suffer?"

"She will probably be sentenced to a term of imprisonment for perjury," said Mr Mayherne quietly.

"Shut away - that's what I want. You're going, are you? Where's my money? Where's that good money?"

Without a word, Mr Mayherne put down the notes on the table. Then, drawing a deep breath, he turned and left the squalid room. Looking back, he saw the old woman crooning over the money.

He wasted no time. He found the cinema in Lion Road easily enough, and, shown a photograph of Romaine Heilger, the commissionaire recognized her at once. She had arrived at the cinema with a man some time after ten o'clock on the evening in question. He had not noticed her escort particularly, but he remembered the lady who had spoken to him about the picture that was showing. They stayed until the end, about an hour later.

Mr Mayherne was satisfied. Romaine Heilger's evidence was a tissue of lies from beginning to end. She had evolved it out of her passionate hatred. The lawyer wondered whether he would ever know what lay behind that hatred. What had Leonard Vole done to her? He had seemed dumbfounded when the solicitor had reported her attitude to him. He had declared earnestly that such a thing was incredible - yet it had seemed to Mr Mayherne that after the first astonishment his protests had lacked sincerity.

He did know. Mr Mayherne was convinced of it. He knew, but he had no intention of revealing the fact. The secret between those two remained a secret. Mr Mayherne wondered if some day he should come to learn what it was.

The solicitor glanced at his watch. It was late, but time was everything. He hailed a taxi and gave an address.

"Sir Charles must know of this at once," he murmured to himself as he got in.

The trial of Leonard Vole for the murder of Emily French aroused widespread interest. In the first place the prisoner was young and good-looking, then he was accused of a particularly dastardly crime, and there was the further interest of Romaine Heilger, the principal witness for the prosecution. There had been pictures of her in many papers, and several fictitious stories as to her origin and history.

The proceedings opened quietly enough. Various technical evidence came first. Then Janet Mackenzie was called. She told substantially the same story as before. In cross-examination counsel for the defense succeeded in getting her to contradict herself once or twice over her account of Vole's association with Miss French; he emphasized the fact that though she had heard a man's voice in the sitting-room that night, there was nothing to show that it was Vole who was there, and he managed to drive home a feeling that jealousy and dislike of the prisoner were at the bottom of a good deal of her evidence.

Then the next witness was called.

"Your name is Romaine Heilger?"

"Yes."

"You are an Austrian subject?"

"Yes."

"For the last three years you have lived with the prisoner and passed yourself off as his wife?"

Just for a moment Romaine Heilger's eyes met those of the man in the dock. Her expression held something curious and unfathomable.

"Yes."

The questions went on. Word by word the damning facts came out. On the night in question the prisoner had taken out a crowbar with him. He had returned at twenty minutes past ten, and had confessed to having killed the old lady. His cuffs had been stained with blood, and he had burned them in the kitchen stove. He had terrorized her into silence by means of threats.

As the story proceeded, the feeling of the court which had, to begin with, been slightly favorable to the prisoner, now set dead against him. He himself sat with downcast head and moody air, as though he knew he were doomed.

Yet it might have been noted that her own counsel sought to restrain Romaine's animosity. He would have preferred her to be more unbiased.

Formidable and ponderous, counsel for the defense arose.

He put it to her that her story was a malicious fabrication from start to finish, that she had not even been in her own house at the time in question, that she was in love with another man and was deliberately seeking to send Vole to his death for a crime he did not commit.

Romaine denied these allegations with superb insolence.

Then came the surprising denouement, the production of the letter. It was read aloud in court in the midst of a breathless stillness.

Max, beloved, the Fates have delivered him into our hands! He has been arrested for murder - but, yes, the murder of an old lady! Leonard, who would not hurt a fly! At last I shall have my revenge. The poor chicken! I shall say that he came in that night with blood upon him - that he confessed to me. I shall hang him, Max - and when he hangs he will know and realize that it was Romaine who sent him to his death. And then - happiness, Beloved! Happiness at last!

There were experts present ready to swear that the handwriting was that of Romaine Heilger, but they were not needed. Confronted with the letter, Romaine broke down utterly and confessed everything. Leonard Vole had returned to the house at the time he said, twenty past nine. She had invented the whole story to ruin him.

With the collapse of Romaine Heilger, the case for the Crown collapsed also. Sir Charles called his few witnesses, the prisoner himself went into the box and told his story in a manly straightforward manner, unshaken by cross-examination.

The prosecution endeavored to rally, but without great success. The judge's summing up was not wholly favorable to the prisoner, but a reaction had set in and the jury needed little time to consider their verdict.

"We find the prisoner not guilty."

Leonard Vole was free!

Little Mr Mayherne hurried from his seat. He must congratulate his client.

He found himself polishing his pince-nez vigorously, and checked himself. His wife had told him only the night before that he was getting a habit of it. Curious things, habits. People themselves never knew they had them.

An interesting case - a very interesting case. That woman, now, Romaine Heilger.

The case was dominated for him still by the exotic figure of Romaine Heilger. She had seemed a pale, quiet woman in the house at Paddington, but in court she had flamed out against the sober background, flaunting herself like a tropical flower.

If he closed his eyes he could see her now, tall and vehement, her exquisite body bent forward a little, her right hand clenching and unclenching itself unconsciously all the time.

Curious things, habits. That gesture of hers with the hand was her habit, he supposed. Yet he had seen someone else do it quite lately. Who was it now? Quite lately -

He drew in his breath with a gasp as it came back to him. The woman in Shaw's Rents...

He stood still, his head whirling. It was impossible - impossible - Yet, Romaine Heilger was an actress.

The K.C. came up behind him and clapped him on the shoulder.

"Congratulated our man yet? He's had a narrow shave, you know. Come along and see him."

But the little lawyer shook off the other's hand.

He wanted one thing only - to see Romaine Heilger face to face.

He did not see her until some time later, and the place of their meeting is not relevant.

"So you guessed," she said, when he had told her all that was in his mind. "The face? Oh! that was easy enough, and the light of that gas jet was too bad for you to see the makeup."

"But why - why -"

"Why did I play a lone hand?" She smiled a little, remembering the last time she had used the words.

"Such an elaborate comedy!"

"My friend - I had to save him. The evidence of a woman devoted to him would not have been enough - you hinted as much yourself. But I know something of the psychology of crowds. Let my evidence be wrung from me, as an admission, damning me in the eyes of the law, and a reaction in favor of the prisoner would immediately set in."

"And the bundle of letters?"

"One alone, the vital one, might have seemed like a - what do you call it? - put-up job."

"Then the man called Max?"

"Never existed, my friend."

"I still think," said little Mr Mayherne, in an aggrieved manner, "that we could have got him off by the - er - normal procedure."

"I dared not risk it. You see you thought he was innocent -"

"And you knew it? I see," said little Mr Mayherne.

"My dear Mr Mayherne," said Romaine, "you do not see at all. I knew - he was guilty!"

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The Case of the Distressed Lady
The Case of the Discontented Husband
The Case of the City Clerk
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Have You Got Everything You Want?
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The House at Shiraz
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THE CASE OF THE MIDDLE-AGED WIFE

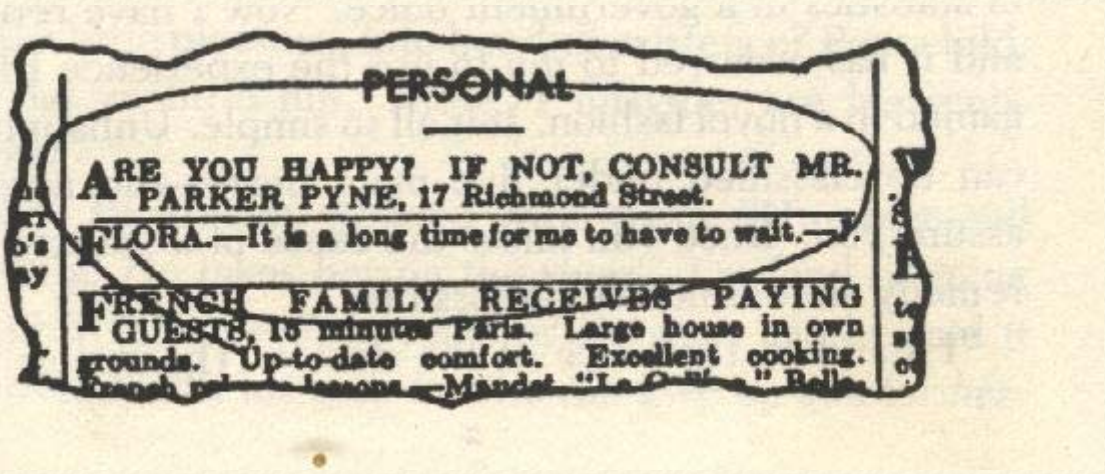
Four grunts, an indignant voice asking why nobody could leave a hat alone, a slammed door, and Mr Packington had departed to catch the eight-forty-five to the City. Mrs Packington sat on at the breakfast table. Her face was flushed, her lips were pursed, and the only reason she was not crying was that at the last minute anger had taken the place of grief.

"I won't stand it," said Mrs Packington. "I won't stand it!" She remained for some moments brooding, and then murmured: "The minx. Nasty sly little cat! How George can be such a fool!"

Anger faded; grief came back. Tears came into Mrs Packington's eyes and rolled slowly down her middle-aged cheeks.

"It's all very well to say I won't stand it, but what can I do?"

Suddenly she felt alone, helpless, utterly forlorn. Slowly she took up the morning paper and read, not for the first time, an advertisement on the front page.


PERSONAL

ARE YOU HAPPY? IF NOT, CONSULT MR. PARKER PYNE, 17 Richmond Street.

FLORA.—It is a long time for me to have to wait.—J.

FRENCH FAMILY RECEIVES PAYING GUESTS, 15 minutes Paris. Large house in own grounds. Up-to-date comfort. Excellent cooking. French pol[illegible] lessons.—Mandet "Le C[illegible]" Bell[illegible]

"Absurd!" said Mrs Packington. "Utterly absurd." Then: "After all, I might just see..."

Which explains why at eleven o'clock Mrs Packington, a little nervous, was being shown into Mr Parker Pyne's private office.

As has been said, Mrs Packington was nervous, but somehow or other, the mere sight of Mr Parker Pyne brought a feeling of reassurance. He was large, not to say fat; he had a bald head of noble proportions, strong glasses and little twinkling eyes.

"Pray sit down," said Mr Parker Pyne. "You have come in answer to my advertisement?" he added helpfully.

"Yes," said Mrs Packington, and stopped there.

"And you are not happy," said Mr Parker Pyne in a cheerful, matter-of-fact voice. "Very few people are. You would really be surprised if you knew how few people are happy."

"Indeed?" said Mrs Packington, not feeling, however, that it mattered whether other people were unhappy or not.

"Not interesting to you, I know," said Mr Parker Pyne, "but very interesting to me. You see, for thirty-five years of my life I have been engaged in the compiling of statistics in a government office. Now I have retired, and it has occurred to me to use the experience I have gained in a novel fashion. It is all so simple. Unhappiness can be classified under five main heads - no more, I assure you. Once you know the cause of a malady, the remedy should not be impossible.

"I stand in the place of the doctor. The doctor first diagnoses the patient's disorder, then he proceeds to recommend a course of treatment. There are cases where no treatment can be of any avail. If that is so, I say frankly that I can do nothing. But I assure you, Mrs Packington, that if I undertake a case, the cure is practically guaranteed."

Could it be so? Was this nonsense, or could it, perhaps, be true? Mrs Packington gazed at him hopefully.

"Shall we diagnose your case?" said Mr Parker Pyne, smiling. He leaned back in his chair and brought the tips of his fingers together.

"The trouble concerns your husband. You have had, on the whole, a happy married life. Your husband has, I think, prospered. I think there is a young lady concerned in the case - perhaps a young lady in your husband's office."

"A typist," said Mrs Packington. "A nasty made-up little minx, all lipstick and silk stockings and curls."

The words rushed from her.

Mr Parker Pyne nodded in a soothing manner.

"There is no real harm in it - that is your husband's phrase, I have no doubt."

"His very words."

"Why, therefore, should he not enjoy a pure friendship with this young lady, and be able to bring a little brightness, a little pleasure, into her dull existence? Poor child, she has so little fun. Those, I imagine, are his sentiments."

Mrs Packington nodded with vigor. "Humbug - all humbug! He takes her on the river - I'm fond of going on the river myself, but five or six years ago he said it interfered with his golf. But he can give up golf for her. I like the theater - George has always said he's too tired to go out at night. Now he takes her out to dance - dance! And comes back at three in the morning. I - I -"

"And doubtless he deplores the fact that women are so jealous, so unreasonably jealous when there is absolutely no cause for jealousy?"

Again Mrs Packington nodded. "That's it." She asked sharply: "How do you know all this?"

"Statistics," Mr Parker Pyne said simply.

"I'm so miserable," said Mrs Packington. "I've always been a good wife to George. I worked my fingers to the bone in our early days. I helped him to get on. I've never looked at any other man. His things are always mended, he gets good meals, and the house is well and economically run. And now that we've got on in the world and could enjoy ourselves and go about a bit and do all the things I've looked forward to doing some day - well, this!" She swallowed hard.

Mr Parker Pyne nodded gravely. "I assure you I understand your case perfectly."

"And - can you do anything?" She asked it almost in whisper.

"Certainly, my dear lady. There is a cure. Oh, yes, there is a cure."

"What is it?" She waited, round-eyed, and expectant.

Mr Parker Pyne spoke quietly and firmly. "You will place yourself in my hands, and the fee will be two hundred guineas."

"Two hundred guineas!"

"Exactly. You can afford to pay such a fee, Mrs Packington. You would pay that sum for an operation. Happiness is just as important as bodily health."

"I pay you afterwards, I suppose?"

"On the contrary," said Mr Parker Pyne. "You pay me in advance."

Mrs Packington rose. "I'm afraid I don't see my way -"

"To buying a pig in a poke?" said Mr Parker Pyne cheerfully. "Well, perhaps you're right. It's a lot of money to risk. You've got to trust me, you see. You've got to pay the money and take a chance. Those are my terms."

"Two hundred guineas!"

"Exactly. Two hundred guineas. It's a lot of money. Good morning, Mrs Packington. Let me know if you change your mind." He shook hands with her, smiling in an unperturbed fashion.

When she had gone he pressed a buzzer on his desk. A forbidding-looking young woman with spectacles answered it.

"A file, please, Miss Lemon. And you might tell Claude that I am likely to want him shortly."

"A new client?"

"A new client. At the moment she has jibbed, but she will come back. Probably this afternoon about four. Enter her."

"Schedule A?"

"Schedule A, of course. Interesting how everyone thinks his own case unique. Well, well, warn Claude. Not too exotic, tell him. No scent and he'd better get his hair cut short."

It was a quarter past four when Mrs Packington once more entered Mr Parker Pyne's office. She drew out a check book, made out a check and passed it to him. A receipt was given.

"And now?" Mrs Packington looked at him hopefully.

"And now," said Mr Parker Pyne, smiling, "you will return home. By the first post tomorrow you will receive certain instructions which I shall be glad if you will carry out."

Mrs Packington went home in a state of pleasant anticipation.

Mr Packington came home in a defensive mood, ready to argue his position if the scene at the breakfast table was reopened. He was relieved, however, to find that his wife did not seem to be in a combative mood. She was unusually thoughtful.

George listened to the radio and wondered whether that dear child Nancy would allow him to give her a fur coat. She was very proud, he knew. He didn't want to offend her. Still, she had complained of

the cold. That tweed coat of hers was a cheap affair; it didn't keep the cold out. He could put it so that she wouldn't mind, perhaps...

They must have another evening out soon. It was a pleasure to take a girl like that to a smart restaurant. He could see several young fellows were envying him. She was uncommonly pretty. And she liked him. To her, as she had told him, he didn't seem a bit old.

He looked up and caught his wife's eye. He felt suddenly guilty, which annoyed him. What a narrow-minded, suspicious woman Maria was! She grudged him any little bit of happiness.

He switched off the radio and went to bed.

Mrs Packington received two unexpected letters the following morning. One was a printed form confirming an appointment at a noted beauty specialist's. The second was an appointment with a dressmaker. The third was from Mr Parker Pyne, requesting the pleasure of her company at lunch at the Ritz that day.

Mr Packington mentioned that he might not be home to dinner that evening as he had to see a man on business. Mrs Packington merely nodded absently, and Mr Packington left the house congratulating himself of having escaped the storm.

The beauty specialist was impressive. Such neglect Madam, but why? This should have been taken in hand years ago. However, it was not too late.

Things were done to her face; it was pressed kneaded and steamed. It had mud applied to it. It had creams applied to it. It was dusted with powder. There were various finishing touches.

At last she was given a mirror. "I believe I do look younger," she thought to herself.

The dressmaking seance was equally exciting. She emerged feeling smart, modish, up-to-date.

At half-past-one, Mrs Packington kept her appointment at the Ritz. Mr Parker Pyne, faultlessly dressed and carrying with him his atmosphere of soothing reassurance, was waiting for her.

"Charming," he said, an experienced eye sweeping her from head to foot. "I have ventured to order your White Lady."

Mrs Packington, who had not contracted the cocktail habit, made no demur. As she sipped the exciting fluid gingerly, she listened to her benevolent instructor.

"Your husband, Mrs Packington," said Mr Parker Pyne, "must be made to Sit Up. You understand - to Sit Up. To assist in that, I am going to introduce to you a young friend of mine. You will lunch with him today."

At that moment a young man came along, looking from side to side. He espied Mr Parker Pyne and came gracefully towards them.

"Mr Claude Luttrell, Mrs Packington."

Mr Claude Luttrell was perhaps just short of thirty. He was graceful, debonair, perfectly dressed, extremely handsome.

"Delighted to meet you," he murmured.

Three minutes later Mrs Packington was facing her new mentor at a small table for two.

She was shy at first, but Mr Luttrell soon put her at her ease. He knew Paris well and had spent a good deal of time on the Riviera. He asked Mrs Packington if she were fond of dancing. Mrs Packington said she was, but that she seldom got any dancing nowadays as Mr Packington didn't care to go out in the evenings.

"But he couldn't be so unkind as to keep you at home," said Claude Luttrell, smiling and displaying a dazzling row of teeth. "Women will not tolerate male jealousy in these days."

Mrs Packington nearly said that jealousy didn't enter into the question. But the words remained unspoken. After all, it was an agreeable idea.

Claude Luttrell spoke airily of night clubs. It was settled that on the following evening Mrs Packington and Mr Luttrell should patronize the popular Lesser Archangel. Mrs Packington was a little nervous about announcing this fact to her husband. George, she felt, would think it extraordinary and possibly ridiculous. But she was saved all trouble on this score. She had been too nervous to make her announcement at breakfast, and at two o'clock a telephone

message came to the effect that Mr Packington would be dining in town.

The evening was a great success. Mrs Packington had been a good dancer as a girl and under Claude Luttrell's skilled guidance she soon picked up modern steps. He congratulated her on her gown and also on the arrangement of her hair. (An appointment had been made her that morning with a fashionable hairdresser.) At bidding her farewell, he kissed her hand in a most electrifying manner. Mrs Packington had not enjoyed an evening so much for years.

A bewildering ten days ensued. Mrs Packington lunched, teaed, tangoed, dined, danced and supped. She heard all about Claude Luttrell's sad childhood. She heard the sad circumstances in which his father lost his money. She heard of his tragic romance and his bittered feelings towards women generally.

On the eleventh day they were dancing at the Red Admiral. Mrs Packington saw her spouse before he saw her. George was with the young lady from his office. Both couples were dancing.

"Hello, George," said Mrs Packington lightly, when their orbits brought them together.

It was with considerable amusement that She saw her husband's face grow first red, then purple with astonishment. With the astonishment was blended an expression of guilt detected.

Mrs Packington felt amusedly mistress of the situation. Poor old George! Seated once more at her table she watched them. How

stout he was, how bald, how terribly he bounced on his feet! He danced in the style of twenty years ago. Poor George, how terribly he wanted to be young! And that poor girl he was dancing with had to pretend to like it. She looked bored enough now, the face over his shoulder where he couldn't see it.

How much more enviable, thought Mrs Packington contentedly, was her own situation. She glanced at the perfect Claude, now tactfully silent. How well he understood her. He never jarred - as husbands so inevitable did jar after a lapse of years.

She looked at him again. Their eyes met. He smiled; his beautiful dark eyes, so melancholy, so romantic, looked tenderly into hers.

"Shall we dance again?" he murmured.

They danced again. It was heaven!

She was conscious of George's apoplectic gaze following them. It had been the idea, she remembered, to make George jealous. What a long time ago that was! She really didn't want George to be jealous now. It might upset him. Why should he be upset, poor thing? Everyone was so happy...

Mr Packington had been home an hour when Mrs Packington got in. He looked bewildered and unsure of himself.

"Humph," he remarked. "So you're back."

Mrs Packington cast off an evening wrap which had cost her forty guineas that very morning. "Yes," she said, smiling. "I'm back."

George coughed. "Er - rather odd meeting you."

"Wasn't it?" said Mrs Packington.

"I - well, I thought it would be a kindness to take that girl somewhere. She's been having a lot of trouble at home. I thought - well, kindness you know."

Mrs Packington nodded. Poor old George - bouncing on his feet and getting so hot and being so pleased with himself.

"Who's that chap you were with? I don't know him, do I?"

"Luttrell, his name is. Claude Luttrell."

"How did you come across him?"

"Oh, someone introduced me," said Mrs Packington vaguely.

"Rather a queer thing for you to go out dancing - at your time of life. Mustn't make a fool of yourself, my dear."

Mrs Packington smiled. She was feeling much too kindly to the universe in general to make the obvious reply. "A change is always nice," she said amiably.

"You've got to be careful, you know. A lot of these lounge-lizard fellows going about. Middle-aged women sometimes make awful fools of themselves. I'm just warning you, my dear. I don't like to see you doing anything unsuitable."

"I find the exercise very beneficial," said Mrs Packington.

"Um - yes."

"I expect you do, too," said Mrs Packington kindly. "The great thing is to be happy, isn't it? I remember your saying so one morning at breakfast, about ten days ago."

Her husband looked at her sharply, but her expression was devoid of sarcasm. She yawned.

"I must go to bed. By the way, George, I've been dreadfully extravagant lately. Some terrible bills will be coming in. You don't mind, do you?"

"Bills?" said Mr Packington.

"Yes. For clothes. And massage. And hair treatment. Wickedly extravagant I've been - but I know you won't mind."

She passed up the stairs. Mr Packington remained with his mouth open. Maria had been amazingly nice about this evening's business; she hadn't seemed to care at all. But it was a pity she had suddenly taken to spending money. Maria - that model of economy!

Women! George Packington shook his head. The scrapes that girl's brothers had been getting into lately. Well, he'd been glad to help. All the same - and dash it all, things weren't going too well in the City.

Sighing, Mr Packington in his turn slowly climbed the stairs.

Sometimes words that fail to make their effect at the time are remembered later. Not till the following morning did certain words uttered by Mr Packington really penetrate his wife's consciousness.

Lounge lizards; middle-aged women; awful fools of themselves.

Mrs Packington was courageous at heart. She sat down and faced facts. A gigolo. She had read all about gigolos in the papers. Had read, too, of the follies of middle-aged women.

Was Claude a gigolo? She supposed he was. But then, gigolos were paid for and Claude always paid for her. Yes, but it was Mr Parker Pyne who paid, not Claude - or, rather, it was really her own two hundred guineas.

Was she a middle-aged fool? Did Claude Luttrell laugh at her behind her back? Her face flushed at the thought.

Well, what of it? Claude was a gigolo. She was a middle-aged fool. She supposed she should have given him something. A gold cigarette case. That sort of thing.

A queer impulse drove her out of there and then to Asprey's. The cigarette case was chosen and paid for. She was to meet Claude at Claridge's for lunch.

As they were sipping coffee she produced it from her bag. "A little present," she murmured.

He looked up, frowned. "For me?"

"Yes. I - I hope you like it."

His hand closed over it and he slid it violently across the table. "Why do you give me that? I won't take it. Take it back. Take it back, I say." He was angry. His dark eyes flashed.

She murmured, "I'm sorry," and put it away in her bag again.

There was constraint between them that day.

The following morning he rang her up. "I must see you. Can I come to your house this afternoon?"

She told him to come at three o'clock.

He arrived very white, very tense. They greeted each other. The constraint was more evident.

Suddenly he sprang up and stood facing her. "What do you think I am? That is what I've come to ask you? We've been friends, haven't

we? Yes, friends. But all the same, you think I'm - well, a gigolo. A creature which lives on women. A lounge lizard. You do, don't you?"

"No, no."

He swept aside her protest. His face had gone yellow white.

"You do think that! Well, it's true. That's what I've come to say. It's true! I had my orders to take you about, to amuse you, to make love to you, to make you forget your husband. That was my job. A despicable one, eh?"

"Why are you telling me this?" she asked.

"Because I'm through with it. I can't carry on with it. Not with you. You're different. You're the kind of woman I could believe in, trust, adore. You think I am just saying this; that it's part of the game." He came closer to her. "I'm going to prove to you it isn't. I'm going away - because of you. I'm going to make myself into a man instead of the loathsome creature I am because of you."

He took her suddenly in his arms. His lips closed on hers. Then he released her and stood away.

"Good-by. I've been a rotter - always. But I swear it will be different now. Do you remember once saying you liked to read the advertisements in the Agony column? On this day every year you'll find there a message from me saying that I remember and am making good. You'll know, then, all you've meant to me. One thing more. I've taken nothing from you. I want you to take something

from me." He drew a plain gold seal ring from his finger. "This was my mother's. I'd like you to have it. Now good-by."

He left her standing there amazed, the gold ring in her hand.

George Packington came home early. He found his wife gazing into the fire with a far-away look. She spoke kindly but absently to him.

"Look here, Maria," he jerked out suddenly.

"About that girl?"

"Yes, dear?"

"I - I never meant to upset you, you know. About her. Nothing in it."

"I know. I was foolish. See as much as you like of her if it makes you happy."

These words, surely, should have cheered George Packington. Strangely enough, they annoyed him. How could you enjoy taking a girl about when your wife fairly urged you on? Dash it all, it wasn't decent! All that feeling of being a gay dog, of being a strong man playing with fire, fizzled out and died an ignominious death. George Packington felt suddenly tired and a great deal poorer in his pocket. The girl was a shrewd little piece.

"We might go away together somewhere for a bit if you like, Maria?" he suggested timidly.

"Oh, never mind about me. I'm quite happy."

"But I'd like to take you away. We might go to the Riviera."

Mrs Packington smiled at him from a distance.

Poor old George. She was fond of him. He was such a pathetic old dear. There was no secret splendor in his life as there was in hers. She smiled more tenderly still.

"That would be lovely, my dear," she said.

Mr Parker Pyne was speaking to Miss Lemon.

"Entertainment account?"

"One hundred and two pounds, fourteen and sixpence," said Miss Lemon.

The door was pushed open and Claude Luttrell entered. He looked moody.

"Morning, Claude," said Mr Parker Pyne. "Everything go off satisfactorily?"

"I suppose so."

"The ring? What name did you put in it, by the way?"

"Matilda," said Claude gloomily. "1899."

"Excellent. What wording for the advertisement?"

"'Making good. Still remember. Claude.'"

"Make a note of that, please. Miss Lemon. The Agony column. November third for - let me see, expenses a hundred and two pounds, fourteen and six. Yes, for ten years, I think. That leaves us a profit of ninety-two pounds, two and fourpence. Adequate. Quite adequate."

Miss Lemon departed.

"Look here," Claude burst out. "I don't like this. It's a rotten game."

"My dear boy!"

"A rotten game. That was a decent woman - a good sort. Telling her all those lies, filling her up with this sob stuff, dash it all, it makes me sick!"

Mr Parker Pyne adjusted his glasses and looked at Claude with a kind of scientific interest. "Dear me!" he said dryly. "I do not seem to remember that your conscience ever troubled you during your somewhat - ahem! - notorious career. Your affairs on the Riviera were particularly brazen, and your exploitation of Mrs Hattie West, the Californian Cucumber King's wife, was especially notable for the callous mercenary instinct you displayed."

"Well, I'm beginning to feel different," grumbled Claude. "It isn't - nice, this game."

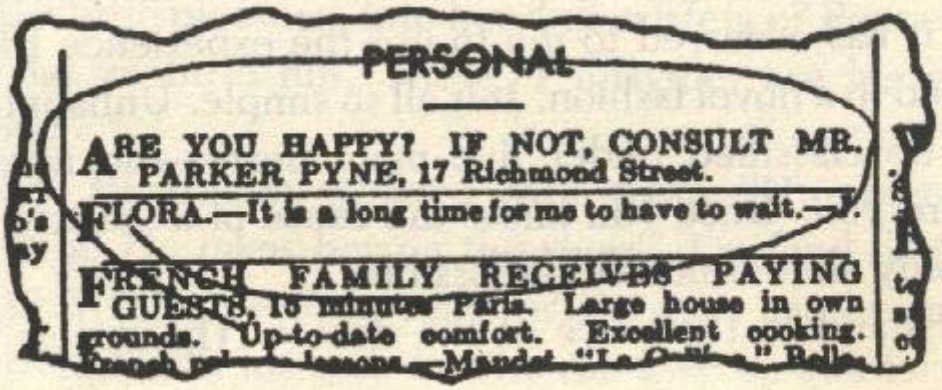
Mr Parker Pyne spoke in the voice of a head master admonishing a favorite pupil. "You have, my dear Claude, performed a meritorious action. You have given an unhappy woman what every woman needs - a romance. A woman tears a passion to pieces and gets no good from it, but a romance can be laid up in lavender and looked at all through the long years to come. I know human nature, my boy, and I tell you that a woman can feed on such an incident for years." He coughed. "We have discharged our commission to Mrs Packington very satisfactorily."

"Well," muttered Claude, "I don't like it." He left the room.

Mr Parker Pyne took a new file from a drawer. He wrote: "Interesting vestiges of a conscience noticeable in hardened Lounge Lizard. Note: Study developments."

THE CASE OF THE DISCONTENTED SOLDIER

Major Wilbraham hesitated outside the door of Mr Parker Pyne's office to read, not for the first time, the advertisement from the morning paper which had brought him there. It was simple enough:


PERSONAL

ARE YOU HAPPY? IF NOT, CONSULT MR. PARKER PYNE, 17 Richmond Street.

FLORA.—It is a long time for me to have to wait.—F.

FRENCH FAMILY RECEIVES PAYING GUESTS, 15 minutes Paris. Large house in own grounds. Up-to-date comfort. Excellent cooking. French [illegible] lessons.—Mandat "La [illegible]" Bells.

The major took a deep breath and abruptly plunged through the swing door leading to the outer office. A plain young woman looked up from her typewriter and glanced at him inquiringly.

"Mr Parker Pyne?" said Major Wilbraham, blushing.

"Come this way, please."

He followed her into an inner office - into the presence of the bland Mr Parker Pyne.

"Good morning," said Mr Pyne. "Sit down, won't you? And now tell me what I can do for you."

"My name is Wilbraham -" began the other.

"Major? Colonel?" said Mr Pyne.

"Major."

"Ah! And recently returned from abroad? India? East Africa?"

"East Africa."

"A fine country, I believe. Well, so you are home again - and you don't like it. Is that the trouble?"

"You're absolutely right. Though how you knew -"

Mr Parker Pyne waved an impressive hand. "It is my business to know. You see, for thirty-five years of my life I have been engaged in the compiling of statistics in a government office. Now I have retired and it has occurred to me to use the experience I have gained in a novel fashion. It is all so simple. Unhappiness can be classified under five main heads - no more, I assure you. Once you know the cause of a malady, the remedy should not be impossible.

"I stand in the place of the doctor. The doctor first diagnoses the patient's disorder, then he recommends a course of treatment. There are cases where no treatment can be of any avail. If that is so, I say quite frankly that I can do nothing about it. But if I undertake a case, the cure is practically guaranteed.

"I can assure you, Major Wilbraham, that ninety-six percent of retired empire builders - as I call them - are unhappy. They exchange an active life, a life full of responsibility, a life of possible danger, for - what? Straitened means, a dismal climate and a general feeling of being a fish out of water."

"All you've said is true," said the major. "It's the boredom I object to. The boredom and the endless tittle-tattle about petty village matters. But what can I do about it? I've got a little money besides

my pension. I've a nice cottage near Cobham. I can't afford to hunt or shoot or fish. I'm not married. My neighbors are all pleasant folk, but they've no ideas beyond this island."

"The long and short of the matter is that you find life tame," said Mr Parker Pyne.

"Damned tame."

"You would like excitement, possibly danger?" asked Mr Pyne.

The soldier shrugged. "There's no such thing in this tin-pot country."

"I beg your pardon," said Mr Pyne seriously. "There you are wrong. There is plenty of danger, plenty of excitement, here in London if you know where to go for it. You have seen only the surface of our English life, calm, pleasant. But there is another side. If you wish it, I can show you that other side."

Major Wilbraham regarded him thoughtfully. There was something reassuring about Mr Pyne. He was large, not to say fat; he had a bald head of noble proportions, strong glasses and little twinkling eyes. And had an aura - an aura of dependability.

"I should warn you, however," continued Mr Pyne "that there is an element of risk."

The soldier's eye brightened. "That's all right," he said. Then, abruptly: "And - your fees?"

"My fee," said Mr Pyne, "is fifty pounds, payable in advance. If in a month's time you are still in the same state of boredom, I will refund your money."

Wilbraham considered. "Fair enough," he said at last. "I agree. I'll give you a check now."

The transaction was completed. Mr Parker Pyne pressed a buzzer on his desk.

"It is now one o'clock," he said. "I am going to ask you to take a young lady out to lunch." The door opened. "Ah, Madeleine, my dear, let me introduce Major Wilbraham, who is going to take you out to lunch."

Wilbraham blinked slightly, which was hardly to be wondered at. The girl who entered the room was dark, languorous, with wonderful eyes and long black lashes, a perfect complexion and a voluptuous scarlet mouth. Her exquisite clothes set off the saving grace of her figure. From head to foot she was perfect.

"Er - delighted," said Major Wilbraham.

"Miss de Sara," said Mr Parker Pyne.

"How very kind of you," murmured Madeleine de Sara.

"I have your address here," announced Mr Parker Pyne. "Tomorrow morning you will receive my further instructions."

Major Wilbraham and the lovely Madeleine departed.

It was three o'clock when Madeleine returned.

Mr Parker Pyne looked up. "Well?" he demanded.

Madeleine shook her head. "Scared of me," she said. "Thinks I'm a vamp."

"I thought as much," said Mr Parker Pyne. "You carried out my instructions?"

"Yes. We discussed the occupants of the other tables freely. The type he likes is fair-haired, blue-eyed, slightly anaemic, not too tall."

"That should be easy," said Mr Pyne. "Get me Schedule B and let me see what we have in stock at present."

He ran his finger down a list, finally stopping at a name. "Freda Clegg. Yes, I think Freda Clegg will do excellently. I had better see Mrs Oliver about it."

The next day Major Wilbraham received a note which read:

On Monday morning next at eleven o'clock go to Eaglemont, Friars Lane, Hampstead, and ask for Mr Jones. You will represent yourself as coming from the Guava Shipping Company.

Obediently on the following Monday, which happened to be Bank Holiday, Major Wilbraham set for Eaglemont, Friars Lane. He set out, I say, but never got there. For before he got there, something happened.

All the world and his wife seemed to be on their way to Hampstead. Major Wilbraham got entangled in crowds, suffocated in the tube and found it hard discover the whereabouts of Friars Lane.

Friars Lane was a cul-de-sac, a neglected road full of ruts, with houses on either side standing back from the road. They were largish houses winch had seen better days and had been allowed to fall into disrepair.

Wilbraham walked along peering at the half-erased names on the gateposts, when suddenly he heard something that made him stiffen to attention. It was a kind of gurgling, half-choked cry.

It came again and this time it was faintly recognizable as the word "Help!" It came from inside the wall of the house he was passing.

Without a moment's hesitation, Major Wilbraham pushed open the rickety gate and sprinted noiselessly to the weed-covered drive. There in the shrubbery was a girl struggling in the grasp of two enormous Negroes.

She was putting up a brave fight, twisting and kicking. One Negro held his hand over her mouth in spite of her furious efforts to get her head free.

Intent on their struggle with the girl, neither of the blacks had noticed Wilbraham's approach. The first they knew of it was when a violent punch on the jaw sent the man who was covering the girl's mouth reeling backwards. Taken by surprise, the other man relinquished his hold of the girl and turned. Wilbraham was ready for him. Once again his fist shot out, and the Negro reeled backwards and fell. Wilbraham turned on the other man, who was closing in behind him.

But the two men had had enough. The second one rolled over, sat up; then, rising, he made a dash for the gate. His companion followed suit. Wilbraham started after them, but changed his mind and turned towards the girl, who was leaning against a tree, panting.

"Oh, thank you!" she gasped. "It was terrible."

Major Wilbraham saw for the first time who it was he had rescued so opportunely. She was a girl of about twenty-one or -two, fair-haired and blue-eyed, pretty in a rather colorless way.

"If you hadn't come!" she gasped.

"There, there," said Wilbraham soothingly. "It's all right now. I think, though, that we'd better get away from here. It's possible those fellows might come back."

A faint smile came to the girl's lips. "I don't think they will - not after the way you hit them. Oh, it was splendid of you!"

Major Wilbraham blushed under the warmth of her glance of admiration.

"Nothin' at all," he said indistinctly. "All in day's work. Lady being annoyed. Look here, if you take my arm, can you walk? It's been a nasty shock, I know."

"I'm all right now," said the girl. However, she took the proffered arm. She was still rather shaky. She glanced behind her at the house as they emerged through the gate. "I can't understand it," she murmured. "That's clearly an empty house."

"It's empty, right enough," agreed the major, looking up at the shuttered windows and general air of decay.

"And yet it is Whitefriars." She pointed to a half-obliterated name on the gate. "And Whitefriars was the place I was to go."

"Don't worry about anything now," said Wilbraham. "In a minute or two we'll be able to get a taxi. Then we'll drive somewhere and have a cup of coffee."

At the end of the lane they came out into a more frequented street, and by good fortune a taxi had just set down a fare at one of the houses. Wilbraham hailed it, gave an address to the driver and they got in.

"Don't try to talk," he admonished his companion. "Just lie back. You've had a nasty experience."

She smiled at him gratefully.

"By the way - er - my name is Wilbraham."

"Mine is Clegg - Freda Clegg."

Ten minutes later, Freda was sipping hot coffee and looking gratefully across a small table at her rescuer.

"It seems like a dream," she said. "A bad dream." She shuddered. "And only a short while ago I was wishing for something to happen - anything! Oh, I don't like adventures."

"Tell me how it happened."

"Well, to tell you properly I shall have to talk a lot about myself, I'm afraid."

"An excellent subject," said Wilbraham, with a bow.

"I am an orphan. My father - he was a sea captain - died when I was eight. My mother died three years ago. I work in the City. I am with

the Vacuum Gas Company - a clerk. One evening last week I found a gentleman waiting to see me when I returned to my lodgings. He was a lawyer, a Mr Reid from Melbourne.

"He was very polite and asked me several questions about my family. He explained that he had known my father many years ago. In fact, he had transacted some legal business for him. Then he told me the object of his visit. 'Miss Clegg,' he said, 'I have reason to suppose that you might benefit as the result of a financial transaction entered into by your father several years before he died.' I was very much surprised, of course.

"'It is unlikely that you would ever have heard anything of the matter,' he explained. 'John Clegg never took the affair seriously, I fancy. However, it has materialized unexpectedly, but I am afraid any claim you might put in would depend on your ownership of certain papers. These papers would be part of your father's estate, and of course it is possible that they have been destroyed as worthless. Have you kept any of your father's papers?'

"I explained that my mother had kept various things of my father's in an old sea chest. I had looked through it cursorily but had discovered nothing of interest.

"'You would hardly be likely to recognize the importance of these documents, perhaps,' he said, smiling.

"Well, I went to the chest, took out the few papers it contained and brought them to him. He looked at them, but said it was impossible to say offhand what might or might not be connected with the

matter in question. He would take them away with him and would communicate with me if anything turned up.

"By the last post on Saturday I received a letter from him in which he suggested that I come to his house to discuss the matter. He gave me the address: Whitefriars, Friars Lane, Hampstead. I was to be there at a quarter to eleven this morning.

"I was a little late finding the place. I hurried through the gate and up towards the house, when suddenly those two dreadful men sprang at me from the bushes. I hadn't time to cry out. One man put his hand over my mouth. I wrenched my head free and screamed for help. Luckily you heard me. If it hadn't been for you -" She stopped. Her looks were more eloquent than further words.

"Very glad I happened to be on the spot. By Gad, I'd like to get hold of those two brutes. You'd never seen them before, I suppose?"

She shook her head. "What do you think it means?"

"Difficult to say. But one thing seems pretty simple. There's something someone wants among your father's papers. This man Reid told you a cock-and-bull story as to get the opportunity of looking through the papers. Evidently what he wanted wasn't there."

"Oh!" said Freda. "I wonder. When I got home on Saturday I thought my things had been tampered with. To tell you the truth, I suspected my landlady of having pried about in my room out of curiosity. But now -"

"Depend upon it, that's it. Someone gained admission to your room and searched it, without finding what he was after. He suspected that you knew the value of this paper, whatever it was, and that you carried it about on your person. So he planned this ambush. If you had had it with you, it would have been taken from you. If not, you would have been held prisoner while they tried to make you tell where it was hidden."

"But what can it possibly be?" cried Freda.

"I don't know. But it must be something pretty good for him to go to this length."

"It doesn't seem possible."

"Oh, I don't know. Your father was a sailor. He went to out-of-the-way places. He might have come across something the value of which he never knew."

"Do you really think so?" A pink flush of excitement showed in the girl's pale cheeks.

"I do indeed. The question is, what shall we do next? You don't want to go to the police, I suppose?"

"Oh, no, please."

"I'm glad you say that. I don't see what good the police could do, and it would only mean unpleasantness for you. Now I suggest that

you allow me to give you lunch somewhere and that I then accompany you back to your lodgings, so as to be sure you reach them safely. And then, we might have a look for the paper. Because, you know, it must be somewhere."

"Father may have destroyed it himself."

"He may, of course, but the other side evidently doesn't think so, and that looks hopeful for us."

"What do you think it can be? Hidden treasure?"

"By Jove, it might be!" exclaimed Major Wilbraham, all the boy in him rising joyfully to the suggestion.

"But now, Miss Clegg, lunch!"

They had a pleasant meal together. Wilbraham told Freda all about his life in East Africa. He described elephant hunts, and the girl was thrilled. When they had finished, he insisted on taking her home in a taxi.

Her lodgings were near Notting Hill Gate. On arriving there, Freda had a brief conversation with her landlady.

She returned to Wilbraham and took him up to the second floor, where she had a tiny bedroom and sitting room.

"It's exactly as we thought," she said. "A man came on Saturday morning to see about laying a new electric cable; he told her there was a fault in the wiring in my room. He was there some time."

"Show me this chest of your father's," said Wilbraham.

Freda showed him a brass-bound box. "You see," she said, raising the lid, "It's empty."

The soldier nodded thoughtfully. "And there are no papers anywhere else?"

"I'm sure there aren't. Mother kept everything in here."

Wilbraham examined the inside of the chest. Suddenly he uttered an exclamation. "Here's a slit in the lining." Carefully he inserted his hand, feeling about. A slight crackle rewarded him. "Something's slipped down behind."

In another minute he had drawn out his find. A piece of dirty paper folded several times. He smoothed it out on the table; Freda was looking over his shoulder. She uttered an exclamation of disappointment.

"It's just a lot of queer marks."

"Why, the thing's in Swahili. Swahili, of all things!" cried Major Wilbraham. "East African native dialect, you know."

"How extraordinary!" said Freda. "Can you read it, then?"

"Rather. But what an amazing thing." He took the paper to the window.

"Is it anything?" asked Freda tremulously. Wilbraham read the thing through twice, and then came back to the girl. "Well," he said with a chuckle, "here's your hidden treasure, all right."

"Hidden treasure? Not really? You mean Spanish gold - a sunken galleon - that sort of thing?"

"Not quite so romantic as that, perhaps. But it comes to the same thing. This paper gives the hiding place of a cache of ivory."

"Ivory?" said the girl, astonished.

"Yes. Elephants, you know. There's a law about the number you're allowed to shoot. Some hunter got away with breaking that law on a grand scale. They were on his trail and he cached the stuff. There's a thundering lot of it - and this gives fairly clear directions how to find it. Look here, we'll have to go after this, you and I."

"You mean there's really a lot of money in it?"

"Quite a nice little fortune for you."

"But how did that paper come to be among my father's things?"

Wilbraham shrugged. "Maybe the Johnny was dying or something. He may have written the thing down in Swahili for protection and

given it to your father, who possibly had befriended him in some way. Your father, not being able to read it, attached no importance to it. That's only a guess on my part, but I dare say it's not far wrong."

Freda gave a sigh. "How frightfully exciting!"

"The thing is - what to do with the precious document," said Wilbraham. "I don't like leaving it here. They might come and have another look. I suppose you wouldn't entrust it to me?"

"Of course I would. But - mightn't it be dangerous for you?" she faltered.

"I'm a tough nut," said Wilbraham grimly. "You needn't worry about me." He folded up the paper and put it in his pocketbook. "May I come to see you tomorrow evening?" he asked. "I'll have worked out a plan by then, and I'll look up the places on my map. What time do you get back from the City?"

"I get back about half-past-six."

"Capital. We'll have a pow-wow, and then perhaps you'll let me take you out to dinner. We ought to celebrate. So long, then. Tomorrow at half-past-six."

Major Wilbraham arrived punctually on the following day. He rang the bell and inquired for Miss Clegg. A maid-servant had answered the door.

"Miss Clegg? She's out."

"Oh!" Wilbraham did not like to suggest that he come in and wait. I'll call back presently," he said.

He hung about in the street outside, expecting every minute to see Freda tripping towards him. The minutes passed. Quarter to seven. Seven. Quarter past seven. Still no Freda. A feeling of uneasiness swept over him. He went back to the house and rang the bell again.

"Look here" he said, "I had an appointment with Miss Clegg at half-past-six. Are you sure she isn't in, or hasn't - er - left any message?"

"Are you Major Wilbraham?" asked the servant.

"Yes."

"Then there's a note for you. It come by hand."

Wilbraham took it from her and tore it open. It ran as follows:

Dear Major Wilbraham:

Something rather strange has happened. I won't write more now, but will you meet me at Whitefriars?

Go there as soon as you get this.

Yours sincerely,

Freda Clegg

Wilbraham drew his brows together as he thought rapidly. His hand drew a letter absent-mindedly from his pocket. It was to his tailor. "I wonder," he said to the maidservant, "if you could let me have a stamp."

"I expect Mrs Parkins could oblige you."

She returned in a moment with the stamp. It was paid for with a shilling. In another minute Wilbraham was walking towards the tube station, dropping the envelope in a box as he passed.

Freda's letter had made him most uneasy. What could have taken the girl, alone, to the scene of yesterday's sinister encounter?

He shook his head. Of all the foolish things to do! Had Reid reappeared? Had he somehow or other prevailed upon the girl to trust him? What had taken her to Hampstead?

He looked at his watch. Nearly half-past-seven. She would have counted on his starting at half-past-six. An hour late. Too much. If only she had had the sense to give him some hint.

The letter puzzled him. Somehow, its independent tone was not characteristic of Freda Clegg.

It was ten minutes to eight when he reached Friars Lane. It was getting dark. He looked sharply about him; there was no one in sight. Gently he pushed the rickety gate so that it swung noiselessly on its hinges. The drive was deserted. The house was dark. He went up the path cautiously, keeping a lookout from side to side. He did not intend to be caught by surprise.

Suddenly he stopped. Just for a minute a chink of light had shone through one of the shutters. The house was not empty. There was someone inside.

Softly Wilbraham slipped into the bushes and worked his way round to the back of the house. At last he found what he was looking for. One of the windows on the ground floor was unfastened. It was the window of a kind of scullery. He raised the sash, flashed a torch (he had bought it at a shop on the way over) around the deserted interior and climbed in.

Carefully he opened the scullery door. There was no sound. He flashed the torch once more. A kitchen - empty. Outside the kitchen were half a dozen steps and a door evidently leading to the front part of the house. He pushed open the door and listened. Nothing. He slipped through. He was now in the front hall. Still there was no sound. There was a door to the right and a door to the left. He chose the right-hand door, listened for a time, then turned the handle. It gave. Inch by inch he opened the door and stepped inside.

Again he flashed the torch. The room was unfurnished and bare.

Just at that moment he heard a sound behind him, whirled round - too late. Something came down on his head and he pitched forward into unconsciousness.

How much time elapsed before he regained consciousness Wilbraham had no idea. He returned painfully to life, his head aching. He tried to move and found it impossible. He was bound with ropes.

His wits came back to him suddenly. He remembered now. He had been hit on the head.

A faint light from a gas jet high up on the wall showed him that he was in a small cellar. He looked around and his heart gave a leap. A few feet away lay Freda, bound like himself. Her eyes were closed, but even as he watched her anxiously, she sighed and they opened. Her bewildered gaze fell on him and joyous recognition leaped into them.

"You, too!" she said. "What has happened?"

"I've let you down badly," said Wilbraham. "Tumbled headlong into the trap. Tell me, did you send me a note asking me to meet you here?"

The girl's eyes opened in astonishment. "I? But you sent me one."

"Oh, I sent you one, did I?"

"Yes. I got it at the office. It asked me to meet you here instead of at home."

"Same method for both of us," he groaned, and he explained the situation.

"I see," said Freda. "Then the idea was -"

"To get the paper. We must have been followed yesterday. That's how they got on to me."

"And - have they got it?" asked Freda.

"Unfortunately, I can't feel and see," said the soldier, regarding his bound hands ruefully.

And then they both started. For a voice spoke, a voice that seemed to come from the empty air.

"Yes, thank you," it said. "I've got it, all right. No mistake about that."

The unseen voice made them both shiver.

"Mr Reid," murmured Freda.

"Mr Reid is one of my names, my dear young lady," said the voice. "But only one of them. I have a great many. Now, I am sorry to say

that you two have interfered with my plans - a thing I never allow. Your discovery of this house is a serious matter. You have not told the police about it yet, but you might do so in the future.

"I very much fear that I cannot trust you in the matter. You might promise - but promises are seldom kept. And you see, this house is very useful to me. It is, you might say, my clearing house. The house from which there is no return. From here you pass on - elsewhere. You, I am sorry to say, are so passing on. Regrettable - but necessary."

The voice paused for a brief second, then resumed:

"No bloodshed. I abhor bloodshed. My method is much simpler. And really not too painful, so I understand. Well, I must be getting along. Good evening to you both."

"Look here!" It was Wilbraham who spoke. "Do what you like to me, but this young lady has done nothing - nothing. It can't hurt you to let her go."

But there was no answer.

At that moment there came a cry from Freda. "The water - the water!"

Wilbraham twisted himself painfully and followed the direction of her eyes. From a hole up near the ceiling a steady trickle of water was pouring in.

Freda gave a hysterical cry. "They're going to drown us!"

The perspiration broke out on Wilbraham's brow.

"We're not done yet," he said. "We'll shout for help. Surely somebody will hear. Now, both together."

They yelled and shouted at the top of their voices. Not till they were hoarse did they stop.

"No use, I'm afraid," said Wilbraham sadly. "We're too far underground and I expect the doors are muffled. After all, if we could be heard, I've no doubt that brute would have gagged us."

"Oh!" cried Freda. "And it's all my fault. I got you into this."

"Don't worry about that, little girl. It's you I'm thinking about. I've been in tight corners before now and got out of them. Don't you lose heart. I'll get you out of this. We've plenty of time. At the rate that water's flowing in, it will be hours before the worst happens."

"How wonderful you are!" said Freda. "I've never met anybody like you - except in books."

"Nonsense - just common sense. Now, I've got to loosen these infernal ropes."

At the end of a quarter of an hour, by dint of straining and twisting, Wilbraham had the satisfaction of feeling that his bonds were

appreciably loosened. He managed to bend his head down and his wrists up till he was able to attack the knots with his teeth.

Once his hands were free, the rest was only a matter of time. Cramped, stiff, but free, he bent over the girl. A minute later she also was free.

So far the water was only up to their ankles.

"And now," said the soldier, "to get out of here."

The door of the cellar was up a few stairs. Major Wilbraham examined it.

"No difficulty here," he said. "Flimsy stuff, it will soon give at the hinges." He set his shoulders to it and heaved.

There was the cracking of wood - a crash, and the door burst from its hinges.

Outside was a flight of stairs. At the top was another door - a very different affair - of solid wood, with iron.

"A bit more difficult, this," said Wilbraham. "Hello, here's a piece of luck. It's unlocked."

He pushed it open, peered round it, then beckoned the girl to come on. They emerged into a passage behind the kitchen. In another moment they were standing under the stars in Friars Lane.

"Oh!" Freda gave a little sob. "Oh, how dreadful it's been!"

"My poor darling." He caught her in his arms. "You've been so wonderfully brave. Freda - darling angel - could you ever - I mean, would you - I love you, Freda. Will you marry me?"

After a suitable interval, highly satisfactory to both parties, Major Wilbraham said with a chuckle:

"And what's more, we've still got the secret of the ivory cache."

"But they took it from you!"

The major chuckled again. "That's just what they didn't do! You see, I wrote out a spoof copy, and before joining you here tonight, I put the real thing in a letter I was sending to my tailor and posted it. They've got the spoof copy - and I wish them joy of it! Do you know what we'll do, sweetheart? We'll go to East Africa for our honeymoon and hunt out the cache."

Mr Parker Pyne left his office and climbed two flights of stairs. Here in a room at the top of the house sat Mrs Oliver, the sensational novelist, now a member of Mr, Pyne's staff.

Mr. Parker Pyne tapped at the door and entered.

Mrs Oliver sat at a table on which were a typewriter, several notebooks, a general confusion of loose manuscripts and a large bag of apples.

"A very good story, Mrs Oliver," said Mr Parker Pyne genially.

"It went off well?" said Mrs Oliver. "I'm glad."

"That water-in-the-cellar business," said Mr Parker Pyne. "You don't think, on a future occasion, that something more original - perhaps?" He made the suggestion with proper diffidence.

Mrs Oliver shook her head and took an apple from the bag. "I think not Mr Pyne. You see, people are used to reading about such things. Water rising in a cellar, poison gas, et cetera. Knowing about it beforehand gives it an extra thrill when it happens to oneself. The public is conservative, Mr Pyne; it likes the old well-worn gadgets."

"Well, you should know," admitted Mr Parker Pyne, mindful of the authoress' forty-six successful works of fiction, all best sellers in England and America, and freely translated into French, German, Italian, Hungarian, Finnish, Japanese and Abyssinian. "How about expenses?"

Mrs Oliver drew a paper towards her. "Very moderate, on the whole. The two Negroes, Percy and Jerry, wanted very little. Young Lorrimer, the actor, was willing to enact the part of Mr Reid for five guineas. The cellar speech was a phonograph record, of course."

"Whitefriars has been extremely useful to me," said Mr Pyne. "I bought it for a song and it has already been the scene of eleven exciting dramas."

"Oh, I forgot," said Mrs Oliver. "Johnny's wages. Five shillings."

"Johnny?"

"Yes. The boy who poured the water from the watering cans through the hole in the wall."

"Ah, yes. By the way, Mrs Oliver how did you happen to know Swahili?"

"I didn't."

"I see. The British Museum, perhaps?"

"No. Delfridge's Information Bureau."

"How marvelous are the resources of modern commerce!" he murmured.

"The only thing that worries me," said Mrs Oliver, "is that those two young people won't find any cache when they get there."

"One cannot have everything in this world," said Mr Parker Pyne. "They will have had a honeymoon."

Mrs Wilbraham was sitting in a deck chair. Her husband was writing a letter. "What's the date, Freda?"

"The sixteenth."

"The sixteenth. By Jove!"

"What is it, dear?"

"Nothing. I just remembered a chap named Jones."

However happily married, there are some things one never tells.

"Dash it all," thought Major Wilbraham, "I ought to have called at that place and got my money back."

And then, being a fair-minded man, he looked at the other side of the question. "After all, it was I who broke the bargain. I suppose if I'd gone to see Jones something would have happened. And anyway, as it turns out, if I hadn't been going to see Jones, I should never have heard Freda cry for help, and we might never have met. So, indirectly, perhaps they have a right to the fifty pounds!"

Mrs Wilbraham was also following out a train of thought. "What a silly little fool I was to believe in that advertisement and pay those people three guineas. Of course, they never did anything for it and nothing else happened. If I'd only known what was coming - first Mr Reid, and then the queer, romantic way that Charlie came into my life. And to think that but for pure chance I might never have met him!"

She turned and smiled adoringly at her husband.

THE CASE OF THE DISTRESSED LADY

The buzzer on Mr Parker Pyne's desk purred discreetly.

"Yes?" said the great man.

"A young lady wishes to see you," announced his secretary. "She has no appointment."

"You may send her in, Miss Lemon." A moment later he was shaking hands with his visitor. "Good morning," he said. "Do sit down."

The girl sat dow and looked at Mr Parker Pyne. She was a pretty girl and quite young. Her hair was dark and wavy with a row of curls at the nape of the neck. She was beautifully turned out from the white knitted cap on her head to the cobweb stockings and dainty shoes. Clearly she was nervous.

"You are Mr Parker Pyne?" she asked.

"I am."

"The one who - who - advertises?"

"The one who advertises."

"You say that if people aren't - aren't happy - to - to come to you."

"Yes."

She took the plunge. "Well, I'm frightfully unhappy. So I thought I'd come along and just - and just see."

Mr Parker Pyne waited. He felt there was more to come.

"I - I'm in frightful trouble." She clenched her hands nervously.

"So I see," said Mr Parker Pyne. "Do you think you could tell me about it7"

That, it seemed, was what the girl was by no means sure of. She stared at Mr Parker Pyne with a desperate intentness. Suddenly she spoke with a rush.

"Yes, I will tell you. - I've made up my mind now. I've been nearly crazy with worry. I didn't know what to do or whom to go to. And then I saw your advertisement. I thought it was probably just a ramp, but it stayed in my mind. It sounded so comforting, somehow. And then I thought - well, it would do no harm to come and see. I could always make an excuse and get away again if I didn't - well, if didn't -"

"Quite so; quite so," said Mr Pyne.

"You see," said the girl, "it means - well, trusting somebody."

"And you feel you can trust me?" he said, smiling.

"It's odd," said the girl with unconscious rudeness, "but I do. Without knowing anything about you! I'm sure I can trust you."

"I can assure you," said Mr Pyne, "that your trust will not be misplaced."

"Then," said the girl, "I'll tell you about it. My name is Daphne St. John."

"Yes, Miss St. John."

"Mrs. I'm - I'm married."

"Pshaw!" muttered Mr Pyne, annoyed with himself as he noted the platinum circlet on the third finger of her heft hand. "Stupid of me."

"If I weren't married," said the girl, "I shouldn't mind so much. I mean, it wouldn't matter so much. It's the thought of Gerald - Well, here - here's what all the trouble's about!"

She dived in her bag, took something out and flung it down on the desk where, gleaming and flashing, it rolled over to Mr Parker Pyne.

It was a platinum ring with a large solitaire diamond. Mr Pyne picked it up, took it to the window, tested it on the pane, applied a jeweler's lens to his eye and examined it closely.

"An exceedingly fine diamond," he remarked, coming back to the table; "worth, I should say, about two thousand pounds at least."

"Yes. And it's stolen! I stole it! And I don't know what to do."

"Dear me!" said Mr Parker Pyne. "This is very interesting."

His client broke down and sobbed into an inadequate handkerchief.

"Now, now," said Mr Pyne. "Everything's going to be all right."

The girl dried her eyes and sniffed. "Is it?" she said. "Oh, is it?"

"Of course it is. Now, just tell me the whole story."

"Well, it began by my being hard up. You see, I'm frightfully extravagant. And Gerald gets so annoyed about it. Gerald's my husband. He's a lot older than I am, and he's got very - well, very austere ideas. He thinks running into debt is dreadful. So I didn't tell him. And I went over to Le Touquet with some friends and I thought perhaps I might be lucky at chemmy and get straight again. I did win at first. And then I lost, and then I thought I must go on. And I went on. And - and -"

"Yes, yes," said Mr Parker Pyne. "You need not go into details. You were in a worse plight than ever. That is right, is it not?"

Daphne St. John nodded. "And by then, you see, I simply couldn't tell Gerald. Because he hates gambling. Oh, I was in an awful mess. Well, we went down to stay with the Dortheimers near Cobham. He's frightfully rich, of course. His wife, Naomi, was at school with me. She's pretty and a dear. While we were there, the setting of this

ring got loose. On the morning we were leaving, she asked me to take it up to town and drop it at her jeweler's in Bond Street." She paused.

"And now we come to the difficult part," said Mr Pyne helpfully. "Go on, Mrs St. John."

"You won't ever tell, will you?" demanded the girl pleadingly.

"My clients' confidences are sacred. And anyway, Mrs St. John, you have told me so much already that I could probably finish the story for myself."

"That's true. All right. But I hate saying it - it sounds so awful. I went to Bond Street. There's another shop there - Viro's. They - copy jewelry. Suddenly I lost my head. I took the ring in and said I wanted an exact copy; I said I was going abroad and didn't want to take real jewelry with me. They seemed to think it quite natural.

"Well, I got the paste replica - it was so good you couldn't have told it from the original - and I sent it off by registered post to Lady Dortheimer. I had a box with the jeweler's name on it, so that was all right, and I made a professional-looking parcel. And then I - I - pawned the real one." She hid her face in her hands. "How could I? How could I? I was just a low, mean, common thief."

Mr Parker Pyne coughed. "I do not think you have quite finished," he said.

"No, I haven't. This, you understand, was about six weeks ago. I paid off all my debts and got square again, but of course I was miserable all the time. And then an old cousin of mine died and I came into some money. The first thing I did was to redeem the wretched ring. Well, that's all right; here it is. But something terribly difficult has happened."

"Yes?"

"We've had a quarrel with the Dortheimers. It's over some shares that Sir Reuben persuaded Gerald to buy. He was terribly let in over them and he told Sir Reuben what he thought of him - and oh, it's all dreadful! And now, you see, I can't get the ring back."

"Couldn't you send it to Lady Dortheimer anonymously?"

"That gives the whole thing away. She'll examine her own ring, find it's a fake and guess at once what I've done."

"You say she is a friend of yours. What about telling her the whole truth - throwing yourself on her mercy?"

Mrs St. John shook her head. "We're not such friends as that. Where money or jewelry is concerned, Naomi's as hard as nails. Perhaps she couldn't prosecute me if I gave the ring back, but she could tell everyone what I've done and I'd be ruined. Gerald would know and he would never forgive me. Oh, how awful everything is!" She began to cry again. "I've thought and I've thought, and I can't see what to do! Oh, Mr Pyne, can't you do anything?"

"Several things," said Mr Parker Pyne.

"You can? Really?"

"Certainly. I suggested the simplest way because in my long experience I have always found it the best. It avoids unlooked-for complications. Still, I see the force of your objections. At present no one knows of this unfortunate occurrence but yourself?"

"And you," said Mrs St. John.

"Oh, I do not count. Well, then, your secret is safe a present. All that is needed is to exchange the rings in some unsuspicious manner."

"That's it," the girl said eagerly.

"That should not be difficult. We must take a little time to consider the best method -"

She interrupted him. "But there is no time! That's what's driving me nearly crazy. She's going to have the ring reset."

"How do you know?"

"Just by chance. I was lunching with a woman the other day and I admired a ring she had on - a bit emerald. She said it was the newest thing - and that Naomi Dortheimer was going to have her diamond reset that way."

"Which means that we shall have to act quickly," said Mr Pyne thoughtfully.

"Yes, yes."

"It means gaining admission to the house - and possible not in a menial capacity. Servants have little chance of handling valuable rings. Have you any idea yourself, Mrs St. John?"

"Well, Naomi is giving a big party on Wednesday. And this friend of mine mentioned that she had been looking for some exhibition dancers. I don't know if anything has been settled -"

"I think that can be managed," said Mr Parker Pyne. "If the matter is already settled it will be more pensive, that is all. One thing more, do you happen to know where the main light switch is situated?"

"As it happens I do know that, because a fuse blew out late one night when the servants had all gone to bed. It's a box at the back of the hall - inside a little cupboard."

At Mr Parker Pyne's request she drew him a sketch.

"And now," said Mr Parker Pyne, "everything is going to be all right, so don't worry, Mrs St. John. What about the ring? Shall I take it now, or would you rather keep it till Wednesday?"

"Well, perhaps I'd better keep it."

"Now, no more worry, mind you," Mr Parker Pyne admonished her.

"And your - fee?" she asked timidly.

"That can stand over for the moment. I will let you know on Wednesday what expenses have been necessary. The fee will be nominal, I assure you."

He conducted her to the door, then rang the buzzer on his desk.

"Send Claude and Madeleine here."

Claude Luttrell was one of the handsomest specimens of lounge lizard to be found in England. Madeleine de Sara was the most seductive of vamps.

Mr Parker Pyne surveyed them with approval. "My children," he said, "I have a job for you. You are going to be internationally famous exhibition dancers. Now, attend to this carefully, Claude, and mind you get it right..."

Lady Dortheimer was fully satisfied with the arrangements for her ball. She surveyed the floral decorations and approved, gave a few last orders to the butler, and remarked to her husband that so far nothing had gone wrong!

It was a slight disappointment that Michael and Juanita, the dancers from the Red Admiral, had been unable to fulfill their contract at the last moment, owing to Juanita's spraining her ankle,

but instead, two new dancers were being sent (so ran the story over the telephone) who had created a furor in Paris.

The dancers duly arrived and Lady Dortheimer approved. The evening went splendidly. Jules and Sanchia did their turn, and most sensational it was. A wild Spanish Revolution dance. Then a dance called the Degenerate's Dream. Then an exquisite exhibition of modern dancing.

The "cabaret" over, normal dancing was resumed.

The handsome Jules requested a dance with Lady Dortheimer. They floated away. Never had Lady Dortheimer had such a perfect partner.

Sir Reuben was searching for the seductive Sanchia - in vain. She was not in the ballroom.

She was, as a matter of fact, out in the deserted hall near a small box, with her eyes fixed on the jeweled watch which she wore round her wrist.

"You are not English - you cannot be English - to dance as you do," murmured Jules into Lady Dortheimer's ear. "You are the sprite, the spirit of the wind. Droushcka petrovka navarouchi."

"What is that language?"

"Russian," said Jules mendaciously. "I say something to you in Russian that I dare not say in English."

Lady Dortheimer closed her eyes. Jules pressed her closer to him.

Suddenly the lights went out. In the darkness Jules bent and kissed the hand that lay on his shoulder. As she made to draw it away, he caught it, raised it to his lips again. Somehow, a ring slipped from her finger into his hand.

To Lady Dortheimer it seemed only a second before the lights went on again. Jules was smiling at her.

"Your ring," he said. "It slipped off. You permit?"

He replaced it on her finger. His eyes said a number of things while he was doing it.

Sir Reuben was talking about the main switch. "Some idiot. Practical joke, I suppose."

Lady Dortheimer was not interested. Those few minutes of darkness had been very pleasant.

Mr Parker Pyne arrived at his office on Thursday morning to find Mrs St. John already awaiting him.

"Show her in," said Mr Pyne.

"Well?" She was all eagerness.

"You look pale," he said accusingly.

She shook her head. "I couldn't sleep last night. I was wondering -"

"Now, here is the little bill for expenses. Train fares, costumes, and fifty pounds to Michael and Juanita. Sixty-five pounds, seventeen shillings."

"Yes, yes! But about last night - was it all right? Did it happen?"

Mr Parker Pyne looked at her in surprise. "My dear young lady, naturally it is all right. I took it for granted that you understood that."

"What a relief! I was afraid -"

Mr Parker Pyne shook his head reproachfully.

"Failure is a word not tolerated in this establishment. If I do not think I can succeed I refuse to undertake a case. If I do take a case, its success is practically a foregone conclusion."

"She's really got her ring back and suspects nothing?"

"Nothing whatever. The operation was most delicately conducted."

Daphne St. John sighed. "You don't know the load off my mind. What were you saying about expenses?"

"Sixty-five pounds, seventeen shillings."

Mrs St. John opened her bag and counted out the money. Mr Parker Pyne thanked her and wrote out a receipt.

"But your fee?" murmured Daphne. "This is only for expenses."

"In this case there is no fee."

"Oh, Mr Pyne! I couldn't, really!"

"My dear young lady, I insist. I will not touch a penny. It would be against my principles. Here is your receipt. And now -"

With the smile of a happy conjurer bringing off a successful trick, he drew a small box from his pocket and pushed it across the table. Daphne opened it. Inside, to all appearances, lay the identical diamond ring.

"Brute!" said Mrs St. John, making a face at it. "How I hate you! I've a good mind to throw you out of the window."

"I shouldn't do that," said Mr Pyne. "It might surprise people."

"You're quite sure it isn't the real one?" said Daphne.

"No, no! The one you showed me the other day is safely on Lady Dortheimer's finger."

"Then that's all right." Daphne rose with a happy laugh.

"Curious your asking me that," said Mr Parker Pyne. "Of course Claude, poor fellow, hasn't many brains. He might easily have got muddled. So, to make sure, I had an expert look at this thing this morning."

Mrs St. John sat down again rather suddenly. "Oh! And he said?"

"That it was an extraordinarily good imitation," said Mr Parker Pyne, beaming. "First-class work. So that sets your mind at rest, doesn't it?"

Mrs St. John started to say something, then stopped.

She was staring at Mr Parker Pyne.

The latter resumed his seat behind the desk and looked at her benevolently. "The cat who pulled the chestnuts out of the fire," he said dreamily. "Not a pleasant rφle. Not a rφle I should care to have any of my staff undertake. Excuse me. Did you say anything?"

"I - no, nothing."

"Good. I want to tell you a little story, Mrs St. John. It concerns a young lady. A fair-haired young lady, I think. She is not married. Her name is not St. John. Her Christian name is not Daphne. On the contrary, her name is Ernestine Richards, and until recently she was secretary to Lady Dortheimer.

"Well, one day the setting of Lady Dortheimer's diamond ring became loose and Miss Richards brought it up to town to have it

fixed. Quite like your story here, is it not? The same idea occurred to Miss Richards that occurred to you. She had the ring copied. But she was a far-sighted young lady. She saw a day coming when Lady Dortheimer would discover the substitution. When that happened, she would remember who had taken the ring to town and Miss Richards would be instantly suspected.

"So what happened? First, I fancy, Miss Richards invested in a La Merveilleuse transformation - Number Seven side parting, I think -" his eyes rested innocently on his client's wavy locks - "shade dark brown. Then she called on me. She showed me the ring, allowed me to satisfy myself that it was genuine, thereby disarming suspicion on my part. That done and a plan of substitution arranged, the young lady took the ring to the jeweler who in due course returned it to Lady Dortheimer.

"Yesterday evening the other ring, the false ring, was hurriedly handed over at the last minute at Waterloo Station. Quite rightly, Miss Richards did not consider that Mr Luttrell was likely to be an authority on diamonds. But just to satisfy myself that everything was aboveboard I arranged for a friend of mine, a diamond merchant, to be on the train. He looked at the ring and pronounced at once, 'This is not a real diamond; it is an excellent paste replica.'

"You see the point, of course, Mrs St John? When Lady Dortheimer discovered her loss, what would she remember? The charming young dancer who slipped the ring off her finger when the lights went out! She would make inquiries and find that the dancers originally engaged were bribed not to come. If matters were traced back to my office, my story of a Mrs St. John would seem feeble in

the extreme. Lady Dortheimer never knew a Mrs St. John. The story would sound a flimsy fabrication.

"Now you see, don't you, that I could not allow that. And so my friend Claude replaced on Lady Dortheimer's finger the same ring that he took off." Mr Parker Pyne's smile was less benevolent now.

"You see why I could not take a fee? I guarantee to give happiness. Clearly I have not made you happy. I will say just one thing more. You are young; possibly this is your first attempt at anything of the kind. Now I, on the contrary, am comparatively advanced in years, and I have had a long experience in the compilation of statistics. From that experience I can assure you that in eighty-seven percent of cases dishonesty does not pay. Eighty-seven percent. Think of it!"

With a brusque movement the pseudo Mrs St. John rose.

"You oily old brute!" she said. "Leading me on!" Making me pay expenses! And all the time -" She choked, and rushed toward the door.

"Your ring," said Mr Parker Pyne, holding it out to her.

She snatched it from him, looked at it and flung it out of the open window.

A door banged and she was gone.

Mr Parker Pyne was looking out of the window with some interest. "As I thought," he said. "Considerable surprise has been created. The gentleman selling Dismal Desmonds does not know what to make of it."

THE CASE OF THE DISCONTENTED HUSBAND

Undoubtedly one of Mr Parker Pyne's greatest assets was his sympathetic manner. It was a manner that invited confidence. He was well acquainted with the kind of paralysis that descended on clients as soon as they got inside his office. It was Mr Pyne's task to pave the way for the necessary disclosures.

On this particular morning he sat facing a new client, a Mr Reginald Wade. Mr Wade, he deduced at once, was the inarticulate type. The type that finds it hard to put into words anything connected with the emotions.

He was a tall, broadly built man with mild, pleasant blue eyes and a well-tanned complexion. He sat pulling absent-mindedly at a little mustache while he looked at Mr Parker Pyne with all the pathos of a dumb animal.

"Saw your advertisement, you know," he jerked. "Thought I might as well come along. Rum sort of show, but you never know, what?"

Mr Parker Pyne interpreted these cryptic remarks correctly. "When things go badly, one is willing to take a chance," he suggested.

"A chance - any chance. Things are in a bad way with me, Mr Pyne. I don't know what to do about it. Difficult, you know; damned difficult."

"That," said Mr Pyne, "is where I come in. I do know what to do! I am a specialist in every kind of human trouble."

"Oh, I say - bit of a tall order, that!"

"Not really. Human troubles are easily classified into a few main heads. There is ill health. There is boredom. There are wives who are in trouble over their husbands. There are husbands -" he paused - "who are in trouble over their wives."

"Matter of fact, you've hit it. You've hit it absolutely."

"Tell me about it," said Mr Pyne.

"There's nothing much to tell. My wife wants me to give her a divorce so that she can marry another chap."

"Very common indeed in these days. Now you, I gather, don't see eye to eye with her in this business?"

"I'm fond of her," said Mr Wade simply. "You see - well, I'm fond of her."

A simple and somewhat tame statement, but if Mr Wade had said, "I adore her. I worship the ground she walks on. I would cut myself into little pieces for her," he could not have been more explicit to Mr Parker Pyne.

"All the same, you know," went on Mr Wade, "what can I do? I mean, a fellow's so helpless. If she prefers this other fellow - well, one's got to play the game; stand aside and all that."

"The proposal is that she should divorce you?"

"Of course. I couldn't let her be dragged through the divorce court."

Mr Pyne looked at him thoughtfully. "But you come to me? Why?"

The other laughed in a shamefaced manner. "I don't know. You see, I'm not a clever chap. I can't think of things. I thought you might - well, suggest something. I've got six months, you see. She agreed to that. If at the end of six months she is still of the same mind - well, then, I get out. I thought you might give me a hint or two. At present everything I do annoys her.

"You see, Mr Pyne, what it comes to is this: I'm not a clever chap! I like knocking balls about. I like a round of golf and a good set of tennis. I'm no good at music and art and such things. My wife's clever. She likes pictures and the opera and concerts, and naturally she gets bored with me. This other fellow - nasty longhaired chap - he knows all about these things. He can talk about them. I can't. In a

way, I can understand a clever, beautiful woman getting fed up with an ass like me."

Mr Parker Pyne groaned. "You have been married - how long?... Nine years? And I suppose you have adopted that attitude from the start. Wrong, my dear sir; disastrously wrong! Never adopt an apologetic attitude with a woman. She will take you at your own valuation - and you deserve it. You should have gloried in your athletic prowess. You should have spoken of art and music as 'all that nonsense my wife likes.' You should have condoled with her on not being able to play games better. The humble spirit, my dear sir, is a washout in matrimony! No woman can be expected to stand up against it. No wonder your wife has been unable to last the course."

Mr Wade was looking at him in bewilderment.

"Well," he said, "what do you think I ought to do?"

"That certainly is the question. Whatever you should have done nine years ago, it is too late now. New tactics must be adopted. Have you ever had any affairs with other women?"

"Certainly not."

"I should have said, perhaps, any light flirtations?"

"I never bothered about women much."

"A mistake. You must start now."

Mr Wade looked alarmed. "Oh, look here, I couldn't really. I mean -"

"You will be put to no trouble in the matter. One of my staff will be supplied for the purpose. She will tell you what is required of you, and any attentions you pay her she will, of course, understand to be merely a matter of business."

Mr Wade looked relieved. "That's better. But do you really think - I mean, it seems to me that Iris will be keener to get rid of me than ever."

"You do not understand human nature, Mr Wade. Still less do you understand feminine human nature. At the present moment you are, from the feminine point of view, merely a waste product. Nobody wants you. What use has a woman for something that no one wants? None whatever. But take another angle. Suppose your wife discovers that you are looking forward to regaining your freedom as much as she is?"

"Then she ought to be pleased."

"She ought to be, perhaps, but she will not be! Moreover, she will see that you have attracted a fascinating young woman - a young woman who could pick and choose. Immediately your stock goes up. Your wife knows that all her friends will say it was you who tired of her and wished to marry a more attractive woman. That will annoy her."

"You think so?"

"I am sure of it. You will no longer be 'poor dear old Reggie.' You will be 'that sly dog Reggie.' All the difference in the world! Without relinquishing the other man, she will doubtless try to win you back. You will not be won. You will sensible and give to her all her arguments. 'Much better to part."Temperamentally unsuited.' You realize that while what she said was true - that you had never understood her - it is also true that she had never understood you. But we need not go into this now; you will be given full instructions when the time comes."

Mr Wade seemed doubtful still. "You really think that this plan of yours will do the trick?" he asked dubiously.

"I will not say I am absolutely sure of it," said Mr Parker Pyne cautiously. "There is a bare possibility that your wife may be so overwhelmingly in love with this other man that nothing you could say or do will affect her, but I consider that unlikely. She has probably been driven into this affair through boredom - boredom with the atmosphere of uncritical devotion and absolute fidelity with which you have most unwisely surrounded her. If you follow my instructions, the chances are, I should say, ninety-seven percent in your favor."

"Good enough," said Mr Wade. "I'll do it. By the way - er - how much?"

"My fee is two hundred guineas, payable in advance."

Mr Wade drew out a check book.

The grounds of Lorrimer Court were lovely in the afternoon sunshine. Iris Wade, lying on a long chair, made a delicious spot of color. She was dressed in delicate shades of mauve and by skillful make-up managed to look much younger than her thirty-five years.

She was talking to her friend Mrs Massington, whom she always found sympathetic. Both ladies were afflicted with athletic husbands who talked stocks and shares and golf alternately.

"- and so one learns to live and let live," finished Iris.

"You're wonderful, darling," said Mrs Massington and added too quickly: "Tell me, who is this girl?"

Iris raised a weary shoulder. "Don't ask me! Reggie found her. She's Reggie's little friend! So amusing. You know he never looks at girls as a rule. He came to me and hemmed and hawed, and finally said he wanted to ask this Miss de Sara down for the weekend. Of course I laughed - I couldn't help it. Reggie, you know! Well, here she is."

"Where did he meet her?"

"I don't know. He was very vague about it all."

"Perhaps he's known her some time."

"Oh, I don't think so," said Mrs Wade. "Of course," she went on, "I'm delighted - simply delighted. I mean, it makes it so much easier for me, as things are. Because I have been unhappy about Reggie; he's such a dear old thing. That's what I kept saying to Sinclair - that it would hurt Reggie so. But he insisted that Reggie would soon get over it; it looks as if he were right. Two days ago Reggie seemed heartbroken - and now he wants this girl down! As I say, I'm amused. I like to see Reggie enjoying himself. I fancy the poor fellow actually thought I might be jealous. Such an absurd idea! 'Of course,' I said, 'have your friend down.' Poor Reggie - as though a girl like that could ever care about him. She's just amusing herself."

"She's extremely attractive," said Mrs Massington. "Almost dangerously so, if you know what I mean. The sort of girl who cares only for men. I don't feel, somehow, she can be a really nice girl."

"Probably not," said Mrs Wade.

"She has marvelous clothes," said Mrs Massington.

"Almost too exotic, don't you think?"

"But very expensive."

"Opulent. She's too opulent-looking."

"Here they come," said Mrs Massington.

Madeleine de Sara and Reggie Wade were walking across the lawn. They were laughing and talking together and seemed very happy.

Madeleine flung herself into a chair, tore off the bret she was wearing and ran her hands through her exquisitely dark curls. She was undeniably beautiful.

"We've had such a marvelous afternoon!" she cried. "I'm terribly hot. I must be looking too dreadful."

Reggie Wade started nervously at the sound of his cue. "You look - you look -" He gave a little laugh. "I won't say it," he finished.

Madeleine's eyes met his. It was a glance of complete understanding on her part. Mrs Massington noted it alertly.

"You should play golf," said Madeleine to her hostess. "You miss such a lot. Why don't you take it up? I have a friend who did and became quite good, and she was a lot older than you."

"I don't care for that sort of thing," said Iris coldly.

"Are you bad at games? How rotten for you! It makes one feel so out of things. But really, Mrs Wade, coaching nowadays is so good that almost anyone can play fairly well. I improved my tennis no end last summer. Of course I'm hopeless at golf."

"Nonsense!" said Reggie. "You only need coaching. Look how you were getting those brassie shots this afternoon."

"Because you showed me how. You're a wonderful teacher. Lots of people simply can't teach. But you've got the gift. It must be wonderful to be you - you can do everything."

"Nonsense. I'm no good - no use whatever." Reggie was confused.

"You must be very proud of him," said Madeleine, turning to Mrs Wade. "How have you managed to keep him all these years? You must have been very clever. Or have you hidden him away?"

Her hostess made no reply. She picked up her book with a hand that trembled.

Reggie murmured something about changing, and went off.

"I do think it's so sweet of you to have me here," said Madeleine to her hostess. "Some women are so suspicious of their husbands' friends. I do think jealousy is absurd, don't you?"

"I do indeed. I should never dream of being jealous of Reggie."

"That's wonderful of you! Because anyone can see that he's a man who's frightfully attractive to women. It was a shock to me when I heard he was married. Why do all the attractive men get snapped up young?"

"I'm glad you find Reggie so attractive," said Mrs Wade.

"Well, he is, isn't he? So good-looking, and so frightfully good at games. And that pretended indifference of his on women. That spurs us one, of course."

"I suppose you have a lot of men friends," said Mrs Wade.

"Oh, yes. I like men better than women. Women are never really nice to me. I can't think why."

"Perhaps you are too nice to their husbands," said Mrs Massington with a tinkly laugh.

"Well, one's sorry for people sometimes. So many nice men are tied to such dull wives. You know, 'arty' women and highbrow women. Naturally, the men want someone young and bright to talk to. I think the modern ideas of marriage and divorce are so sensible. Start again while one is still young with someone who shares one's tastes and ideas. It's better for everybody in the end. I mean, the highbrow wives probably pick up some long-haired creature of their own type who satisfies them. I think cutting your losses and starting again is a wise plan, don't you, Mrs Wade?"

"Certainly."

A certain frostiness in the atmosphere seemed to penetrate Madeleine's consciousness. She murmured something about changing for tea and left them.

"Detestable creatures these modern girls are," said Mrs Wade. "Not an idea in their heads."

"She's got one idea in hers, Iris," said Mrs Massing ton. "That girl's in love with Reggie."

"Nonsense!"

"She is. I saw the way she looked at him just now. She doesn't care a pin whether he's married or not. She means to have him. Disgusting, I call it."

Mrs Wade was silent a moment, then she laughed uncertainly.

"After all," she said, "what does it matter?"

Presently Mrs Wade, too, went upstairs. Her husband was in his dressing room changing. He was singing.

"Enjoyed yourself, dear?" said Mrs Wade.

"Oh, er - rather, yes."

"I'm glad. I want you to be happy."

"Yes, rather."

Acting a part was not Reggie Wade's strong point, but as it happened, the acute embarrassment occasioned by his fancying he was doing so did just as well. He avoided his wife's eye and jumped when she spoke to him. He felt ashamed; hated the farce of it all. Nothing could have produced a better effect. He was the picture of conscious guilt.

"How long have you known her?" asked Mrs Wade suddenly.

"Er - who?"

"Miss de Sara, of course."

"Well I don't quite know. I mean - oh some time."

"Really? You never mentioned her."

"Didn't I? I suppose I forgot."

"Forgot indeed!" said Mrs Wade. She departed with a whisk of mauve draperies.

After tea Mr Wade showed Miss de Sara the rose garden. They walked across the lawn conscious of two pairs of eyes raking their backs.

"Look here." Safe out of sight in the rose garden, Mr Wade unburdened himself. "Look here, I think we'll have to give this up. My wife looked at me just now as though she hated me."

"Don't worry," said Madeleine. "It's quite all right."

"Do you think so? I mean, I don't want to put her against me. She said several nasty things at tea."

"It's all right," said Madeleine again. "You're doing splendidly."

"Do you really think so?"

"Yes." In a lower voice she went on: "Your wife is walking round the corner of the terrace. She wants to see what we're doing. You'd better kiss me."

"Oh!" said Mr Wade nervously. "Must I? I mean -"

"Kiss me!" said Madeleine fiercely.

Mr Wade kissed her. Any lack of elan in the performance was remedied by Madeleine. She flung her arms round him. Mr Wade staggered.

"Oh!" he said.

"Did you hate it very much?" said Madeleine.

"No, of course not," said Mr Wade gallantly. "It - it just took me by surprise." He added wistfully: "Have we been in the rose garden long enough, do you think?"

"I think so," said Madeleine. "We've put in a bit of good work here."

They returned to the lawn. Mrs Massington informed them that Mrs Wade had gone to lie down. Later, Mr Wade joined Madeleine with a perturbed face.

"She's in an awful state - hysterics."

"Good."

"She saw me kissing you."

"Well, we meant her to."

"I know, but I couldn't say that, could I? I didn't know what to say. I said it had just - just - well, happened."

"Excellent."

"She said you were scheming to marry me and that you were no better than you should be. That upset me - it seemed such awfully rough luck on you. I mean, when you're just doing a job. I said that I had the utmost respect for you and that what she said wasn't true at all, and I'm afraid I got angry when she went on about it."

"Magnificent!"

"And then she told me to go away. She doesn't want ever to speak to me again. She talked of packing up and leaving." His face was dismayed.

Madeleine smiled. "I'll tell you the answer to that one. Tell her that you'll be the one to go; that you'll pack up and clear out to town."

"But I don't want to!"

"That's all right. You won't have to. Your wife would hate to think of you amusing yourself in London."

The following morning Reggie Wade had a fresh bulletin to impart.

"She says she's been thinking, and that it isn't fair for her to go away when she agreed to stay six months. But she says that as I have my friends down here she doesn't see why she shouldn't have hers. She is asking Sinclair Jordan."

"Is he the one?"

"Yes, and I'm damned if I'll have him in my house!"

"You must," said Madeleine. "Don't worry. I'll attend to him. Say that on thinking things over you have no objection, and that you know she won't mind your asking me to stay on, too."

"Oh, dear!" sighed Mr Wade.

"Now don't lose heart," said Madeleine. "Everything is going splendidly. Another fortnight - and all your troubles will be over."

"A fortnight? Do you really think so?" demanded Mr Wade.

"Think so? I'm sure of it," said Madeleine.

A week later Madeleine de Sara entered Mr Parker Pyne's office and sank wearily into a chair.

"Enter the Queen of Vamps," said Mr Parker Pyne, smiling.

"Vamps!" said Madeleine. She gave a hollow laugh. "I've never had such uphill work being a vamp. That man is obsessed by his wife! It's a disease."

Mr Parker Pyne smiled. "Yes, indeed. Well, in one way it made our task easier. It is not every man, my dear Madeleine, whom I would expose to your fascination so light-heartedly."

The girl laughed. "If you knew the difficulty I had to make him even kiss me as though he liked it!"

"A novel experience for you, my dear. Well, is your task accomplished?"

"Yes. I think all is well. We had a tremendous scene last night. Let me see, my last report was three days ago?"

"Yes."

"Well, as I told you, I only had to look at that miserable worm, Sinclair Jordan, once. He was all over me - especially as he thought from my clothes that I had money. Mrs Wade was furious, of course. Here were both her men dancing attendance on me. I soon showed where my preference lay. I made fun of Sinclair Jordan, to his face and to her. I laughed at his clothes, and at the length of his hair. I pointed out that he had knock-knees."

"Excellent technique," said Mr Parker Pyne appreciatively.

"Everything boiled up last night. Mrs Wade came out in the open. She accused me of breaking up her home. Reggie Wade mentioned the little matter of Sinclair Jordan. She said that that was only the result of her unhappiness and loneliness. She had noticed her husband's abstraction for some time but had had no idea as to the cause of it. She said they had always been ideally happy, that she adored him and he knew it, and that she wanted him and only him.

"I said it was too late for that. Mr Wade followed his instructions splendidly. He said he didn't give a damn! He was going to marry me! Mrs Wade could have her Sinclair as soon as she pleased. There was no reason why the divorce proceedings shouldn't be started at once; waiting six months was absurd.

"Within a few days, he said, she should have the necessary evidence and could instruct her solicitors. He said he couldn't live without me. Then Mrs Wade clutched her chest and talked about her weak heart and had to be given brandy. He didn't weaken. He went up to town this morning, and I've no doubt she's gone after him by this time."

"So that's all right," said Mr Pyne cheerfully. "A very satisfactory case."

The door flew open. In the doorway stood Reggie Wade.

"Is she here?" he demanded, advancing into the room. "Where is she?" He caught sight of Madeleine.

"Darling!" he cried. He seized both her hands. "Darling, darling. You knew, didn't you, that it was real last night - that I meant every word I said to Iris? I don't know why I was blind so long. But I've known for the last three days."

"Known what?" said Madeleine faintly.

"That I adored you. That there was no woman in the world for me but you. Iris can bring her divorce and when it's gone through you'll marry me, won't you? Say you will. Madeleine, I adore you."

He caught the paralyzed Madeleine in his arms just as the door flew open again, this time to admit a thin woman dressed in untidy green.

"I thought so!" said the newcomer. "I followed you! I knew you'd go to her!"

"I can assure you -" began Mr Parker Pyne, recovering from the stupefaction that had descended upon him.

The intruder took no notice of him. She swept on:

"Oh, Reggie, you can't want to break my heart! Only come back! I'll not say a word about all this. I'll learn golf. I won't have any friends you don't care about. After all these years, when we've been so happy together -"

"I've never been happy till now," said Mr Wade, still gazing at Madeleine. "Dash it all, Iris, you wanted to marry that ass Jordan. Why don't you go and do it?"

Mrs Wade gave a wail. "I hate him! I hate the very sight of him." She turned to Madeleine. "You wicked woman! You horrible vampire - stealing my husband from me."

"I don't want your husband," said Madeleine distractedly.

"Madeleine!" Mr Wade was gazing at her in agony.

"Please go away," said Madeleine.

"But look here, I'm not pretending. I mean it."

"Oh, go away!" cried Madeleine hysterically. "Go away!"

Reggie moved reluctantly towards the door. "I shall come back," he warned her. "You've not seen the last of me." He went out, banging the door.

"Girls like you ought to be flogged and branded!" cried Mrs Wade. "Reggie was an angel to me always till you came along. Now he's so changed I don't know him." With a sob, she hurried out after her husband.

Madeleine and Mr Parker Pyne looked at each other.

"I can't help it," said Madeleine helplessly. "He's a very nice man - a dear - but I don't want to marry him. I'd no idea of all this. If you knew the difficulty I had making him kiss me!"

"Ahem!" said Mr Parker Pyne. "I regret to admit it, but it was an error of judgment on my part." He shook his head sadly, and drawing Mr Wade's file towards him, wrote across it:

FAILURE - owing to natural causes.

N.B. They should have been foreseen.

THE CASE OF THE CITY CLERK

Mr Parker Pyne leaned back thoughtfully in his swivel chair and surveyed his visitor. He saw a small sturdily built man of forty-five with wistful, puzzled, timid eyes that looked at him with a kind of anxious hopefulness.

"I saw your advertisement in the paper" said the little man nervously.

"You are in trouble, Mr Roberts?"

"No, not in trouble exactly."

"You are unhappy?"

"I shouldn't like to say that either. I've a great deal to be thankful for."

"We all have," said Mr Parker Pyne. "But when we have to remind ourselves of the fact it is a bad sign."

"I know," said the little man eagerly. "That's just it! You've hit the nail on the head, sir."

"Supposing you tell me all about yourself," suggested Mr Parker Pyne.

"There's not much to tell, sir. As I say, I've a great deal to be thankful for. I have a job; I've managed to save a little money; the children are strong and healthy."

"So you want - what?"

"I - I don't know." He flushed. "I expect that sounds foolish to you, sir."

"Not at all," said Mr Parker Pyne.

By skilled questioning he elicited further confidences. He heard of Mr Roberts' employment in a well-known firm and of his slow but steady rise. He heard of his marriage; of the struggle to present a decent appearance, to educate the children and have them "looking nice"; of the plotting and planning and skimping and

saving to put aside a few pounds each year. He heard, in fact, the saga of a life of ceaseless effort to survive.

"And - well, you see how it is," confessed Mr Roberts. "The wife's away. Staying with her mother with the two children. Little change for them and a rest for her. No room for me and we can't afford to go elsewhere. And being alone, and reading the paper, I saw your advertisement and it set me thinking. I'm forty-eight. I just wondered... Things going on everywhere," he ended, all his wistful suburban soul in his eyes.

"You want," said Mr Pyne, "to live gloriously for ten minutes?"

"Well, I shouldn't put it like that. But perhaps you're right. Just to get out of the rut. I'd go back to it thankful afterwards - if only I had something to think about." He looked at the other man anxiously. "I suppose there's nothing possible, sir? I'm afraid - I'm afraid I couldn't afford to pay much."

"How much could you afford?"

"I could manage five pounds, sir." He waited, breathless.

"Five pounds," said Mr Parker Pyne. "I fancy - I just fancy we might be able to manage something for five pounds. Do you object to danger?" he added sharply.

A tinge of color came into Mr Roberts' sallow face.

"Danger, did you say, sir? Oh, no, not at all. I - I've never done anything dangerous."

Mr Parker Pyne smiled. "Come to see me again tomorrow and I'll tell you what I can do for you."

The Bon Voyageur is a little-known hostelry. It is a restaurant frequented by a few habituйs. They dislike newcomers.

To the Bon Voyageur came Mr Pyne and was greeted with respectful recognition. "Mr Bonnington here?" he asked.

"Yes, sir. He's at his usual table."

"Good. I'll join him."

Mr Bonnington was a gentleman of military appearance with a somewhat bovine face. He greeted his friend with pleasures.

"Hello, Parker. Hardly ever see you nowadays. Didn't know you came here."

"I do now and then. Especially when I want to lay my hand on an old friend."

"Meaning me?"

"Meaning you. As a matter of fact, Lucas, I've been thinking over what we were talking about the other day."

"The Peterfield business? Seen the latest in the papers? No, you can't have. It won't be in till this evening."

"What is the latest?"

"They murdered Peterfield last night," said Mr Bonnington, placidly eating salad.

"Good heavens!" cried Mr Pyne.

"Oh, I'm not surprised," said Mr Bonnington. "Pig-headed old man, Peterfield. Wouldn't listen to us. Insisted on keeping the plans in his own hands."

"Did they get them?"

"No; it seems some woman came round and gave the professor a recipe for boiling a ham. The old ass, absent-minded as usual, put the recipe for the ham in his safe and the plans in the kitchen."

"Fortunate."

"Almost providential. But I still don't know who's going to take 'em to Geneva. Maitland's in the hospital. Carslake's in Berlin. I can't leave. It means young Hooper." He looked at his friend.

"You're still of the same opinion?" asked Mr Parker Pyne.

"Absolutely. He's been got at! I know it. I haven't a shadow of proof, but I tell you, Parker, I know when a chap's crooked! And I want those plans to get to Geneva. The League needs 'em. For the first time an invention isn't going to be sold to a nation. It's going to be handed over voluntarily to the League.

"It's the finest peace gesture that's ever been attempted, and it's got to be put through. And Hooper's crooked. You'll see, he'll be drugged on the train! If he goes in a plane it'll come down at some convenient spot! But confound it all, I can't pass him over. Discipline! You've got to have discipline! That's why I spoke to you the other day."

"You asked me whether I knew of anyone."

"Yes. Thought you might in your line of business. Some fire eater spoiling for a row. Whoever I send stands a good chance of being done in. Your man would probably not be suspected at all. But he's got to have nerve."

"I think I know of someone who would do," said Mr Pyne.

"Thank God there are still chaps who will take a risk. Well, it's agreed, then?"

"It's agreed," said Mr Parker Pyne.

Mr Parker Pyne was summing up instructions.

"Now, that's quite clear? You will travel in a first-class sleeper to Geneva. You leave London at ten-forty-five, via Folkestone and Boulogne, and you get into your first-class sleeper at Boulogne. You arrive at Geneva at eight the following morning. Here is the address at which you will report. Please memorize it and I will destroy it. Afterwards go to this hotel and await further instructions. Here is sufficient money in French and Swiss notes and currency. You understand?"

"Yes, sir." Roberts' eyes were shining with excitement. "Excuse me, sir, but am I allowed to - er - know anything of what it is I am carrying?"

Mr Parker Pyne smiled beneficently. "You are carrying a cryptogram which reveals the secret hiding place of the crown jewels of Russia," he said solemnly. "You can understand, naturally, that Bolshevist agents will be alert to intercept you. If it is necessary for you to talk about yourself, I should recommend that you say you have come into money and are enjoying a little holiday abroad."

Mr Roberts sipped a cup of coffee and looked out over the Lake of Geneva. He was happy but at the same time he was disappointed.

He was happy because, for the first time in his life, he was in a foreign country. Moreover, he was staying in the kind of hotel he would never stay in again, and not for one moment had he had to worry about money! He had a room with private bathroom,

delicious meals and attentive service. All these things Mr Roberts had enjoyed very much indeed.

He was disappointed because so far nothing that could be described as adventure had come his way. No disguised Bolshevists or mysterious Russians had crossed his path. A pleasant chat on the train with a French commercial traveler who spoke excellent English was the only human intercourse that had come his way. He had secreted the papers in his sponge bag as he had been told to do and had delivered them according to instructions.

There had been no dangers to overcome, no hair-breadth escapes. Mr Roberts was disappointed.

It was at that moment that a tall, bearded man murmured, "Pardon," and sat down on the other side of the little table. "You will excuse me," he said, "but I think you know a friend of mine. 'P.P.' are the initials."

Mr Roberts was pleasantly thrilled. Here, at last, was a mysterious Russian. "Qu-quite right."

"Then I think we understand each other," said the stranger.

Mr Roberts looked at him searchingly. This was far more like the real thing. The stranger was a man of about fifty, of distinguished though foreign appearance.

He wore an eyeglass, and a small colored ribbon in his buttonhole.

"You have accomplished your mission in the most satisfactory manner," said the stranger. "Are you prepared to undertake a further one?"

"Certainly. Oh, yes."

"Good. You will book a sleeper on the Geneva-Paris train for tomorrow night. You will ask for Berth Number Nine."

"Supposing it is not free?"

"It will be free. That will have been seen to."

"Berth Number Nine," repeated Roberts. "Yes, I've got that."

"During the course of your journey someone will say to you, 'Pardon Monsieur, but I think you were recently at Grasse?' To that you will reply, 'Yes, last month.' The person will then say, 'You are interested in scent?' and you will reply, 'Yes, I am a manufacturer of synthetic Oil of Jasmine.' After that you will place yourself entirely at the disposal of the person who has spoken to you. By the way, are you armed?"

"No," said little Mr Roberts in a flutter. "No; I never thought. That is -"

"That can soon be remedied," said the bearded man. He glanced around. No one was near them. Something hard and shining was pressed into Mr Roberts' hand.

"A small weapon but efficacious," said the stranger, smiling.

Mr Roberts, who had never fired a revolver in his life, slipped it gingerly into a pocket. He had an uneasy feeling that it might go off at any minute.

They went over the passwords again. Then Roberts' new friend rose.

"I wish you good luck," he said. "May you come through safely. You are a brave man, Mr Roberts."

"Am I?" thought Roberts, when the other had departed. "I'm sure I don't want to get killed. That would never do."

A pleasant thrill shot down his spine, slightly adulterated by a thrill that was not quite so pleasant.

He went to his room and examined the weapon. He was still uncertain about its mechanism and hoped he would not be called upon to use it.

He went out to book his seat.

The train left Geneva at nine-thirty. Roberts got to the station in good time. The sleeping-car conductor took his ticket and his passport, and stood aside while an underling swung Roberts' suitcase onto the rack. There was other luggage there: pigskin case and a Gladstone bag.

"Number Nine is the lower berth," said the conductor.

As Roberts turned to leave the carriage he ran into a big man who was entering. They drew apart with apologies - Roberts' in English and the stranger's in French. He was a big burly man, with a closely shaven head and thick eyeglasses through which his eyes seemed to peer suspiciously.

"An ugly customer," said the little man to himself. He sensed something vaguely sinister about his traveling companion. Was it to keep a watch on this man that he had been told to ask for Berth Number Nine? He fancied it might be.

He went out again into the corridor. There was still ten minutes before the train was due to start and he thought he would walk up and down the platform. Halfway along the passage he stood back to allow a lady to pass him. She was just entering the train and the conductor preceded her, ticket in hand. As she passed Roberts she dropped her hand bag. The Englishman picked it up and handed it to her.

"Thank you, Monsieur." She spoke in English but her voice was foreign, a rich low voice very seductive in quality. As she was about to pass on, she hesitated and murmured: "Pardon, Monsieur, but I think you were recently at Grasse?"

Roberts' heart leaped with excitement. He was to place himself at the disposal of this lovely creature - for she was lovely, of that there was no doubt. Not only lovely, but aristocratic and wealthy. She

wore a traveling coat of fur, a chic hat. There were pearls round her neck. She was dark and her lips were scarlet.

Roberts made the required answer: "Yes, last month."

"You are interested in scent?"

"Yes, I am a manufacturer of synthetic Oil of Jasmine."

She bent her head and passed on, leaving a mere whisper behind her: "In the corridor as soon as the train starts."

The next ten minutes seemed an age to Roberts. At last the train started. He walked slowly along the corridor. The lady in the fur coat was struggling with a window. He hurried to her assistance.

"Thank you, Monsieur. Just a little air before they insist on closing everything." And then in a soft, low, rapid voice: "After the frontier, when our fellow traveler is asleep - not before - go into the washing place and through into the compartment on the other side. You understand?"

"Yes." He let down the window and said in a louder voice: "Is that better, Madame?"

"Thank you very much."

He retired to his compartment. His traveling companion was already stretched out in the upper berth. His preparations for the

night had evidently been simple. The removal of boots and a coat, in fact.

Roberts debated his own costume. Clearly if he were going into a lady's compartment he could not undress.

He found a pair of slippers, substituted them for his boots, and then lay down, switching out the light. A few minutes later, the man above began to snore.

Just after ten o'clock they reached the frontier. The door was thrown open; a perfunctory question was asked. Had Messieurs anything to declare? The door was closed again. Presently the train drew out of Bellegarde.

The man in the upper berth was snoring again. Roberts allowed twenty minutes to elapse, then he slipped to his feet and opened the door of the lavatory compartment. Once inside, he bolted the door behind him and eyed the door on the farther side. It was not bolted. He hesitated. Should he knock?

Perhaps it would be absurd to knock. But he didn't quite like entering without knocking. He compromised, opened the door gently about an inch and waited. He even ventured on a small cough.

The response was prompt. The door was pulled open, he was seized by the arm, pulled through into the farther compartment, and the girl closed and bolted the door behind him.

Roberts caught his breath. Never had he imagined anything so lovely. She, was wearing a long foamy garment of cream chiffon and lace. She leaned against the door into the corridor, panting. Roberts had often read of beautiful hunted creatures at bay. Now, for the first time, he saw one - a thrilling sight.

"Thank God!" murmured the girl.

She was quite young, Roberts noted, and her loveliness was such that she seemed to him like a being from another world. Here was romance at last - and he was in it!

She spoke in a low, hurried voice. Her English was good but the inflection was wholly foreign. "I am so glad you have come," she said. "I have been horribly frightened. Vassilievitch is on the train. You understand what that means?"

Roberts did not understand in the least what it meant, but he nodded.

"I thought I had given them the slip. I might have known better. What are we to do? Vassilievitch is in the next carriage to me. Whatever happens, he must not get the jewels. Even if he murders me, he must not get the jewels."

"He's not going to murder you and he's not going to get the jewels," said Roberts with determination.

"Then what am I to do with them?"

Roberts looked past her at the door. "The door's bolted," he said.

The girl laughed. "What are locked doors to Vassilievitch?"

Roberts felt more and more as though he were in the middle of one of his favorite novels. "There's only one thing to be done. Give them to me."

She looked at him doubtfully. "They are worth a quarter of a million."

Roberts flushed. "You can trust me."

The girl hesitated a moment longer, then: "Yes, I will trust you," she said. She made a swift movement. The next minute she was holding out to him a rolled-up pair of stockings - stockings of cobweb silk. "Take them, my friend," she said to the astonished Roberts.

He took them and at once he understood. Instead of being light as air, the stockings were unexpectedly heavy.

"Take them into your compartment," she said. "You can give them to me in the morning - if - if I am still here."

Roberts coughed. "Look here," he said. "About you." He paused. "I - I must keep guard over you."

Then he flushed in an agony of propriety. "Not in here, I mean. I'll stay in there." He nodded towards the lavatory compartment.

"If you like to stay here -" She glanced at the upper unoccupied berth.

Roberts flushed to the roots of his hair. "No, no," he protested. "I shall be all right in there. If you need me, call out."

"Thank you, my friend," said the girl softly.

She slipped into the lower berth, drew up the covers and smiled at him gratefully. He retreated into the washroom.

Suddenly - it must have been a couple of hours later - he thought he heard something. He listened - nothing. Perhaps he had been mistaken. And yet it certainly seemed to him that he had heard a faint sound from the next carriage. Supposing - just supposing...

He opened the door softly. The compartment was as he had left it, with the tiny blue light in the ceiling. He stood there with his eyes straining through the dimness till they got accustomed to it. He made out the outline of the berth.

He saw that it was empty. The girl was not there! He switched the light full on. The compartment was empty. Suddenly he sniffed. Just a whiff but he recognized it - the sweet, sickly odor of chloroform!

He stepped from the compartment (unlocked now, he noted) out into the corridor and looked up and down. Empty! His eyes fastened on the door next to the girl's.

She had said that Vassilievitch was in the next compartment. Gingerly Roberts tried the handle. The door was bolted on the inside.

What should he do? Demand admittance? But the man would refuse - and after all, the girl might not be there! And if she were, would she thank him for making a public business of the matter? He had gathered that secrecy was essential in the game they were playing.

A perturbed little man wandered slowly along the corridor. He paused at the end compartment. The door was open, and the conductor lay there sleeping. And above him, on a hook, hung his brown uniform coat and a peaked cap.

In a flash Roberts had decided on his course of action. In another minute he had donned the coat and cap and was hurrying back along the corridor. He stopped at the door next to that of the girl, summoned all his resolution and knocked peremptorily.

When the summons was not answered, he knocked again.

"Monsieur," he said, in his best accent.

The door opened a little way and a head peered out - the head of a foreigner, clean-shaven except for a black mustache. It was an angry, malevolent face.

"Qu'est-ce qu'il y a?" he snapped.

"Votre passeport, monsieur." Roberts stepped back and beckoned.

The other hesitated, then stepped out into the corridor. Roberts had counted on his doing that. If he had the girl inside, he naturally would not want the conductor to come in. Like a flash, Roberts acted. With all his force he shoved the foreigner aside - the man was unprepared and the swaying of the train helped - bolted into the carriage himself, shut the door and locked it.

Lying across the end of the berth was the girl, a gag across her mouth and her wrists tied together. He freed her quickly, and she fell against him with a sigh.

"I feel so weak and ill," she murmured. "It was chloroform, I think. Did he - did he get them?"

"No." Roberts tapped his pocket. "What are we to do now?" he asked.

The girl sat up. Her wits were returning. She took in his costume.

"How clever of you. Fancy thinking of that! He said he would kill me if I did not tell him where the jewels were. I have been so afraid - and then you came." Suddenly she laughed. "But we have outwitted him! He will not dare do anything. He cannot even try to get back into his own compartment.

"We must stay here till morning. Probably he will leave the train at Dijon; we are due to stop there in about half an hour. He will telegraph to Paris and they will pick up our trail there. In the

meantime, you had better throw that coat and cap out of the window. They might get you into trouble."

Roberts obeyed.

"We must not sleep," the girl decided. "We must stay on guard till morning."

It was a strange, exciting vigil. At six o'clock in the morning, Roberts opened the door carefully and looked out. No one was about. The girl slipped quickly into her own compartment. Roberts followed her in. The place had clearly been ransacked. He regained his own carriage through the wash-room. His fellow traveler was still snoring.

They reached Paris at seven o'clock. The conductor was declaiming at the loss of his coat and cap. He had not yet discovered the loss of a passenger.

Then began a most entertaining chase. The girl and Roberts took taxi after taxi across Paris. They entered hotels and restaurants by one door and left them by another. At last the girl gave a sigh.

"I feel sure we are not followed now," she said. "We have shaken them off."

They breakfasted and drove to Le Bourget. Three hours later they were at Croydon. Roberts had never flown before.

At Croydon a tall old gentleman with a far-off resemblance to Mr Roberts' mentor at Geneva was waiting for them. He greeted the girl with especial respect.

"The car is here, madam," he said.

"This gentleman will accompany us, Paul," said the girl. And to Roberts: "Count Paul Stepanyi."

The car was a vast limousine. They drove for about an hour, then they entered the grounds of a country house and pulled up at the door of an imposing mansion. Mr Roberts was taken to a room furnished as study. There he handed over the precious pair of stockings.

He was left alone for a while. Presently Count Stepanyi returned.

"Mr Roberts," he said, "our thanks and gratitude are due to you. You have proved yourself a brave and resourceful man." He held out a red morocco case.

"Permit me to confer upon you the Order of St. Stanislaus - tenth class with laurels."

As in a dream Roberts opened the case and looked at the jeweled order. The old gentleman was still speaking.

"The Grand Duchess Olga would like to thank you herself before you depart."

He was led to a big drawing-room. There, very beautiful in a flowing robe, stood his traveling companion.

She made an imperious gesture of the hand, and the other man left them.

"I owe you my life, Mr Roberts," said the grand duchess.

She held out her hand. Roberts kissed it. She leaned suddenly towards him.

"You are a brave man," she said.

His lips met hers; a waft of rich Oriental perfume surrounded him. For a moment he held that slender, beautiful form in his arms...

He was still in a dream when somebody said to him:

"The car will take you anywhere you wish."

An hour later, the car came back for the Grand Duchess Olga. She got into it and so did the white-haired man. He had removed his beard for coolness.

The car set down the Grand Duchess Olga at a house in Streatham. She entered it and an elderly woman looked up from a tea table.

"Ah, Maggie dear, so there you are."

In the Geneva-Paris express this girl was the Grand Duchess Olga; in Mr Parker Pyne's office she was Madeleine de Sara, and in the house at Streatham she was Maggie Sayers, fourth daughter of an honest, hard-working family.

How are the mighty fallen!

Mr Parker Pyne was lunching with his friend.

"Congratulations," said the latter, "your man carried the thing through without a hitch. The Tormali gang must be wild to think the plans of that gun have gone to the League. Did you tell your man what it was he was carrying?"

"No. I thought it better to - er - embroider."

"Very discreet of you."

"It wasn't exactly discretion. I wanted him to enjoy himself. I fancied he might find a gun a little tame. I wanted him to have some adventures."

"Tame?" said Mr Bonnington, staring at him. "Why, that lot would murder him as soon as look at him."

"Yes," said Mr Parker Pyne mildly. "But I didn't want him to be murdered."

"Do you make a lot of money in your business, Parker?" asked Mr Bonnington.

"Sometimes I lose it," said Mr Parker Pyne. "That is, if it is a deserving case."

Three angry gentlemen were abusing one another in Paris.

"That confounded Hooper!" said one. "He let us down."

"The plans were not taken by anyone from the office," said the second. "But they went Wednesday, I am assured of that. And so I say you bungled it."

"I didn't," said the third sulkily; "there was no Englishman on the train except a little clerk. He'd never heard of Peterfield or of the gun. I know. I tested him. Peterfield and the gun meant nothing to him." He laughed. "He had a Bolshevist complex of some kind."

Mr Roberts was sitting in front of a gas fire. On his knee was a letter from Mr Parker Pyne. It enclosed a check for fifty pounds "from certain people who are delighted with the way a certain commission was executed."

On the arm of his chair was a library book. Mr Roberts opened it at random. "She crouched against the door like a beautiful hunted creature at bay."

Well, he knew all about that.

He read another sentence: "He sniffed the air. The faint, sickly odor of chloroform came to his nostrils."

That he knew about, too.

"He caught her in his arms and felt the responsive quiver of her scarlet lips."

Mr Roberts gave a sigh. It wasn't a dream. It had all happened. The journey out had been dull enough, but the journey home! He had enjoyed it. But he was glad to be home again. He felt vaguely that life could not be lived indefinitely at such a pace. Even the Grand Duchess Olga - even that last kiss - partook already of the unreal quality of a dream.

Mary and the children would be home tomorrow. Mr Roberts smiled happily.

She would say: "We've had such a nice holiday. I hated thinking of you all alone here, poor old boy."

And he'd say: "That's all right, old girl. I had to go to Geneva for the firm on business - delicate bit of negotiation - and look what they've sent me." And he'd show her the check for fifty pounds.

He thought of the Order of St. Stanislaus, tenth class with laurels. He'd hidden it, but supposing Mary found it! It would take a bit of explaining...

Ah, that was it - he'd tell her he'd picked it up abroad. A curio.

He opened his book again and read happily. No longer was there a wistful expression on his face.

He too, was of that glorious company to whom Things Happened.

THE CASE OF THE RICH WOMAN

The name of Mrs Abner Rymer was brought to Mr Parker Pyne. He knew the name and he raised his eyebrows. Presently his client was shown into the room.

Mrs Rymer was a tall woman, big-boned. Her figure was ungainly and the velvet dress and the heavy fur coat she wore did not disguise the fact. The knuckles of her large hands were pronounced. Her face was big and broad and highly colored. Her black hair was fashionably dressed, and there were many tips of curled ostrich in her hat.

She plumped herself down on a chair with a nod.

"Good morning," she said. Her voice had a rough accent. "If you're any good at all you'll tell me how to spend my money!"

"Most original," murmured Mr Parker Pyne. "Few ask that in these days. So you really find it difficult Mrs Rymer?"

"Yes, I do," said the lady bluntly. "I've got three fur coats, a lot of Paris dresses and such like. I've got a car and a house in Park Lane. I've had a yacht but I don't like the sea. I've got a lot of those high-class servants that look down their nose at you. I've traveled a bit and seen foreign parts. And I'm blessed if I can think of anything more to buy or do." She looked hopefully at Mr Pyne.

"There are hospitals," he said.

"What? Give it away, you mean? No, that I won't do! That money was worked for, let me tell you, worked for hard. If you think I'm going to hand it out like so much dirt - well, you're mistaken. I want to spend it; spend it and get some good out of it. Now, if you've got any ideas that are worth while in that line, you can depend on a good fee."

"Your proposition interests me," said Mr Pyne. "You do not mention a country house."

"I forgot it, but I've got one. Bores me to death."

"You must tell me more about yourself. Your problem is not easy to solve."

"I'll tell you and willing. I'm not ashamed of what I've come from. Worked in a farmhouse, I did, when I was a girl. Hard work it was,

too. Then I took up with Abner - he was a workman in the mills near by. He courted me for eight years, and then we got married."

"And you were happy?" asked Mr Pyne.

"I was. He was a good man to me, Abner. We had a hard struggle of it, though; he was out of a job twice, and children coming along. Four we had, three boys and a girl. And none of them lived to grow up. I dare say it would have been different if they had." Her face softened; looked suddenly younger.

"His chest was weak - Abner's was. They wouldn't take him for the war. He did well at home. He was made foreman. He was a clever fellow, Abner. He worked out a process. They treated him fair, I will say; gave him a good sum for it. He used that money for another idea of his. That brought in money hand over fist. He was a master now, employing his own workmen. He bought two concerns that were bankrupt and made them pay. The rest was easy. Money came in hand over fist. It's still coming in.

"Mind you, it was rare fun at first. Having a house and a tiptop bathroom and servants of one's own. No more cooking and scrubbing and washing to do. Just sit back on your silk cushions in the drawing-room and ring the bell for tea - like any countess might! Grand fun it was, and we enjoyed it. And then we came up to London. I went to swell dressmakers for my clothes. We went to Paris and the Riviera. Rare fun it was."

"And then?" said Mr' Parker Pyne.

"We got used to it, I suppose," said Mrs Rymer. "After a bit it didn't seem so much fun. Why, there were days when we didn't even fancy our meals properly - us, with any dish we fancied to choose from! As for baths - well, in the end, one bath a day's enough for anyone. And Abner's health began to worry him. Paid good money to doctors, we did, but they couldn't do anything. They tried this and they tried that. But it was no use. He died." She paused. "He was a young man, only forty-three."

Mr Pyne nodded sympathetically.

"That was five years ago. Money's still rolling in. It seems wasteful not to be able to do anything with it. But as I tell you, I can't think of anything else to buy that I haven't got already."

"In other words," said Mr Pyne, "your life is dull. You are not enjoying it."

"I'm sick of it," said Mrs Rymer gloomily. "I've no friends. The new lot only want subscriptions, and they laugh at me behind my back. The old lot won't have anything to do with me. My rolling up in a car makes them shy. Can you do anything, or suggest anything?"

"It is possible that I can," said Mr Pyne slowly. "It will be difficult, but I believe there is a chance of success. I think it's possible I can give you back what you have lost - your interest in life."

"How?" demanded Mrs Rymer curtly.

"That," said Mr Parker Pyne, "is my professional secret. I never disclose my methods beforehand. The question is, will you take a chance? I do not guarantee success, but I do think there is a reasonable possibility of it."

"And how much will it cost?"

"I shall have to adopt unusual methods, and therefore it will be expensive. My charges will be one thousand pounds, payable in advance."

"You can open your mouth all right, can't you?" said Mrs Rymer appreciatively. "Well, I'll risk it. I'm used to paying top price. Only when I pay for a thing, I take good care that I get it."

"You shall get it," said Mr Parker Pyne. "Never fear."

"I'll send you the check this evening," said Mrs Rymer, rising. "I'm sure I don't know why I should trust you. Fools and their money are soon parted, they say. I dare say I'm a fool. You've got nerve, to advertise in all the papers that you can make people happy!"

"Those advertisements cost me money," said Mr Pyne. "If I could not make my words good, that money would be wasted. I know what causes unhappiness, and consequently I have a clear idea of how to produce an opposite condition."

Mrs Rymer shook her head doubtfully and departed, leaving a cloud of expensive mixed essences behind her.

The handsome Claude Luttrell strolled into the office.

"Something in my line?"

Mr Pyne shook his head. "Nothing so simple," he said. "No, this is a difficult case. We must, I fear, take a few risks. We must attempt the unusual."

"Mrs Oliver?"

Mr Pyne smiled at the mention of the world-famous novelist.

"Mrs Oliver," he said, "is really the most conventional of all of us. I have in mind a bold and audacious coup. By the way, you might ring up Doctor Antrobus."

"Antrobus?"

"Yes. His services will be needed."

A week later Mrs Rymer once more entered Mr Parker Pyne's office. He rose to receive her.

"This delay, I assure you, has been necessary," he said. "Many things had to be arranged, and I had to secure the services of an unusual man who had to come half across Europe."

"Oh!" She said it suspiciously. It was constantly present in her mind that she had paid out a check for a thousand pounds and the check had been cashed.

Mr Parker Pyne touched a buzzer. A young girl, dark, Oriental-looking, but dressed in white nurse's kit, answered it.

"Is everything ready, Nurse de Sara?"

"Yes. Doctor Constantine is waiting."

"What are you going to do?" asked Mrs Rymer, with a touch of uneasiness.

"Introduce you to some Eastern magic, dear lady," said Mr Parker Pyne.

Mrs Rymer followed the nurse up to the next floor.

Here she was ushered into a room that bore no relation to the rest of the house. Oriental embroideries covered the walls. There were divans with soft cushions and beautiful rugs on the floor. A man was bending over a coffeepot. He straightened as they entered.

"Doctor Constantine," said the nurse.

The doctor was dressed in European clothes, but his face was swarthy and his eyes were dark and oblique with a peculiarly piercing power in their glance.

"So this is my patient?" he said in a low, vibrant voice.

"I'm not a patient," said Mrs Rymer.

"Your body is not sick," said the doctor, "but your soul is weary. We of the East know how to cure that disease. Sit down and drink a cup of coffee."

Mrs Rymer sat down and accepted a tiny cup of the fragrant brew. As she sipped it the doctor talked.

"Here in the West, they treat only the body. A mistake. The body is only the instrument. A tune is played upon it. It may be a sad, weary tune. It may be a gay tune full of delight. That last is what we shall give you. You have money. You shall spend it and enjoy. Life shall be worth living again. It is easy - easy - so easy..."

A feeling of languor crept over Mrs Rymer. The figures of the doctor and the nurse grew hazy. She felt blissfully happy and very sleepy. The doctor's figure grew bigger. The whole world was growing bigger.

The doctor was looking into her eyes. "Sleep," he was saying. "Sleep. Your eyelids are closing. Soon you will sleep. You will sleep. You will sleep..."

Mrs Rymer's eyelids closed. She floated with a wonderful great big world...

When her eyes opened it seemed to her that a long time had passed. She remembered several things vaguely - strange, impossible dreams; then a feeling of waking; then further dreams. She remembered something about a car and the dark, beautiful girl in nurse's uniform bending over her.

Anyway, she was properly awake now, and in her own bed.

At least, was it her own bed? It felt different. It lacked the delicious softness of her own bed. It was vaguely reminiscent of days almost forgotten. She moved, and it creaked. Mrs Rymer's bed in Park Lane never creaked.

She looked round. Decidedly, this was not Park Lane. Was it a hospital? No, she decided, not a hospital. Nor was it a hotel. It was a bare room, the walls an uncertain shade of lilac. There was a deal washstand with a jug and basin upon it. There was a deal chest of drawers and a tin trunk. There were unfamiliar clothes hanging on pegs. There was the bed covered with a much-mended quilt and there was herself in it.

"Where am I?" said Mrs Rymer.

The door opened and a plump little woman bustled in. She had red cheeks and a good-humored air. Her sleeves were rolled up and she wore an apron.

"There!" she exclaimed. "She's awake. Come in, doctor."

Mrs Rymer opened her mouth to say several things - but they remained unsaid, for the man who followed the plump woman into the room was not in the least like the elegant, swarthy Doctor Constantine. He was a bent old man who peered through thick glasses.

"That's better," he said, advancing to the bed and taking up Mrs Rymer's wrist. "You'll soon be better now, my dear."

"What's been the matter with me?" demanded Mrs Rymer.

"You had a kind of seizure," said the doctor. "You've been unconscious for a day or two. Nothing to worry about."

"Gave us a fright, you did, Hannah," said the plump woman. "You've been raving, too, saying the oddest things."

"Yes, yes, Mrs Gardner," said the doctor repressively. "But we mustn't excite the patient. You'll soon be up and about again, my dear."

"But don't you worry about the work, Hannah," said Mrs Gardner. "Mrs Roberts has been in to give me a hand and we've got on fine. Just lie still and get well, my dear."

"Why do you call me Hannah?" said Mrs Rymer.

"Well, it's your name," said Mrs Gardner, bewildered.

"No, it isn't. My name is Amelia. Amelia Rymer. Mrs Abner Rymer."

The doctor and Mrs Gardner exchanged glances.

"Well, just you lie still," said Mrs Gardner.

"Yes, yes; no worry," said the doctor.

They withdrew. Mrs Rymer lay puzzling. Why did they call her Hannah, and why had they exchanged that glance of amused incredulity when she had given them her name? Where was she, and what had happened?

She slipped out of bed. She felt a little uncertain on her legs, but she walked slowly to the small dormer window and looked out - on a farmyard! Completely mystified, she went back to bed. What was she doing in a farmhouse that she had never seen before?

Mrs Gardner re-entered the room with a bowl of soup on a tray.

Mrs Rymer began her questions. "What am I doing in this house?" she demanded. "Who brought me here?"

"Nobody brought you, my dear. It's your home. Leastways, you've lived here for the last five years - and me not suspecting once that you were liable to fits."

"Lived here? Five years?"

"That's right. Why, Hannah, you don't mean that you still don't remember?"

"I've never lived here! I've never seen you before."

"You see, you've had this illness and you've forgotten."

"I've never lived here."

"But you have, my dear." Suddenly Mrs Gardner darted across to the chest of drawers and brought to Mrs Rymer a faded photograph in a frame.

It represented a group of four persons: a bearded man, a plump woman (Mrs Gardner), a tall, lank maid with a pleasantly sheepish grin, and somebody in a prim dress and apron - herself!

Stupefied, Mrs Rymer gazed at the photograph. Mrs Gardner put the soup down beside her and quietly left the room.

Mrs Rymer sipped the soup mechanically. It was good soup, strong and hot. All the time her brain was in a whirl. Who was mad? Mrs Gardner or herself? One of them must be! But there was the doctor, too.

"I'm Amelia Rymer," she said firmly to herself. "I know I'm Amelia Rymer and nobody's going to tell me different."

She had finished the soup. She put the bowl back or the tray. A folded newspaper caught her eye and she picked it up and looked at the date on it, October 19.

What day had she gone to Mr Parker Pyne's office?

Either the fifteenth or the sixteenth. Then she must have been ill for three days.

"That rascally doctor!" said Mrs Rymer wrathfully.

All the same, she was a shade relieved. She had heard of cases where people had forgotten who they were for years at a time. She had been afraid some such thing had happened to her.

She began turning the pages of the paper, scanning the columns idly, when suddenly a paragraph caught her eye.

Mrs Abner Rymer, widow of Abner Rymer, the "button shank" king, was removed yesterday to a private home for mental cases. For the past two days she has persisted in declaring she was not herself, but a servant girl named Hannah Moorhouse.

"Hannah Moorhouse! So that's it," said Mrs Rymer. "She's me, and I'm her. Kind of double, I suppose. Well, we can soon put that right! If that oily hypocrite of a Parker Pyne is up to some game or other -"

But at this minute her eye was caught by the name Constantine staring at her from the printed page. This time it was a headline.

DR. CONSTANTINE'S CLAIM

At a farewell lecture given last night on the eve of his departure for Japan, Dr Claudius Constantine advanced some startling theories. He declared that it was possible to prove the existence of the soul by transferring a soul from one body to another. In the course of his experiments in the East he had, he claimed, successfully effected a double transfer - the soul of a hypnotized body A being transferred to a hypnotized body B and the soul of B to the body of A. On recovering from the hypnotic sleep, A declared herself to be B, and B thought herself to be A. For the experiment to succeed, it was necessary to find two people with a great bodily resemblance.

It was an undoubted fact that two people resembling each other were en rapport. This was very noticeable in the case of twins, but two strangers, varying widely in social position but with a marked similarity of feature, were found to exhibit the same harmony of structure.

Mrs Rymer cast the paper from her. "The scoundrel! The black scoundrel!"

She saw the whole thing now! It was a dastardly plot to get hold of her money. This Hannah Moorhouse was Mr Pyne's tool - possibly an innocent one. He and that devil Constantine had brought off this fantastic coup. But she'd expose him! She'd show him up! She'd have the law on him! She'd tell everyone -

Abruptly Mrs Rymer came to a stop in the tide of her indignation. She remembered that first paragraph. Hannah Moorhouse had not been a docile tool. She had protested; had declared her individuality. And what had happened?

"Clapped into a lunatic asylum, poor girl," said Mrs Rymer.

A chill ran down her spine.

A lunatic asylum. They got you in there and they never let you get out. The more you said you were sane, the less they'd believe you. There you were and there you stayed. No, Mrs Rymer wasn't going to run the risk of that.

The door opened and Mrs Gardner came in.

"Ah, you've drunk your soup, my dear. That's good. You'll soon be better now."

"When was I taken ill?" demanded Mrs Rymer.

"Let me see. It was three days ago - on Wednesday. That was the fifteenth. You were took bad about four o'clock."

"Ah!" The ejaculation was fraught with meaning. It had been just about four o'clock when Mrs Rymer had entered the presence of Doctor Constantine.

"You slipped down in your chair," said Mrs Gardner. "'Oh!' you says. 'Oh!' just like that. And then: 'I'm falling asleep,' you says in a

dreamy voice. 'I'm falling asleep.' And fall asleep you did, and we put you to bed and sent for the doctor, and here you've been ever since."

"I suppose," Mrs Rymer ventured, "there isn't any way you could know who I am - apart from my face, I mean."

"Well, that's a queer thing to say," said Mrs Gardner. "What is there to go by better than a person's face, I'd like to know? There's your birthmark, though, if that satisfies you better."

"A birthmark?" said Mrs Rymer, brightening. She had no such thing.

"Strawberry mark just under the right elbow," said Mrs Gardner. "Look for yourself, my dear."

"This will prove it," said Mrs Rymer to herself. She knew that she had no strawberry mark under the right elbow. She turned back the sleeve of her nightdress. The strawberry mark was there.

Mrs Rymer burst into tears.

Four days later, Mrs Rymer rose from her bed. She had thought out several plans of action and rejected them.

She might show the paragraph in the paper to Mrs Gardner and the doctor and explain. Would they believe her? Mrs Rymer was sure they would not.

She might go to the police. Would they believe her? Again she thought not.

She might go to Mr Pyne's office. That idea undoubtedly pleased her best. For one thing, she would like to tell that oily scoundrel what she thought of him. She was debarred from putting this plan into operation by a vital obstacle. She was at present in Cornwall (as she had learned), and she had no money for the journey to London. Two and four-pence in a worn purse seemed to represent her financial position.

And so, after four days, Mrs Rymer made a sporting decision. For the present she would accept things! She was Hannah Moorhouse. Very well, she would be Hannah Moorhouse. For the present she would accept the role, and later, when she had saved sufficient money she would go to London and beard the swindler in his den.

And having thus decided, Mrs Rymer accepted her role with perfect good temper, even with a kind of sardonic amusement. History was repeating itself indeed. This life here reminded her of her girlhood. How long ago that seemed!

The work was a bit hard after her years of soft living, but after the first week she found herself slipping into the ways of the farm.

Mrs Gardner was a good-tempered, kindly woman.

Her husband, a big, taciturn man, was kindly also. The lank, shambling man of the photograph had gone and another farmhand

came in his stead, a good-humored giant of forty-five, slow of speech and thought, but with a shy twinkle in his blue eyes.

The weeks went by. At last the day came when Rymer had enough money to pay her fare to London. But she did not go. She put it off. Time enough, she thought. She wasn't easy in her mind about asylums yet. That scoundrel, Parker Pyne, was clever. He'd get a doctor to say she was mad and she'd be clapped out of sight with no one knowing anything about it.

"Besides," said Mrs Rymer to herself, "a bit of a change does one good."

She rose early and worked hard. Joe Welsh, the new farmhand, was ill that winter, and she and Mrs Gardner nursed him. The big man was pathetically dependent on them.

Spring came - lambing time; there were wild flowers in the hedges, a treacherous softness in the air. Joe Welsh gave Hannah a hand with her work. Hannah did Joe's mending.

Sometimes, on Sundays, they went for a walk together. Joe was a widower. His wife had died four years before. Since her death he had, he frankly confessed it, taken a drop too much.

He didn't go much to the Crown nowadays. He bought himself some new clothes. Mr and Mrs Gardner laughed.

Hannah made fun of Joe. She teased him about his clumsiness. Joe didn't mind. He looked bashful but happy.

After spring came summer - a good summer that year. Everyone worked hard.

Harvest was over. The leaves were red and golden on the trees.

It was October eighth when Hannah looked up one day from a cabbage she was cutting and saw Mr Parker Pyne leaning over the fence.

"You!" said Hannah, alias Mrs Rymer. "You..."

It was some time before she got it all out, and when she had said her say, she was out of breath.

Mr Parker Pyne smiled blandly. "I quite agree with you," he said.

"A cheat and a liar, that's what you are!" said Mrs Rymer, repeating herself. "You with your Constantines and your hypnotizing and that poor girl Hanna Moorhouse shut up with loonies."

"No," said Mr Parker Pyne, "there you misjudge me. Hannah Moorhouse is not in a lunatic asylum because Hannah Moorhouse never existed."

"Indeed?" said Mrs Rymer. "And what about the photograph of her that I saw with my own eyes?"

"Faked," said Mr Pyne. "Quite a simple thing to manage."

"And the piece in the paper about her?"

"The whole paper was faked so as to include items in a natural manner which would carry conviction. As it did."

"That rogue, Doctor Constantine!"

"An assumed name - assumed by a friend of mine with a talent for acting."

Mrs Rymer snorted. "Ho! And I wasn't hypnotized either, I suppose?"

"As a matter of fact, you were not. You drank your coffee a preparation of Indian hemp. After that other drugs were administered and you were brought down here by car and allowed to recover consciousness."

"Then Mrs Gardner has been in it all the time?" said Mrs Rymer.

Mr Parker Pyne nodded.

"Bribed by you, I suppose! Or filled up with a lot of lies!"

"Mrs Gardner trusts me," said Mr Pyne. "I saved her only son from penal servitude."

Something in his manner silenced Mrs Rymer on the tack. "What about the birthmark?" she demanded.

Mr Pyne smiled. "It is already fading. In another six months it will have disappeared altogether."

"And what's the meaning of all this tomfoolery? Making a fool of me, sticking me down here as a servant - me with all that good money in the bank. But I suppose I needn't ask. You've been helping yourself to it, my fine fellow. That's the meaning of all this."

"It is true," said Mr Parker Pyne, "that I did obtain from you, while you were under the influence of drugs, a power of attorney and that during your - er - absence, I have assumed control of your financial affairs, but I can assure you, my dear madam, that apart from that original thousand pounds, no money of yours has found its way into my pocket. As a matter of fact, by judicious investments your financial position is actually improved."

He beamed at her.

"Then why -" began Mrs Rymer.

"I am going to ask you a question, Mrs Rymer," said Mr Pyne. "You are an honest woman. You will answer me honestly, I know. I am going to ask you if you are happy."

"Happy! That's a pretty question! Steal a woman's money and ask her if she's happy. I like your impudence!"

"You are still angry," he said. "Most natural. But leave my misdeeds out of it for the moment. Mrs Rymer, when you came to my office a

year ago today, you were an unhappy woman. Will you tell me that you are unhappy now? If so, I apologize, and you are at liberty to take what steps you please against me. Moreover, I will refund you the thousand pounds you paid me. Come, Mrs Rymer, are you an unhappy woman now?"

Mrs Rymer looked at Mr Parker Pyne, but she dropped her eyes when she spoke at last.

"No," she said. "I'm not unhappy." A tone of wonder crept into her voice. "You've got me there. I admit it. I've not been as happy as I am now since Abner died. I - I'm going to marry a man who works here - Joe Welsh. Our banns are going up next Sunday; that is, they were going up next Sunday."

"But now, of course," said Mr Pyne, "everything is different."

Mrs Rymer's face flamed. She took a step forward.

"What do you mean - different? Do you think if I had all the money in the world it would make me a lady? I don't want to be a lady, thank you; a helpless, good-for-nothing lot they are. Joe's good enough for me and I'm good enough for him. We suit each other and we're going to be happy. As for you, Mr Nosey Parker, you take yourself off and don't interfere with what doesn't concern you!"

Mr Parker Pyne took a paper from his pocket and handed it to her. "The power of attorney," he said. "Shall I tear it up? You will assume control of your own fortune now, I take it."

A strange expression came over Mrs Rymer's face. She thrust back the paper.

"Take it. I've said hard things to you - and some of them you deserved. You're a downy fellow, but all the same I trust you. Seven hundred pounds I'll have in the bank here - that'll buy us a farm we've got our eye on. The rest of it - well, let the hospitals have it."

"You cannot mean to hand over your entire fortune to hospitals?"

"That's just what I do mean. Joe's a dear, good fellow, but he's weak. Give him money and you'd ruin him. I've got him off the drink now, and I'll keep him off it. Thank God, I know my own mind. I'm not going to let money come between me and happiness."

"You are a remarkable woman," said Mr Pyne slowly. "Only one woman in a thousand would act as you are doing."

"Then only one woman in a thousand's got sense," said Mrs Rymer.

"I take off my hat to you," said Mr Parker Pyne, and there was an unusual note in his voice. He raised his hat with solemnity and moved away.

"And Joe's never to know, mind!" Mrs Rymer called after him.

She stood there with the dying sun behind her, a great blue-green cabbage in her hands, her head thrown back and her shoulders squared. A grand figure of a peasant woman, outlined against the setting sun...

HAVE YOU GOT EVERYTHING YOU WANT?

"Par ici, Madame."

A tall woman in a mink coat followed her heavily encumbered porter along the platform of the Gare de Lyon.

She wore a dark brown knitted hat pulled down over one eye and ear. The other side revealed a charming tip-tilted profile and little golden curls clustering over a shell-like ear. Typically an American, she was altogether a very charming-looking creature and more than one man turned to look at her as she walked past the high carriages of the waiting train.

Large plates were stuck in holders on the sides of the carriages.

PARIS - ATHENS. PARIS - BUCHAREST. PARIS - STAMBOUL.

At the last named the porter came to an abrupt halt. He undid the strap which held the suitcases together and they slipped heavily to the ground. "Voici, Madame."

The wagon-lit conductor was standing beside the steps. He came forward, remarking, "Bonsoir, Madame," with an empressement perhaps due to the richness and perfection of the mink coat.

The woman handed him her sleeping-car ticket of flimsy paper.

"Number Six," he said; "this way."

He sprang nimbly into the train, the woman following him. As she hurried down the corridor after him, she nearly collided with a portly gentleman who was emerging from the compartment next to hers. She had a momentary glimpse of a large bland face with benevolent eyes.

"Voici, Madame."

The conductor displayed the compartment. He threw up the window and signaled to the porter. A lesser employee took in the baggage and put it up in the racks. The woman sat down.

Beside her on the seat she had placed a small scarlet case and her hand bag. The carriage was hot, but it did not seem to occur to her to take off her coat. She stared out of the window with unseeing eyes. People were hurrying up and down the platform. There were sellers of newspapers, of pillows, of chocolate, of fruit of mineral waters. They held up their wares to her, but her eyes looked blankly through them. The Gare de Lyon had faded from her sight. On her face were sadness and anxiety.

"If Madame will give me her passport?"

The words made no impression on her. The conductor, standing in the doorway, repeated them. Elsie Jeffries roused herself with a start.

"I beg your pardon?"

"Your passport, Madame."

She opened her bag, took out the passport and gave it to him.

"That will be all right, Madame, I will attend to everything." A slight significant pause. "I shall be going with Madame as far as Stamboul."

Elsie drew out a fifty-franc note and handed it to him. He accepted it in a businesslike manner, and inquired when she would like her bed made up and whether she was taking dinner.

These matters settled, he withdrew and almost immediately the restaurant man came rushing down the corridor ringing his little bell frantically, and bawling out,

"Premier service. Premier service."

Elsie rose, divested herself of the heavy fur coat, took a brief glance at herself in the little mirror, and picking up her hand bag and jewel case, stepped out into the corridor. She had gone only a few steps when the restaurant man came rushing along on his return journey. To avoid him, Elsie stepped back for a moment into the doorway of the adjoining compartment, which was now empty. As the man passed and she prepared to continue her journey to the dining car, her glance fell idly on the label of a suitcase which was lying on the seat.

It was a stout pigskin case, somewhat worn. On the label were the words, "J. Parker Pyne, passenger to Stamboul." The suitcase itself bore the initials "P.P."

A startled expression came over the girl's face. She hesitated a moment in the corridor, then going back to her own compartment she picked up a copy of the Times which she had laid down on the table with some magazines and books.

She ran her eye down the advertisement columns on the front page, but what she was looking for was not there. A slight frown on her face, she made her way to the restaurant car.

The attendant allotted her a seat at a small table already tenanted by one person - the man with whom she had nearly collided in the corridor. In fact, the owner of the pig-skin suitcase.

Elsie looked at him without appearing to do so. He seemed very bland, very benevolent, and in some way impossible to explain, delightfully reassuring. He behaved in reserved British fashion, and it was not till the fruit was on the table that he spoke.

"They keep these places terribly hot," he said.

"I know," said Elsie. "I wish one could have the window open."

He gave a rueful smile. "Impossible! Every person present except ourselves would protest."

She gave an answering smile. Neither said any more. Coffee was brought and the usual indecipherable bill. Having laid some notes upon it, Elsie suddenly took her courage in both hands.

"Excuse me," she murmured. "I saw your name upon your suitcase - Parker Pyne. Are you - are you, by any chance -?"

She hesitated and he came quickly to her rescue.

"I believe I am. That is -" he quoted from the advertisement which Elsie had noticed more than once in the "Times," and for which she had searched vainly just now - " 'Are you happy? If not, consult Mr Parker Pyne.' Yes, I'm that one, all right."

"I see," said Elsie. "How - how extraordinary!"

He shook his head. "Not really. Extraordinary from your point of view, but not from mine." He smiled reassuringly, then leaned forward. Most of the other diners had left the car. "So you are unhappy?" he said.

"I -" began Elsie, and stopped.

"You would not have said 'How extraordinary' otherwise," he pointed out.

Elsie was silent a minute. She felt strangely soothed by the mere presence of Mr Parker Pyne. "Ye-es," she admitted at last. "I am - unhappy. At least, I am worried."

He nodded sympathetically.

"You see," she continued, "a very curious thing has happened - and I don't know in the least what to make of it."

"Suppose you tell me about it," suggested Mr Pyne. Elsie thought of the advertisement. She and Edward had often commented on it and laughed. She had never thought that she... Perhaps she had better not... If Mr Parker Pyne were a charlatan... But he looked - nice!

Elsie made her decision. Anything to get this worry off her mind.

"I'll tell you. I'm going to Constantinople to join my husband. He does a lot of Oriental business, and this year he found it necessary to go there. He went a fortnight ago. He was to get things ready for me to join him. I've been very excited at the thought of it. You see, I've never been abroad before. We've been in England six months."

"You and your husband are both American?"

"Yes."

"And you have not, perhaps, been married very long?"

"We've been married a year and a half."

"Happily?"

"Oh, yes! Edward's a perfect angel." She hesitated. "Not, perhaps, very much go to him. Just a little - well, I'd call it strait-laced. Lot of Puritan ancestry and all that. But he's a dear," she added hastily.

Mr Parker Pyne looked at her thoughtfully for a moment or two, then he said, "Go on."

"It was about a week after Edward had started. I was writing a letter in his study, and I noticed that the blotting paper was all new and clean, except for a few lines of writing across it. I'd just been reading a detective story with a clue in a blotter and so, just for fun, I held it up to a mirror. It really was just fun, Mr Pyne - I mean, I wasn't spying on Edward or anything like that. I mean, he's such a mild lamb one wouldn't dream of anything of that kind."

"Yes, yes; I quite understand."

"The thing was quite easy to read. First there was the word 'wife,' then 'Simplon Express,' and lower down, 'just before Venice would be the best time.'" She stopped.

"Curious," said Mr Pyne. "Distinctly curious. It was your husband's handwriting?"

"Oh, yes. But I've cudgeled my brains and I cannot see under what circumstances he would write a letter with just those words in it."

"'Just before Venice would be the best time,'" repeated Mr Parker Pyne. "Distinctly curious."

Mrs Jeffries was leaning forward looking at him with a flattering hopefulness. "What shall I do?" she asked simply.

"I am afraid," said Mr Parker Pyne, "that we shall have to wait until just before Venice." He took up a folder from the table. "Here is the schedule time of our train. It arrives at Venice at two-twenty-seven tomorrow afternoon."

They looked at each other.

"Leave it to me," said Mr Parker Pyne.

It was five minutes past two. The Simplon Express was eleven minutes late. It had passed Mestre about a quarter of an hour before.

Mr Parker Pyne was sitting with Mrs Jeffries in her compartment. So far the journey had been pleasant and uneventful. But now the moment had arrived when, if anything was going to happen, it presumably would happen. Mr Parker Pyne and Elsie faced each other. Her heart was beating fast, and her eyes sought his kind of anguished appeal for reassurance.

"Keep perfectly calm," he said. "You are quite safe. I am here."

Suddenly a scream broke out from the corridor.

"Oh, look - look! The train is on fire!"

With a bound Elsie and Mr Parker Pyne were in the corridor. An agitated woman with a Slav countenance was pointing a dramatic finger. Out of one of the front compartments smoke was pouring in a cloud. Mr Parker Pyne and Elsie ran along the corridor. Others joined them. The compartment in question was full of smoke. The first-comers drew back, coughing. The conductor appeared.

"The compartment is empty!" he cried. "Do not alarm yourselves, messieurs et dames. Le feu, it will controlled."

A dozen excited questions and answers broke out. The train was running over the bridge that joins Venice to the mainland.

Suddenly Mr Parker Pyne turned, forced his way through the little pack of people behind him and hurried down the corridor to Elsie's compartment. The lady with the Slav face was seated in it, drawing deep breaths from the open window.

"Excuse me, Madame," said Parker Pyne. "But this is not your compartment."

"I know. I know," said the Slav lady. "Pardon. It is the shock, the emotion - my heart.' She sank back on the seat and indicated the open window. She drew her breath in great gasps.

Mr Parker Pyne stood in the doorway. His voice was fatherly and reassuring. "You must not be afraid," he said. "I do not think for a moment that the fire is serious."

"Not? Ah, what a mercy! I feel restored." She half rose. "I will return to my own compartment."

"Not just yet." Mr Parker Pyne's hand pressed her gently back. "I will ask of you to wait a moment, Madame."

"Monsieur, this is an outrage!"

"Madame, you will remain."

His voice rang out coldly. The woman sat still looking at him. Elsie joined them.

"It seems it was a smoke bomb," she said breathlessly. "Some ridiculous practical joke. The conductor is furious. He is asking everybody -" She broke off, staring at the second occupant of the carriage.

"Mrs Jeffries," said Mr Parker Pyne, "what do you carry in your little scarlet case?"

"My jewelry."

"Perhaps you would be so kind as to look and see that everything is there."

There was immediately a torrent of words from the Slav lady. She broke into French, the better to do justice to her feelings.

In the meantime Elsie had picked up the jewel case.

"Oh!" she cried. "It's unlocked."

"... et je porterai plainte a la Compagnie des Wagons-Lits," finished the Slav lady.

"They're gone!" cried Elsie. "Everything! My diamond bracelet. And the necklace Pop gave me. And the emerald and ruby rings. And some lovely diamond brooches. Thank goodness I was wearing my pearls. Oh, Mr Pyne, what shall we do?"

"If you will fetch the conductor," said Mr Parker Pyne, "I will see that this woman does not leave this compartment till he comes."

"Scйlйrat! Monstre!" shrieked the Slav lady. She went on to further insults. The train drew in to Venice.

The events of the next half hour may be briefly summarized. Mr Parker Pyne dealt with several different officials in several different languages - and suffered defeat. The suspected lady consented to be searched - and emerged without a stain on her character. The jewels were not on her.

Between Venice and Trieste Mr Parker Pyne and Elsie discussed the case.

"When was the last time you actually saw your jewels?"

"This morning. I put away some sapphire earrings I was wearing yesterday and took out a pair of plain pearl ones."

"And all the jewelry was there intact?"

"Well, I didn't go through it all, naturally. But it looked the same as usual. A ring or something like that might have been missing, but not more."

Mr Parker Pyne nodded. "Now, when the conductor made up the compartment this morning?"

"I had the case with me - in the restaurant car. I always take it with me. I've never left it except when I ran out just now."

"Therefore," said Mr Parker Pyne, "that injured innocent, Madame Subayska, or whatever she calls herself, must have been the thief. But what the devil did she do with the things? She was only in here a minute and a half - just time to open the case with a duplicate key and take out the stuff - yes, but what next?"

"Could she have handed them to anyone else?"

"Hardly. I had turned back and was forcing my way along the corridor. If anyone had come out of this compartment I should have seen them."

"Perhaps she threw them out of the window to someone."

"An excellent suggestion; only, as it happens, we were passing over the sea at that moment. We were on the bridge."

"Then she must have hidden them actually in the carriage."

"Let's hunt for them."

With true transatlantic energy Elsie began to look about. Mr Parker Pyne participated in the search in a somewhat absent fashion. Reproached for not trying, he excused himself.

"I'm thinking that I must send a rather important telegram at Trieste," he explained.

Elsie received the explanation coldly. Mr Parker Pyne had fallen heavily in her estimation.

"I'm afraid you're annoyed with me, Mrs Jeffries," he said meekly.

"Well, you've not been very successful," she retorted.

"But my dear lady, you must remember I am not a detective. Theft and Crime are not in my line at all. The human heart is my province."

"Well, I was a bit unhappy when I got on this train," said Elsie, "but nothing to what I am now! I could just cry buckets. My lovely, lovely bracelet - and the emerald ring Edward gave me when we were engaged."

"But surely you are insured against theft?" Mr Parker Pyne interpolated.

"Am I? I don't know. Yes, I suppose I am. But it's the sentiment of the thing, Mr Pyne."

The train slackened speed. Mr Parker Pyne peered out of the window. "Trieste," he said. "I must send my telegram."

"Edward!" Elsie's face lighted up as she saw her husband hurrying to meet her on the platform at Stamboul.

For the moment even the loss of her jewelry faded from her mind. She forgot the curious words she had found on the blotter. She forgot everything except that it was a fortnight since she had seen her husband last, and that in spite of being sober and strait-laced he was really a most attractive person.

They were just leaving the station when Elsie got a friendly tap on the shoulder and turned to find Mr Parker Pyne. His bland face was beaming good-naturedly.

"Mrs Jeffries," he said, "will you come to see me at the Hotel Tokatlian in half an hour? I think I may have good news for you."

Elsie looked uncertainly at Edward. Then she made the introduction. "This - er - is my husband - Mr Parker Pyne."

"As I believe your wife wired you, her jewels have been stolen," said Mr Parker Pyne. "I have been doing what I can to help her recover them. I think I may have news for her in about half an hour."

Elsie looked inquiringly at Edward. He replied promptly:

"You'd better go, dear. The Tokatlian, you said, Mr Pyne? Right; I'll see she makes it."

It was just half an hour later that Elsie was shown into Mr Parker Pyne's private sitting room. He rose to receive her.

"You've been disappointed in me, Mrs Jeffries," he said. "Now, don't deny it. Well, I don't pretend to be a magician, but I do what I can. Take a look inside here."

He passed along the table a small stout cardboard box. Elsie opened it. Rings, brooches, bracelet, necklace - they were all there.

"Mr Pyne, how marvelous! How - how too wonderful!"

Mr Parker Pyne smiled modestly. "I am glad not to have failed you, my dear young lady."

"Oh, Mr Pyne, you make me feel just mean! Ever since Trieste I've been horrid to you. And now - this. But how did you get hold of them? When? Where?"

Mr Parker Pyne shook his head thoughtfully. "It's a long story," he said. "You may hear it one day. In fact, you may hear it quite soon."

"Why can't I hear it now?"

"There are reasons," said Mr Parker Pyne.

And Elsie had to depart with her curiosity unsatisfied.

When she had gone, Mr Parker Pyne took up his hat and stick and went out into the streets of Pera. He walked along smiling to himself, coming at last to a little cafй, deserted at the moment, which overlooked the Golden Horn. On the other side, the mosques of Stamboul showed slender minarets against the afternoon sky. It was very beautiful. Mr Pyne sat down and ordered two coffees. They came thick and sweet. He had just begun to sip his when a man slipped into the seat opposite.

It was Edward Jeffries.

"I have ordered some coffee for you," said Mr Parker Pyne, indicating the little cup.

Edward pushed the coffee aside. He leaned forward across the table. "How did you know?" he asked.

Mr Parker Pyne sipped his coffee dreamily. "Your wife will have told you about her discovery on the blotter? No? Oh, but she will tell you; it has slipped her mind for the moment."

He mentioned Elsie's discovery.

"Very well; that linked up perfectly with the curious incident that happened just before Venice. For some reason or other you were engineering the theft of your wife's jewels. But why the phrase 'just

before Venice would be the best time'? There seemed no sense in that. Why did you not leave it to your - agent - to choose he own time and place?

"And then, suddenly, I saw the point. Your wife jewels were stolen before you yourself left London and were replaced by paste duplicates. But that solution did not satisfy you. You were a high-minded, conscientious young man. You have a horror of some servant or other innocent person being suspected. A theft must actually occur - at a place and in a manner which will leave no suspicion attached to anybody of your acquaintance or household.

"Your accomplice is provided with a key to the jewel box and a smoke bomb. At the correct moment she gives the alarm; darts into your wife's compartment, unlocks the jewel case and flings the paste duplicate into the sea. She may be suspected and searched, but nothing can be proved against her, since the jewels are not in her possession.

"And now the significance of the place chosen becomes apparent. If the jewels had merely been thrown out by the side of the line, they might have been found. Hence the importance of the one moment when the train is passing over the sea.

"In the meantime, you make your arrangements for selling the jewelry here. You have only to hand over the stones when the robbery has actually taken place. My wire, however, reached you in time. You obeyed my instructions and deposited the box of jewelry at the Tokatlian to await my arrival, knowing that otherwise I should

keep my threat of placing the matter in the hand of the police. You also obeyed my instructions in joining me here."

Edward Jeffries looked at Mr Parker Pyne appealingly. He was a good-looking young man, tall and fair with a round chin and very round eyes. "How can I make you understand?" he said hopelessly. "To you I must seem just a common thief."

"Not at all," said Mr Parker Pyne. "On the contrary, I should say you are almost painfully honest. I am accustomed to the classification of types. You, my dear sir, fall naturally into the category of victims. Now, tell me the whole story."

"I can tell you that in one word - blackmail."

"Yes."

"You've seen my wife; you realize what a pure, innocent creature she is - without thought or knowledge of evil.

"She has the most marvelously pure ideals. If she were to find out about - about anything I had done, she would leave me."

"I wonder. But that is not the point. What have you done, my young friend? I presume this is some affair with a woman."

Edward Jeffries nodded.

"Since your marriage - or before?"

"Before - oh, before."

"Well, well, what happened?"

"Nothing; nothing at all. This is just the cruel part of it. It was at a hotel in the West Indies. There was a very attractive woman - a Mrs Rossiter - staying there. Her husband was a violent man; he had the most savage fits of temper. One night he threatened her with a revolver. She escaped from him and came to my room. She was half crazy with terror. She - she asked me to let her stay there till morning, I - what else could I do?"

Mr Parker Pyne gazed at the young man, and the young man gazed back with conscious rectitude. Mr Parker Pyne sighed. "In other words, to put it plainly, you were had for a mug, Mr Jeffries."

"Really -"

"Yes, yes. A very old trick - but it often comes off successfully with quixotic young men. I suppose, when your approaching marriage was announced, the screw was turned?"

"Yes. I received a letter. If I did not send a certain sum of money, everything would be disclosed to my prospective father-in-law. How I had - had alienated this young woman's affection from her husband; how she had been seen coming to my room. The husband would bring a suit for divorce. Really, Mr Pyne, the whole thing made me out the most utter blackguard."

He wiped his brow in a harassed manner.

"Yes, yes, I know. And so you paid. And from time to time the screw has been put on again."

"Yes. This was the last straw. Our business has been badly hit by the slump. I simply could not lay my hands on any ready money. I hit upon this plan." He picked up his cup of cold coffee, looked at it absently, and drank it. "What am I to do now?" he demanded pathetically. "What am I to do, Mr Pyne?"

"You will be guided by me," said Parker Pyne firmly. "I will deal with your tormentors. As to your wife, you will go straight back to her and tell her the truth - or at least a portion of it. The only point where you will deviate from the truth is concerning the actual facts in the West Indies. You must conceal from her the fact that you were - well, had for a mug, as I said before."

"But -"

"My dear Mr Jeffries, you do not understand women. If a woman has to choose between a mug and a Don Juan, she will choose Don Juan every time. Your wife, Mr Jeffries, is a charming, innocent, high-minded girl, and the only way she is going to get any kick out of her life with you is to believe that she has reformed a rake."

Edward Jeffries was staring at him open-mouthed.

"I mean what I say," said Mr Parker Pyne. "At the present moment your wife is in love with you, but I see signs that she may not remain

so if you continue to present to her a picture of such goodness and rectitude that it is almost synonymous with dullness."

Edward winced.

"Go to her, my boy," said Mr Parker Pyne kindly. "Confess everything - that is, as many things as you can think of. Then explain that from the moment you met her you gave up all this life. You even stole so that it might not come to her ears. She will forgive you enthusiastically."

"But when there's nothing really to forgive -"

"What is truth?" said Mr Parker Pyne. "In my experience it is usually the thing that upsets the apple cart! It is a fundamental axiom of married life that you must lie to a woman. She likes it! Go and be forgiven, my boy. And live happily ever afterwards. I dare say your wife will keep a wary eye on you in future whenever a pretty woman comes along - some men would mind that, but I don't think you will."

"I never want to look at any woman but Elsie," said Mr Jeffries simply.

"Splendid, my boy," said Mr Parker Pyne. "But I shouldn't let her know that if I were you. No woman likes to feel she's taken on too soft a job."

Edward Jeffries rose. "You really think -?"

"I know," said Mr Parker Pyne, with force.

THE GATE OF BAGHDAD

"Four great gates has the city of Damascus "

Mr. Parker Pine repeated Flecker's lines softly to himself.

"Postern of Fate, the Desert Gate, Disaster's Cavern, Fort of Fear,

The Portal of Bagdad am I, the Doorway of Diarbekir."

He was standing in the streets of Damascus and drawn up outside the Oriental Hotel he saw one of the huge six-wheeled Pullmans that was to transport him and eleven other people across the desert to Baghdad on the morrow.

"Pass not beneath, O Caravan, or pass not singing.

Have you heard

That silence where the birds are dead yet something pipeth like a bird?

Pass out beneath, O Caravan, Doom's Caravan, Death's Caravan!"

Something of a contrast now. Formerly the Gate of Baghdad had been the gate of Death. Four hundred miles of desert to traverse by caravan. Long weary months of travel. Now the ubiquitous petrol-fed monsters did the journey in thirty-six hours.

"What were you saying, Mr Parker Pyne?

It was the eager voice of Miss Netta Pryce, youngest and most charming of the tourist race. Though encumbered by a stern Aunt with the suspicion of a beard and a thirst for Biblical knowledge, Netta managed to enjoy herself in many frivolous ways of which the elder Miss Pryce might possibly have not approved.

Mr Parker Pyne repeated Flecker's lines to her.

"How thrilling," said Netta.

Three men in Air Force uniform were standing near and one of them, an admirer of Netta's, struck in.

"There are still thrills to be got out of the journey," he said. "Even nowadays the convoy is occasionally shot up by bandits. Then there's losing yourself - that happens sometimes. And we are sent out to find you. One fellow was lost for five days in the desert. Luckily he had plenty of water with him. Then there are the bumps. Some bumps! One man was killed. It's the truth I'm telling you! He was asleep and his head struck the top of the car and it killed him."

"In the six-wheeler, Mr O'Rourke?" demanded the elder Miss Pryce.

"No - not in the six-wheeler," admitted the young man.

"But we must do some sight seeing," cried Netta.

Her aunt drew out a guide book.

Netta edged away.

"I know she'll want to go to some place where St Paul was lowered out of a window," she whispered. "And I do so want to see the Bazaars."

O'Rourke responded promptly.

"Come with me. We'll start down the Street called Straight -"

They drifted off.

Mr Parker Pyne turned to a quiet man standing beside him, Hensley by name. He belonged to the public works department of Baghdad.

"Damascus is a little disappointing when one sees it for the first time," he said apologetically. "A little civilised. Trams and modern houses and shops."

Hensley nodded. He was a man of few words.

"Not got - back of beyond - when you think you have," he jerked out.

Another man drifted up, a fair young man wearing an old Etonian tie. He had an amiable but slightly vacant face which at the moment looked worried. He and Hensley were in the same department.

"Hullo, Smethurst," said his friend. "Lost anything?"

Captain Smethurst shook his head. He was a young man of somewhat slow intellect.

"Just looking round," he said vaguely. Then he seemed to rouse himself. "Ought to have a beautiful night. What?"

The two friends went off together. Mr Parker Pine bought a local paper printed in French.

He did not find it very interesting. The local news meant nothing to him and nothing of important seemed to be going on elsewhere. He found a few paragraphs headed Londres.

The first referred to financial matters. The second dealt with the supposed destination of Mr Samuel Long, the defaulting financier. His defalcations now amounted to the sum of three millions and it was rumoured that he had reached South America.

"Not too bad for a man just turned thirty," said Mr Parker Pyne to himself.

"I beg your pardon?"

Parker Pyne turned to confront an Italian General who had been on the same boat with him from Brindisi to Beirut.

Mr Parker Pyne explained his remark. The Italian General nodded his head several times.

"He is a great criminal, that man. Even in Italy we have suffered. He inspired confidence all over the world. He is a man of breeding, too, they say."

"Well, he went to Eton and Oxford," said Mr Parker Pyne cautiously.

"Will he be caught, do you think?"

"Depends on how much of a start he got. He may be still in England. He may be - anywhere."

"Here with us?" the General laughed.

"Possibly." Mr Parker Pyne remained serious. "For all you know, General, I may be he."

The General gave him a startled glance. Then his olive brown face relaxed into a smile of comprehension.

"Oh! that is very good - very good indeed. But you -"

His eyes strayed downwards from Mr Parker Pyne's face.

Mr Parker Pyne interpreted the glance correctly.

"You mustn't judge by appearances," he said. "A little additional - er - embonpoint - is easily managed and has a remarkably ageing effect."

He added dreamily,

"Then there is hair dye, of course, and face stain, and even a change of nationality."

General Poli withdrew doubtfully. He never knew how far the English were serious.

Mr Parker Pyne amused himself that evening by going to a Cinema. Afterwards he was directed to a "Nightly Palace of Gaieties." It appeared to him to be neither a palace nor gay. Various ladies danced with a distinct lack of verve. The applause was languid.

Suddenly Mr Parker Pyne caught sight of Smethurst. The young man was sitting at a table alone. His face was flushed and it occurred to Mr Parker Pyne that he had already drunk more than was good for him. He went across and joined the young man.

"Disgraceful, the way these girls treat you," said Captain Smethurst gloomily. "Bought her two drinks - three drinks - lots of drinks. Then she goes off laughing with some dago. Call it a disgrace."

Mr Parker Pyne sympathised. He suggested coffee.

"Got some araq coming," said Smethurst. "Jolly good stuff. You try it."

Mr Parker Pyne knew something of the properties of araq. He employed tact. Smethurst, however, shook his head.

"I'm in a bit of a mess," he said. "Got to cheer myself up. Don't know what you'd do in my place. Don't like to go back on a pal, what? I mean to say - and yet - what's a fellow to do?"

He studied Mr Parker Pyne as though noticing him for the first time.

"Who are you?" he demanded with the curtness born of his potations. "What do you do?"

"The confidence trick," said Mr Parker Pyne gently.

Smethurst gazed at him in lively concern.

"What - you too?"

Mr Parker Pyne drew from his wallet a cutting. He laid it on the table in front of Smethurst.

"Are you unhappy? (So it ran) If so, consult Mr Parker Pyne."

Smethurst focussed it after some difficulty.

"Well, I'm damned," he ejaculated. "You meantersay - people come and tell you things?"

"They confide in me - yes."

"Pack of idiotic women, I suppose."

"A good many women," admitted Mr Parker Pyne. "But men also. What about you, my young friend? You wanted advice just now?"

"Shut your damned head," said Captain Smethurst. "No business of anybody's - anybody's 'cept mine. Where's that goddamned araq?"

Mr Parker Pyne shook his head sadly.

He gave up Captain Smethurst as a bad job.

The convoy for Baghdad started at seven o'clock in the morning. There was a party of twelve. Mr Parker Pyne and General Poli, Miss Pryce and her niece, three Air Force officers, Smethurst and Hensley and an Armenian mother and son by name Pentemian.

The journey started uneventfully. The fruit trees of Damascus were soon left behind. The sky was cloudy and the young driver looked at it doubtfully once or twice. He exchanged remarks with Hensley.

"Been raining a good bit the other side of Rutbah. Hope we shan't stick."

They made a halt at midday and square cardboard boxes of lunch were handed round. The two drivers brewed tea which was served

in cardboard cups. They drove on again across the flat interminable plain.

Mr Parker Pyne thought of the slow caravans and the weeks of journeying...

Just at sunset they came to the desert fort of Rutbah. The great gates were unbarred and the six-wheeler drove in through them into the inner courtyard of the fort.

"This feels exciting," said Netta.

After a wash she was eager for a short walk. Flight Lieutenant O'Rourke and Mr Parker Pyne offered themselves as escorts. As they started the manager came up to them and begged them not to go far away as it might be difficult to find their way back after dark.

"We'll only go a short way," O'Rourke promised.

Walking was not, indeed, very interesting owing to the sameness of the surroundings.

Once Mr Parker Pyne bent and picked something up.

"What is it?" asked Netta curiously.

He held it out to her.

"A prehistoric flint, Miss Pryce - a borer."

"Did they - kill each other with them?"

"No - it had a more peaceful use. But I expect they could have killed with it if they'd wanted to. It's the wish to kill that counts - the mere instrument doesn't matter. Something can always be found."

It was getting dark, and they ran back to the fort.

After a dinner of many courses of the tinned variety they sat and smoked. At twelve o'clock the six-wheeler was to proceed.

The driver looked anxious.

"Some bad patches near here," he said. "We may stick."

They all climbed into the big car and settled themselves. Miss Pryce was annoyed not to be able to get at one of her suitcases.

"I should like my bedroom slippers," she said.

"More likely to need your gum boots," said Smethurst. "If I know the look of things we'll be stuck in a sea of mud."

"I haven't even got a change of stockings," said Netta.

"That's all right. You'll stay put. Only the stronger sex has to get out and heave."

"Always carry spare socks," said Hensley patting his overcoat pocket. "Never know."

The lights were turned out. The big car started out into the night.

The going was not too good. They were not jolted as they would have been in a touring car, but nevertheless they got a bad bump now and then.

Mr Parker Pyne had one of the front seats. Across the aisle was the Armenian lady shrouded in wraps and shawls. Her son was behind her. Behind Mr Parker Pyne were the two Miss Pryces. The General, Smethurst, Hensley and the R.A.F. men were at the back.

The car rushed on through the night. Mr Parker Pyne found it hard to sleep. His position was cramped. The Armenian lady's feet stuck out and encroached on his preserve. She, at any rate, was comfortable.

Everyone else seemed to be asleep. Mr Parker Pyne felt drowsiness stealing over him, when a sudden jolt threw him up towards the roof of the car. He heard a drowsy protest from the back of the six-wheeler.

"Steady. Want to break our necks?"

Then the drowsiness returned. A few minutes later, his neck sagging uncomfortably, Mr Parker Pyne slept...

He was awakened suddenly. The six-wheeler had stopped. Some of the men were getting out. Hensley spoke briefly.

"We're stuck."

Anxious to see all there was to see, Mr Parker Pyne stepped gingerly out in the mud. It was not raining now. Indeed there was a moon and by its light the drivers could be seen frantically at work with jacks and stones, striving to raise the wheels. Most of the men were helping. From the windows of the six-wheeler the three women looked out, Miss Pryce and Netta with interest, the Armenian lady with ill-concealed disgust.

At a command from the driver, the male passengers obediently heaved.

"Where's that Armenian fellow?" demanded O'Rourke. "Keeping his toes warmed and comfortable like a cat? Let's have him out too."

"Captain Smethurst, too," observed General Poli. "He is not with us."

"The blighter's asleep still. Look at him."

True enough, Smethurst still sat in his armchair, his head sagging forward and his whole body slumped down.

"I'll rouse him," said O'Rourke.

He sprang in through the door. A minute later he reappeared. His voice had changed.

"I say. I think he's ill - or something. Where's the doctor?"

Squadron Leader Loftus, the Air Force doctor, a quiet looking man with greying hair detached himself from the group by the wheel.

"What's the matter with him?" he asked.

"I - don't know."

The doctor entered the car. O'Rourke and Parker Pyne followed him. He bent over the sagging figure. One look and touch was enough.

"He's dead," he said quietly.

"Dead? But how?" Questions shot out. "Oh! how dreadful!" from Netta.

Loftus looked round in an irritated manner.

"Must have hit his head against the top," he said. "We went over one bad bump."

"Surely that wouldn't kill him? Isn't there anything else?"

"I can't tell unless I examine him properly," snapped Loftus. He looked round him with a harassed air. The women were pressing closer. The men outside were beginning to crowd in.

Mr Parker Pyne spoke to the driver. He was a strong athletic young man. He lifted each female passenger in turn, carrying her across

the mud and setting her down on dry land. Madame Pentemian and Netta he managed easily, but he staggered under the weight of the hefty Miss Pryce.

The interior of the six-wheeler was left clear for the doctor to make his examination.

The men went back to their efforts to jack up the car. Presently the sun rose over the horizon. It was a glorious day. The mud was drying rapidly, but the car was still stuck. Three jacks had been broken and so far no efforts had been of any avail. The drivers started preparing breakfast - opening tins of sausages and boiling water for tea.

A little way apart Squadron Leader Loftus was giving his verdict.

"There's no mark or wound on him. As I said he must have hit his head against the top."

"You're satisfied he died naturally?" asked Mr Parker Pyne.

There was something in his voice that made the doctor look at him quickly.

"There's only one other possibility."

"Yes?"

"Well, that someone hit him on the back of the head with something in the nature of a sandbag." His voice sounded apologetic.

"That's not very likely," said Williamson, the other Air Force officer. He was a cherubic looking youth. "I mean, nobody could do that without our seeing."

"If we were asleep?" suggested the doctor.

"Fellow couldn't be sure of that," pointed out the other. "Getting up and all that would have roused someone or other."

"The only way," said General Poli, "would be for anyone sitting behind him. He could choose his moment and need not even rise from his seat."

"Who was sitting behind Captain Smethurst?" asked the doctor.

O'Rourke replied readily.

"Hensley, sir - so that's no good. Hensley was Smethurst's best pal."

There was a silence. Then Mr Parker Pyne's voice rose with quiet certainty.

"I think," he said, "that Flight Lieutenant Williamson has something to tell us."

"I, sir? I - well -"

"Out with it, Williamson," said O'Rourke.

"It's nothing, really - nothing at all."

"Out with it."

"It's only a scrap of conversation I overheard - at Rutbah - in the courtyard. I'd got back into the six-wheeler to look for my cigarette case. I was hunting about. Two fellows were just outside talking. One of them was Smethurst. He was saying -"

He paused.

"Come on, man, out with it."

"Something about not wanting to let a pal down. He sounded very distressed. Then he said: 'I'll hold my tongue till Baghdad - but not a minute afterwards. You'll have to get out quickly.'"

"And the other man?"

"I don't know, sir. I swear I don't. It was dark and he only said a word or two and that I couldn't catch."

"Who amongst you knows Smethurst well?"

"I don't think the words 'a pal' could refer to any one but Hensley," said O'Rourke slowly. "I knew Smethurst, but very slightly. Williamson is new out - so is Squadron Leader Loftus. I don't think either of them have ever met him before."

Both men agreed.

"You, General?"

"I never saw the young man until we crossed the Lebanon in the same car from Beirut."

"And that Armenian rat?"

"He couldn't be a pal," said O'Rourke with decision. "And no Armenian would have the nerve to kill anyone."

"I have, perhaps, a small additional piece of evidence," said Mr Parker Pyne.

He repeated the conversation he had had with Smethurst in the cafй at Damascus.

He made use of the phrase - "don't like to go back on a pal," said O'Rourke thoughtfully. "And he was worried."

"Has no one else anything to add?" asked Mr Parker Pyne.

The doctor coughed.

"It may have nothing to do with it -" he began.

He was encouraged.

"It was just that I heard Smethurst say to Hensley, 'You can't deny that there is a leakage in your department.'"

"When was this?"

"Just before starting from Damascus yesterday morning. I thought they were just talking shop. I didn't imagine - " He stopped.

"My friends, this is interesting," said the General. "Piece by piece you assemble the evidence."

"You said a sandbag, doctor," said Mr Parker Pyne. "Could a man manufacture such a weapon?"

"Plenty of sand," said the doctor drily. He took some up in his hand as he spoke.

"If you put some in a sock," began O'Rourke and hesitated.

Everyone remembered two short sentences spoken by Hensley the night before.

"Always carry spare socks. Never know."

There was silence. Then Mr Parker Pyne said quietly. "Squadron Leader Loftus, I believe Mr Hensley's spare socks are in the pocket of his overcoat which is now in the car."

Their eyes went for one minute to where a moody figure was pacing to and from on the horizon. Hensley had held aloof since the

discovery of the dead man. His wish for solitude had been respected since it was known that he and the dead man had been friends.

Mr Parker Pyne went on.

"Will you get them and bring them here?"

The doctor hesitated.

"I don't like -" he muttered. He looked again at that pacing figure. "Seems a bit low down -"

"You must get them please," said Mr Parker Pyne. "The circumstances are unusual. We are marooned here. And we have got to know the truth. If you will fetch those socks I fancy we shall be a step nearer."

Loftus turned away obediently.

Mr Parker Pyne drew General Poli a little aside.

"General, I think it was you who sat across the aisle from Captain Smethurst."

"That is so."

"Did anyone get up and pass down the car?"

"Only the English lady, Miss Pryce. She went to the wash place at the back."

"Did she stumble at all?"

"She lurched a little with the movement of the car, naturally."

"She was the only person you saw moving about?"

"Yes."

The General looked at him curiously and said, "Who are you, I wonder? You take command, yet you are not a soldier."

"I have seen a good deal of life," said Mr Parker Pyne.

"You have traveled, eh?"

"No," said Mr Parker Pyne. "I have sat in an office."

Loftus returned carrying the socks. Mr Parker Pyne took them from him and examined them. To the inside of one of them wet sand still adhered.

Mr Parker Pyne drew a deep breath.

"Now I know," he said.

All their eyes went to the pacing figure on the horizon.

"I should like to look at the body if I may," said Mr Parker Pyne.

He went with the doctor to where Smethurst's body had been laid down covered with a tarpaulin.

The doctor removed the cover.

"There's nothing to see," he said.

But Mr Parker Pyne's eyes were fixed on the dead man's tie.

"So Smethurst was an old Etonian," he said. Loftus looked surprised.

Then Mr Parker Pyne surprised him still further.

"What do you know of young Williamson?" he asked.

"Nothing at all. I only met him at Beirut. I'd come from Egypt. But why? Surely -"

"Well, it's on his evidence we're going to hang a man, isn't it?" said Mr Parker Pyne cheerfully. "One's got to be careful."

He still seemed to be interested in the dead man's tie and collar. He unfastened the studs and removed the collar. Then he uttered an exclamation.

"See that?"

On the back of the collar was a small round blood-stain.

He peered closer down at the uncovered neck.

"This man wasn't killed by a blow on the head, doctor," he said briskly. "He was stabbed - at the base of the skull. You can just see the tiny puncture."

"And I missed it!"

"You'd got your preconceived notion," said Mr Parker Pyne apologetically. "A blow on the head. It's easy enough to miss this. You can hardly see the wound. A quick stab with a small sharp instrument and death would be instantaneous. The victim wouldn't even cry out."

"Do you mean a stiletto? You think the General -"

"Italians and stilettos go together in the popular fancy - Hullo, here comes a car!"

A touring car had appeared over the horizon.

"Good," said O'Rourke as he came up to join them. "The ladies can go on in that."

"What about our murderer?" asked Mr Parker Pyne.

"You mean Hensley -"

"No, I don't mean Hensley," said Mr Parker Pyne. "I happen to know that Hensley's innocent."

"You - but why?"

"Well, you see, he had sand in his sock."

O'Rourke stared.

"I know, my boy," said Mr Parker Pyne gently, "it doesn't sound like sense, but it is. Smethurst wasn't hit on the head, you see, he was stabbed."

He paused a minute and then went on.

"Just cast your mind back to the conversation I told you about - the conversation we had in the cafй. You picked out what was, to you, the significant phrase. But it was another phrase that struck me. When I said to him that I did the Confidence trick he said 'What, you too?' Doesn't that strike you as rather curious? I don't know that you'd describe a series of speculations from a Department as a 'Confidence Trick.' Confidence Trick is more descriptive of someone like the absconding Mr Samuel Long, for instance."

The doctor started O'Rourke said. "Yes - perhaps..."

"I said in jest that perhaps the absconding Mr Long was one of our party. Suppose that that is the truth."

"What - but it's impossible!"

"Not at all. What do you know of people besides their passports and the accounts they give of themselves. Am I really Mr Parker Pyne? Is General Poli really an Italian General? And what of the masculine Miss Pryce senior who needs a shave most distinctly."

"But he - but Smethurst - didn't know Long?"

"Smethurst is an old Etonian. Long, also, was at Eton. Smethurst may have known him although he didn't tell you so. He may have recognised him amongst us. And if so, what is he to do? He has a simple mind, and he worries over the matter. He decides at last to say nothing till Baghdad is reached. But after that he will hold his tongue no longer."

"You think one of us is Long," said O'Rourke, still dazed.

He drew a deep breath.

"It must be the Italian fellow - it must. Or what about the Armenian?"

"To make up as a foreigner and get a foreign passport is really much more difficult than to remain English," said Mr Parker Pyne.

"Miss Pryce?" cried O'Rourke incredulously.

"No," said Mr Parker Pyne. "This is our man!"

He laid what seemed an almost friendly hand on the shoulder of the man beside him. But there was nothing friendly in his voice, and the fingers were vice-like in their grip.

"Squadron Leader Loftus or Mr Samuel Long, it doesn't matter which you call him!"

"But that's impossible - impossible," spluttered O'Rourke. "Loftus has been in the service for years."

"But you've never met him before, have you? He was a stranger to all of you. It isn't the real Loftus, naturally."

The quiet man found his voice.

"Clever of you to guess. How did you, by the way?"

"Your ridiculous statement that Smethurst had been killed by bumping his head. O'Rourke put that idea into your head when we were standing talking in Damascus yesterday. You thought - how simple! You were the only doctor with us - whatever you said would be accepted. You'd got Loftus's kit. You'd got his instruments. It was easy to select a neat little tool for your purpose. You lean over to speak to him and as you are speaking you drive the little weapon home. You talk a minute or two longer. It is dark in the car. Who will suspect?

"Then comes the discovery of the body. You give your verdict. But it does not go as easily as you thought. Doubts are raised. You fall back on a second line of defense. Williamson repeats the

conversation he has overheard Smethurst having with you. It is taken to refer to Hensley and you add a damaging little invention of your own about a leakage in Hensley's department. And then I make a final test. I mention the sand and the socks. You are holding a handful of sand. I send you to find the socks so that we may know the truth. But by that I did not mean what you thought I meant. I had already examined Hensley's socks. There was no sand in either of them. You put it there."

Mr Samuel Long lit a cigarette.

"I give it up," he said. "My luck's turned. Well, I had a good run while it lasted. They were getting hot on my trail when I reached Egypt. I came across Loftus. He was just going to join up in Baghdad - and he knew none of them there. It was too good a chance to be missed. I bought him. It cost me twenty thousand pounds. What was that to me? Then, by cursed ill luck, I run into Smethurst - an ass if there ever was one! He was my fag at Eton. He had a bit of hero worship for me in those days. He didn't like the idea of giving me away. I did my best and at last he promised to say nothing till we reached Baghdad. What chance should I have then? None at all. There was only one way - to eliminate him. But I can assure you I am not a murderer by nature. My talents lie in quite another direction."

His face changed - contracted. He swayed and pitched forward.

O'Rourke bent over him.

"Probably prussic acid - in the cigarette," said Mr Parker Pyne. "The gambler has lost his last throw."

He looked round him - at the wide desert. The sun beat down on him. Only yesterday they had left Damascus - by the gate of Baghdad.

"Pass not beneath, O Caravan, or pass not singing.

Have you heard

That silence where the birds are dead yet something pipeth like a bird?"

THE HOUSE AT SHIRAZ

It was six in the morning when Mr Parker Pyne left Persia after a stop in Baghdad.

The passenger space in the little monoplan was limited, and the small width of the seats was not sufficient to accommodate the bulk of Mr Parker Pyne with something like comfort. There were two fellow traveling: a large, florid man whom Mr Parker Pyne judged to be of a talkative habit, and a thin woman with pursed lips and a determined air.

"At any rate," thought Mr Parker Pyne, "they don't look as though they would want to consult professionally."

Nor did they. The little woman was an American missionary, full of hard work and happiness, and the man was employed by an oil company. They had given their fellow traveler a rйsumй of their lives before the plane started.

"I am merely a tourist, I am afraid," Mr Parker Pyne had said deprecatingly. "I am going to Teheran and Ispahan and Shiraz."

And the sheer music of the names enchanted him so much as he said them that he repeated them. Teheran. Ispahan. Shiraz.

Mr Parker Pyne looked out at the country below him. It was flat desert. He felt the mystery of these vast, unpopulated regions.

At Kermanshah the machine came down for passport examinations and customs. A bag of Mr Parker Pyne's was opened. A certain small cardboard box was scrutinized with some excitement. Questions were asked. Since Mr Parker Pyne did not speak or understand Persian, the matter was difficult.

The pilot of the machine strolled up. He was a fair-haired young German, a fine-looking man, with deep blue eyes and a weather-beaten face. "Please?" he inquired pleasantly.

Mr Parker Pyne, who had been indulging in some excellent realistic pantomine without, it seemed, much success, turned to him with relief. "It's bug powder," he said. "Do you think you could explain to them?"

The pilot looked puzzled. "Please?"

Mr Parker Pyne repeated his plea in German. The pilot grinned and translated the sentence into Persian. The grave and sad officials were pleased; their sorrowful faces relaxed; they smiled. One even laughed. They found the idea humorous.

The three passengers took their places in the machine again and the flight continued. They swooped down at Hamadan to drop the mails, but the plane did not stop. Mr Parker Pyne peered down, trying to see if he could distinguish the rock of Behistun, that romantic spot where Darius describes the extent of his empire and conquests in three different languages - Babylonian, Median and Persian.

It was one o'clock when they arrived at Teheran.

There were more police formalities. The German pilot had come up and was standing by smiling as Mr Parker Pyne finished answering a long interrogation which he had not understood.

"What have I said?" he asked of the German.

"That your father's Christian name is Tourist, that your profession is Charles, that the maiden name of your mother is Baghdad, and that you have come from Harriet."

"Does it matter?"

"Not the least in the world. Just answer something; that is all they need."

Mr Parker Pyne was disappointed in Teheran. He found it distressingly modern. He said as much the following evening when he happened to run into Herr Schlagal, the pilot, just as he was entering his hotel. On an impulse he asked the other man to dine, and the German accepted.

The Georgian waiter hovered over them and issued his orders. The food arrived. When they had reached the stage of la tourte, a somewhat sticky confection of chocolate, the German said:

"So you go to Shiraz?"

"Yes, I shall fly there. Then I shall come back from Shiraz to Ispahan and Teheran by road. Is it you who will fly me to Shiraz tomorrow?"

"Ach, no. I return to Baghdad."

"You have been long here?"

"Three years. It has only been established three years, our service. So far, we have never had an accident - unberufen!" He touched the table.

Thick cups of sweet coffee were brought. The two men smoked.

"My first passengers were two ladies," said the German reminiscently. "Two English ladies."

"Yes?" said Mr Parker Pyne.

"The one she was a young lady very well born, the daughter of one of your ministers, the - how does one say it? The Lady Esther Carr. She was handsome, very handsome, but mad."

"Mad?"

"Completely mad. She lives there at Shiraz in a big native house. She wears Eastern dress. She will see no Europeans. Is that a life for a well-born lady to live?"

"There have been others," said Mr Parker Pyne. "There was Lady Hester Stanhope - "

"This one is mad," said the other abruptly. "You could see it in her eyes. Just so have I seen the eyes of my submarine commander in the war. He is now in an asylum."

Mr Parker Pyne was thoughtful. He remembered Lord Micheldever, Lady Esther Carr's father, well. He had worked under him when the latter was Home Secretary - a big blond man with laughing blue eyes. He had seen Lady Micheldever once - a noted Irish beauty with her black hair and violet-blue eyes. They were both handsome, normal people, but for all that there was insanity in the Carr family. It cropped out every now and then, after missing a generation. It was odd, he thought, that Herr Schlagal should stress the point.

"And the other lady?" he asked idly.

"The other lady - is dead."

Something in his voice made Mr Parker Pyne look up sharply.

"I have a heart," said Herr Schlagal. "I feel. She was, to me, most beautiful, that lady. You know how it is, these things come over you all of a sudden. She was a flower - a flower." He sighed deeply. "I went to see them once - at the house at Shiraz. The Lady Esther, she asked me to come. My little one, my flower, she was afraid of something, I could see it. When next I ca back from Baghdad, I hear that she is dead. Dead!"

He paused and then said thoughtfully: "It might that the other one killed her. She was mad, I tell you."

He sighed, and Mr Parker Pyne ordered two Benedictines.

"The curaʒao, it is good," said the Georgian waiter and brought them two curaʒaos.

Just after noon the following day, Mr Parker Pyne had his first view of Shiraz. They had flown over mountain ranges with narrow, desolate valleys between, and all arid, parched, dry wilderness. Then suddenly Shiraz came into view - an emerald-green jewel in the heart of the wilderness.

Mr Parker Pyne enjoyed Shiraz as he had not enjoyed Teheran. The primitive character of the hotel did not appall him, nor the equally primitive character of the streets.

He found himself in the midst of a Persian holiday. The Nan Ruz festival had begun on the previous evening - the fifteen-day period in which the Persians celebrate their New Year. He wandered through the empty bazaars and passed out into the great open stretch of common on the north side of the city. All Shiraz was celebrating.

One day he walked just outside the town. He had been to the tomb of Hanfiz the poet, and it was on returning that he saw and was fascinated by a house. A house all tiled in blue and rose and yellow, set in a green garden with water and orange trees and roses. It was, he felt, the house of a dream.

That night he was dining with the English consul and he asked about the house.

"Fascinating place, isn't it? It was built by a former wealthy governor of Luristan, who had made a good thing out of his official position. An Englishwoman's got it now. You must have heard of her. Lady Esther Carr. Mad as a hatter. Gone completely native. Won't have anything to do with anything or anyone British."

"Is she young?"

"Too young to play the fool in this way. She's about thirty."

"There was another Englishwoman with her, wasn't there? A woman who died?"

"Yes; that was about three years ago. Happened the day after I took up my post here, as a matter of fact. Barham, my predecessor, died suddenly, you know."

"How did she die?" asked Mr Parker Pyne bluntly.

"Fell from that courtyard or balcony place on the first floor. She was Lady Esther's maid or companion, I forget which. Anyway, she was carrying the breakfast tray and stepped back over the edge. Very sad; nothing to be done; cracked her skull on the stone below."

"What was her name?"

"King, I think; or was it Wills? No, that's the missionary woman. Rather a nice-looking girl."

"Was Lady Esther upset?"

"Yes - no, I don't know. She was very queer; I couldn't make her out. She's a very - well, imperious creature. You can see she is somebody, if you know what I mean; she rather scared me with her commanding ways and her dark, flashing eyes."

He laughed half apologetically, then looked curiously at his companion. Mr Parker Pyne was apparently staring into space. The match he had just struck to light his cigarette was burning away

unheeded in his hand. It burned down to his fingers and he dropped it with an ejaculation of pain. Then he saw the consul's astonished expression and smiled.

"I beg your pardon," he said.

"Woolgathering, weren't you?"

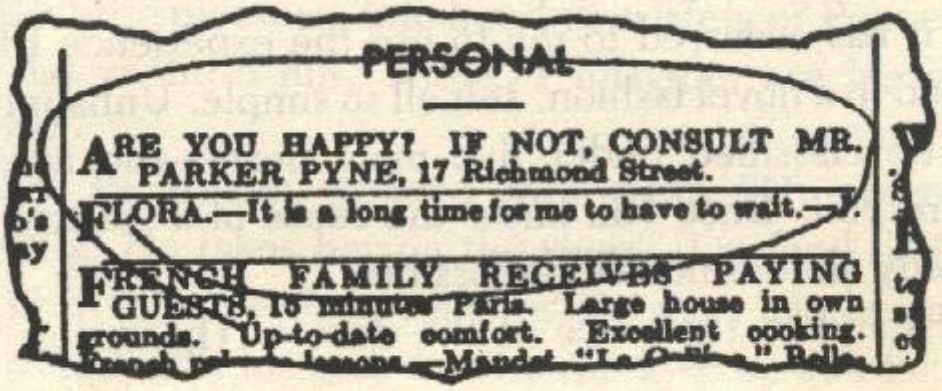
"Three bags full," said Mr Parker Pyne enigmatically.

They talked of other matters.

That evening, by the light of a small oil lamp, Mr Parker Pyne wrote a letter. He hesitated a good deal over its composition. Yet in the end it was very simple:

"Mr Parker Pyne presents his compliments to Lady Esther Carr and begs to state that he is staying at the Hotel Fars for the next three days should she wish to consult him. "

He enclosed a cutting - the famous advertisement:


PERSONAL

ARE YOU HAPPY? IF NOT, CONSULT MR. PARKER PYNE, 17 Richmond Street.

FLORA.—It is a long time for me to have to wait.—F.

FRENCH FAMILY RECEIVES PAYING GUESTS, 15 minutes Paris. Large house in own grounds. Up-to-date comfort. Excellent cooking. French [illegible] lessons.—Mandet "Le Chêne" Belle

"That ought to do the trick," said Mr Parker Pyne, as he got gingerly into his rather uncomfortable bed. "Let me see, nearly three years; yes, it ought to do it."

On the following day about four o'clock the answer came. It was brought by a Persian servant who knew no English.

"Lady Esther Carr will be glad if Mr Parker Pyne will call upon her at nine o'clock this evening. "

Mr Parker Pyne smiled.

It was the same servant who received him that evening. He was taken through the dark garden and up an outside staircase that led round to the back of the house. From there a door was opened and he passed through into the central court or balcony, which was open to the night. A big divan was placed against the wall and on it reclined a striking figure.

Lady Esther was attired in Eastern robes, and it might have been suspected that one reason for her preference lay in the fact that they suited her rich, Oriental style of beauty. Imperious, the consul had called her, and indeed imperious she looked. Her chin was held high and her brows were arrogant.

"You are Mr Parker Pyne? Sit down there."

Her hand pointed to a heap of cushions. On the third finger there flashed a big emerald carved with the arms of her family. It was an

heirloom and must be worth a small fortune, Mr Parker Pyne reflected.

He lowered himself obediently, though with a little difficulty. For a man of his figure it is not easy to sit on the ground gracefully.

A servant appeared with coffee. Mr Parker Pyne took his cup and sipped appreciatively.

His hostess had acquired the Oriental habit of infinite leisure. She did not rush into conversation. She, too, sipped her coffee with half-closed eyes. At last she spoke.

"So you help unhappy people," she said. "At least, that is what your advertisement claims."

"Yes."

"Why did you send it to me? Is it your way of - doing business on your travels?"

There was something decidedly offensive in her voice, but Mr Parker Pyne ignored it. He answered simply,

"No. My idea in traveling is to have a complete holiday from business."

"Then why send it to me?"

"Because I had reason to believe that you - are unhappy."

There was a moment's silence. He was very curious. How would she take that? She gave herself a minute to decide that point. Then she laughed.

"I suppose you thought that anyone who leaves the world, who lives as I do, cut off from my race, from my country, must do so because she is unhappy! Sorrow, disappointment - you think something like that drove me into exile? Oh, well, how should you understand? There - in England - I was a fish out of water. Here I am myself. I am an Oriental at heart. I love this seclusion. I dare say you can't understand that. To you, I must seem -" she hesitated a moment - "mad."

"You're not mad," said Mr Parker Pyne.

There was a good deal of quiet assurance in his voice. She looked at him curiously.

"But they've been saying I am, I suppose. Fools! It takes all kinds to make a world. I'm perfectly happy."

"And yet you told me to come here," said Mr Parker Pyne.

"I will admit I was curious to see you." She hesitated. "Besides, I never want to go back there - to England - but all the same, sometimes I like to hear what is going on in -"

"In the world you have left?"

She acknowledged the sentence with a nod.

Mr Parker Pyne began to talk. His voice, mellow and reassuring, began quietly, then rose ever so little as he emphasized this point and that.

He talked of London, of society gossip, of famous men and women, of new restaurants and new night clubs, of race meetings and shooting parties and country-house scandals. He talked of clothes, of fashions from Paris, of little shops in unfashionable streets where marvelous bargains could be had. He described theaters and cinemas, he gave film news, he described the building of new garden suburbs, he talked of bulbs and gardening, and he came last to a homely description of London in the evening, with the trams and the busses and the hurrying crowds going homeward after the day's work and of the little homes awaiting them, and of the whole strange intimate pattern of English family life.

It was a very remarkable performance, displaying as it did wide and unusual knowledge and a clever marshaling of the facts. Lady Esther's head had drooped; the arrogance of her poise had been abandoned. For some time her tears had been quietly falling, and now that he had finished, she abandoned all pretense and wept openly.

Mr Parker Pyne said nothing. He sat there watching her. His face had the quiet, satisfied expression of one who has conducted an experiment and obtained the desired result.

She raised her head at last. "Well," she said bitterly, "are you satisfied?"

"I think so - now."

"How shall I bear it; how shall I bear it? Never to leave here; never to see - anyone again!" The cry came as though wrung out of her. She caught herself up, flushing. "Well?" she demanded fiercely. "Aren't you going to make the obvious remark? Aren't you going to say, 'If you want to go home so much, why not do so?'"

"No." Mr Parker Pyne shook his head. "It's not nearly so easy as that for you."

For the first time a little look of fear crept into her eyes. "Do you know why I can't go?"

"I think so."

"Wrong." She shook her head. "The reason I can't go is a reason you'd never guess."

"I don't guess," said Mr Parker Pyne. "I observe - and I classify."

She shook her head. "You don't know anything at all."

"I shall have to convince you, I see," said Mr Parker Pyne pleasantly. "When you came out here, Lady Esther, you flew, I believe, by the new German Air Service from Baghdad."

"Yes?"

"You were flown by a young pilot, Herr Schlagal, who afterwards came here to see you."

"Yes."

A different "yes" in some indescribable way - a softer "yes."

"And you had a friend, or companion, who - died." A voice like steel now - cold, offensive.

"My companion."

"Her name was?"

"Muriel King."

"Were you fond of her?"

"What do you mean, fond?" She paused, checked herself. "She was useful to me."

She said it haughtily and Mr Parker Pyne was reminded of the consul's saying: "You can see she is somebody, if you know what I mean."

"Were you sorry when she died?"

"I - naturally! Really, Mr Pyne, is it necessary to go into all this?" She spoke angrily, and went on without waiting for an answer: "It has been very good of you to come. But I am a little tired. If you will tell me what I owe you -?"

But Mr Parker Pyne did not move. He showed no signs of taking offense. He went quietly on with his questions. "Since she died, Herr Schlagal has not been to see you. Suppose he were to come, would you receive him?"

"Certainly not."

"You refuse absolutely?"

"Absolutely. Herr Schlagal will not be admitted."

"Yes," said Mr Parker Pyne thoughtfully. "You could not say anything else."

The defensive armor of her arrogance broke down a little. She said uncertainly: "I - I don't know what you mean."

"Did you know, Lady Esther, that young Schlagal fell in love with Muriel King? He is a sentimental young man. He still treasures her memory."

"Does he?" Her voice was almost a whisper.

"What was she like?"

"What do you mean, what was she like? How do I know?"

"You must have looked at her sometimes," said Mr Parker Pyne mildly.

"Oh, that! She was quite a nice-looking young woman."

"About your own age?"

"Just about." There was a pause, and then she said: "Why do you think that - that Schlagal cared for her?"

"Because he told me so. Yes, yes, in the most unmistakable terms. As I say, he is a sentimental young man. He was glad to confide in me. He was very upset at her dying the way she did."

Lady Esther sprang to her feet. "Do you believe I murdered her?"

Mr Parker Pyne did not spring to his feet. He was not a springing kind of man. "No, my dear child," he said. "I do not believe that you murdered her, and that being so, I think the sooner you stop this play-acting and go home, the better."

"What do you mean, playacting?"

"The truth is, you lost your nerve. Yes, you did. You lost your nerve badly. You thought you'd be accused of murdering your employer."

The girl made a sudden movement.

Mr Parker Pyne went on. "You are not Lady Esther Carr. I knew that before I came here, but I've tested you to make sure." His smile broke out, bland and benevolent. "When I said my little piece just now, I was watching you, and every time you reacted as Muriel King, not as Esther Carr. The cheap shops, the cinemas, the - garden suburbs, going home by bus and tram - you reacted to all those. Country-house gossip, new night clubs, the chatter of Mayfair, race meetings - none of those meant anything at all to you."

His voice became even more persuasive and fatherly.

"Sit down and tell me about it. You didn't murder Lady Esther, but you thought you might be accused of doing so. Just tell me how it all came about."

She took a long breath; then she sank down even more on the divan and began to speak. Her words came hurriedly, in little bursts.

"I must begin - at the beginning. I - I was afraid her. She was mad - not quite made - just a little. She brought me out here with her. Like a fool I was delighted; I thought it was so romantic. Little fool. That's what I was, a little fool. There was some business about a chauffeur. She was man-mad - absolutely man-mad. He wouldn't have anything to do with her, and it put her out; her friends got to know about it and laughed. And so she broke loose from her family and came out here.

"It was all a pose to save her face - solitude in the desert - all that sort of thing. She would have kept it up for a bit, and then gone

back. But she got queerer and queerer. And there was the pilot. She - she took a fancy to him. He came here to see me, and she thought - well, you can understand. But he must have made it clear to her...

"And then she suddenly turned on me. She was awful, frightening. She said I should never go home again. She said I was in her power. She said I was a slave. Just that - a slave. She had the power of life and death over me."

Mr Parker Pyne nodded. He saw the situation unfolding. Lady Esther slowly going over the edge of sanity, as others of her family had gone before her, and the frightened girl, ignorant and untraveled, believing everything that was said to her.

"But one day something in me seemed to snap. I stood up to her: I told her that if it came to it I was stronger than she was. I told her I'd throw her down onto the stones below. She was frightened, really frightened. I suppose she'd just thought me a worm. I took a step towards her - I don't know what she thought I meant to do. She moved backwards; she - she stepped back off the edge!" Muriel King buried her face in her hands.

"And then?" Mr Parker Pyne prompted gently.

"I lost my head. I thought they'd say I'd pushed her over. I thought nobody would listen to me. I thought I should be thrown into some awful prison out here."

Her lips worked. Mr Parker Pyne saw clearly enough the unreasoning fear that had possessed her. "And then it came to me - if it were I! I knew that there would be a new British consul who'd never seen either of us. The other one had died.

"I thought I could manage the servants. To them we were two mad Englishwomen. When one was dead, the other carried on. I gave them good presents of money and told them to send for the British consul. He came and I received him as Lady Esther. I had her ring on my finger. He was very nice and arranged everything. Nobody seemed to have the least suspicion."

Mr Parker Pyne nodded thoughtfully. The prestige of a famous name. Lady Esther Carr might be mad as a hatter, but she was still Lady Esther Carr.

"And then afterwards," continued Muriel, "I wished I hadn't. I saw that I'd been quite mad myself. I was condemned to stay on here playing a part. I didn't see how I could ever get away. If I confessed the truth now it would look more than ever as though I'd murdered her. Oh, Mr Pyne, what shall I do? What shall I do?"

"Do?" Mr Parker Pyne rose to his feet as briskly as his figure allowed. "My dear child, you will come with me now to the British consul, who is a very amiable and kindly man. There will be certain unpleasant formalities to go through. I don't promise you that it will be all plain sailing, but you won't be hanged for murder. By the way, why was the breakfast tray found with the body?"

"I threw it over. I - I thought it would look more like me to have a tray there. Was it silly of me?"

"It was rather a clever touch," said Mr Parker Pyne. "In fact, it was the one point which made me wonder if you might, perhaps, have done away with Lady Esther - that is, until I saw you. When I saw you, I knew that whatever else you might do in your life, you would never kill anyone."

"Because I haven't the nerve, you mean?"

"Your reflexes wouldn't work that way," said Mr Parker Pyne, smiling. "Now, shall we go? There's an unpleasant job to be faced, but I'll see you through it, and then - home to Streatham Hill - it is Streatham Hill, isn't it? Yes, I thought so. I saw your face contract when I mentioned one particular bus number. Are you coming, my dear?"

Muriel King hung back. "They'll never believe me," she said nervously. "Her family and all. They wouldn't believe she could act the way she did."

"Leave it to me," said Mr larker Pyne. "I know something of the family history, you see. Come, child, don't go on playing the coward. Remember, there's a young man in Teheran sighing his heart out. We had better arrange that it is in his plane you fly to Baghdad."

The girl smiled and blushed. "I'm ready," she said simply. Then as she moved towards the door, she turned back. "You said you knew I

was not Lady Esther Carr before you saw me. How could you possibly tell that?"

"Statistics," said Mr Parker Pyne.

"Statistics?"

"Yes. Both Lord and Lady Micheldever had blue eyes. When the consul mentioned that their daughter had flashing dark eyes I knew there was something wrong. Brown-eyed people may produce a blue-eyed child, but not the other way about. A scientific fact, I assure you."

"I think you're wonderful!" said Muriel King.

THE PEARL OF PRICE

The party had had a long and tiring day. They had started from Amman early in the morning with a temperature of ninety-eight in the shade, and had come at last just as it was growing dark into the camp situated in the heart of that city of fantastic and preposterous red rock which is Petra.

There were seven of them. Mr Caleb P. Blundell, that stout and prosperous American magnate. His dark and good-looking, if somewhat taciturn, secretary, Jim Hurst. Sir Donald Marvel, M.P., a tired-looking English politician. Doctor Carver, a world-renowned

elderly archaeologist. A gallant Frenchman, Colonel Dubosc, on leave from Syria. A Mr Parker Pyne, not perhaps so plainly labeled with his profession, but breathing an atmosphere of British solidity. And lastly, there was Miss Carol Blundell - pretty, spoiled, and extremely sure of herself as the only woman among half a dozen men.

They dined in the big tent, having selected their tents or caves for sleeping in. They talked of politics in the Near East - the Englishman cautiously, the Frenchman discreetly, the American somewhat fatuously, and the archaeologist and Mr Parker Pyne not at all. Both of them, it seemed, preferred the rφle of listeners. So also did Jim Hurst.

Then they talked of the city they had come to visit.

"It's just too romantic for words," said Carol. "To think of those - what do you call 'em? - Nabataeans living here all that while ago, almost before time began!"

"Hardly that," said Mr Parker Pyne mildly. "Eh, Doctor Carver?"

"Oh, that's an affair of a mere two thousand years back, and if racketeers are romantic, then I suppose the Nabataeans are, too. They were a pack of wealthy blackguards I should say, who compelled travelers to use their own caravan routes, and saw to it that all other routes were unsafe. Petra was the storehouse of their racketeering profits."

"You think they were just robbers?" asked Carol. "Just common thieves?"

"Thieves is a less romantic word, Miss Blundell. A thief suggests a petty pilferer. A robber suggests a larger canvas."

"What about a modern financier?" suggested Mr Parker Pyne with a twinkle.

"That's one for you, Pop!" said Carol.

"A man who makes money benefits mankind," said Mr Blundell sententiously.

"Mankind," murmured Mr Parker Pyne, "is so ungrateful."

"What is honesty?" demanded the Frenchman. "It is a nuance, a convention. In different countries it means different things. An Arab is not ashamed of stealing. He is not ashamed of lying. With him it is from whom he steals or to whom he lies that matters."

"That is the point of view - yes," agreed Carver.

"Which shows the superiority of the West over the East," said Blundell. "When these poor creatures get education -"

Sir Donald entered languidly into the conversation. "Education is rather rot, you know. Teaches fellows lot of useless things. And what I mean is, nothing alters what you are."

"You mean?"

"Well, what I mean to say is, for instance, once a thief always a thief."

There was a dead silence for a moment. Then Carver began talking feverishly about mosquitoes, and her father backed her up.

Sir Donald, a little puzzled, murmured to his neighbor, Mr Parker Pyne: "Seems I dropped a brick, what?"

"Curious," said Mr Parker Pyne.

Whatever momentary embarrassment had been caused, one person had quite failed to notice it. The archaeologist had sat silent, his eyes dreamy and abstracted. When a pause came, he spoke suddenly and abruptly.

"You know," he said, "I agree with that - at any rate, from the opposite point of view. A man's fundamentally honest, or he isn't. You can't get away from it."

"You don't believe that sudden temptation, for instance, will turn an honest man into a criminal?" asked Mr Parker Pyne.

"Impossible!" said Carver.

Mr Parker Pyne shook his head gently. "I would not say impossible. You see, there are so many factors to take into account. There's the breaking point, for instance."

"What do you call the breaking point?" asked young Hurst, speaking for the first time. He had a deep, rather attractive voice.

"The brain is adjusted to carry so much weight. The thing that precipitates the crisis - that turns an honest man into a dishonest one - may be a mere trifle. That is why most crimes are absurd. The cause, nine times out of ten, is that trifle of overweight - the straw that breaks the camel's back."

"It is the psychology you talk there, my friend," said the Frenchman.

"If a criminal were a psychologist, what a criminal he could be!" said Mr Parker Pyne. His voice dwelt lovingly on the idea. "When you think that of ten people you meet, at least nine of them can be induced to act in any way you please by applying the right stimulus."

"Oh, explain that!" cried Carol.

"There's the bullyable man. Shout loud enough at him - and he obeys. There's the contradictory man. Bully him the opposite way from that in which you want him to go. Then there's the suggestible person, the commonest type of all. Those are the people who have seen a motor, because they have heard a motor horn; who see a postman because they hear the rattle of the letter box; who see a knife in a wound because they are told a man has been stabbed; or who will have heard the pistol if they are told a man has been shot."

"I guess no one could put that sort of stuff over on me," said Carol incredulously.

"You're too smart for that, honey," said her father.

"It is very true what you say," said the Frenchman reflectively. "The preconceived idea, it deceives the senses."

Carol yawned. "I'm going to my cave. I'm tired to death. Abbas Effendi said we had to start early tomorrow. He's going to take us up to the place of sacrifice - whatever that is."

"It's where they sacrifice young and beautiful girls," said Sir Donald.

"Mercy, I hope not! Well, good night, all. Oh, I've dropped my earring."

Colonel Dubosc picked it up from where it had rolled across the table and returned it to her.

"Are they real?" asked Sir Donald abruptly. Discourteous for the moment, he was staring at the two large solitaire pearls at her ears.

"They're real, all right," said Carol.

"Cost me eighty thousand dollars," said her father with relish. "And she screws them in so loosely that they fall off and roll about the table. Want to ruin me, girl?"

"I'd say it wouldn't ruin you even if you had to buy me a new pair," said Carol fondly.

"I guess it wouldn't," her father acquiesced. "I could buy you three pairs of earrings without noticing it in my bank balance." He looked proudly around.

"How nice for you!" said Sir Donald.

"Well, gentlemen, I think I'll turn in now," said Blundell. "Good night." Young Hurst went with him. The other four smiled at one another, as though in sympathy over some thought.

"Well," drawled Sir Donald, "it's nice to know he wouldn't miss the money. Purse-proud hog!" he added viciously.

"They have too much money, these Americans," said Dubosc.

"It is difficult," said Mr Parker Pyne gently, "for a rich man to be appreciated by the poor."

Dubosc laughed. "Envy and malice?" he suggested.

"You are right, Monsieur. We all wish to be rich; to buy the pearl earrings several times over. Except, perhaps, Monsieur here."

He bowed to Doctor Carver who, as seemed usual with him, was once more far away. He was fiddling with an object in his hand.

"Hm?" He roused himself. "No, I must admit I don't covet pearls. Money is always useful, of course." He put it where it belonged "But look at this," he said, "there is something a hundred times more interesting than pearls."

"What is it?"

"It is a cylinder seal of black hematite and it's got a celibation scene engraved on it - a god introducing a suplicant to a more important enthroned god. The suplicant is carrying a child as offer and the more important god has a servant with a palm-leaf to keep away the flies. The inscription is very clear and says that the man is a servant of Hammurabi and so it must have been made just four thousand years ago."

He took a lump of plasticine from his pocket and rolled it out on the table. Then he passed the cylinder seal over it and said,

"You see?"

The scene he had described was very clearly shown on the plasticine.

For a moment the spell of the past was laid upon them all. Then, from outside, the voice of Mr Blundell was heard, unmusically.

"Hey, you darned fellows! Change my baggage out of this cave and into a tent! The no-see-ums are biting hard. I shan't get a wink of sleep."

"No-see-ums?" Sir Donald queried.

"Probably sand flies," said Doctor Carver.

"I like the no-see-ums," said Mr Parker Pyne. "It's a more suggestive name."

The party started early the following morning, getting under way after various exclamations at the color and marking of the rocks. The "rose-red" city was indeed a freak invented by Nature in her most extravagant and colorful mood. The party proceeded slowly, since Doctor Carver walked with his eyes bent on the ground, occasionally pausing to pick up small objects.

"You can always tell the archaeologist - so," said Colonel Dubosc, smiling. "He regards never the sky, nor the hills, nor the beauties of nature. He walks with head bent, searching."

"Yes, but what for?" said Carol. "What are the things you are picking up, Doctor Carver?"

With a slight smile the archaeologist held out a couple of muddy fragments of pottery.

"That rubbish!" cried Carol scornfully.

"Pottery is more interesting than gold," said Doctor Carver. Carol looked disbelieving.

They came to a sharp bend and passed two or three rock-cut tombs. The ascent was somewhat trying. The Bedouin guards went ahead, swinging up the precipitous slopes unconcernedly, without a downward glance at the sheer drop on one side of them.

Carol looked rather pale. One guard leaned down from above and extended a hand. Hurst sprang up in front of her and held out his stick like a rail on the precipitous side. She thanked him with a glance, and a minute later stood safely on a broad path of rock. The others followed slowly. The sun was now high and the heat was beginning to be felt.

At last they reached a broad plateau almost at the top. An easy climb led to the summit of a big square block of rock. Blundell signified to the guide that the party would go up alone. The Bedouins disposed themselves comfortably against the rocks and began to smoke. A few short minutes and the others had reached the summit.

It was a curious, bare place. The view was marvelous embracing the valley on every side. They stood on a plain rectangular floor, with rock basins cut in the side and a kind of sacrificial altar.

"A heavenly place for sacrifices," said Carol with enthusiasm. "But my, they must have had a time getting the victims up here!"

"There was originally a kind of zigzag rock road," explained Doctor Carver. "We shall see traces of it as we go down the other way."

They were some time longer commenting and talking. Then there was a tiny chink, and Doctor Carver said:

"I believe you've dropped your earring again, Miss Blundell."

Carol clapped a hand to her ear. "Why, so I have."

Dubosc and Hurst began searching about.

"It must be just here," said the Frenchman. "It can't have rolled away, because there is nowhere for it to roll to. The place is like a square box."

"It can't have rolled into a crack?" queried Carol.

"There's not a crack anywhere," said Mr Parker Pyne. "You can see for yourself. The place is perfectly smooth. Ah, you have found something, Colonel?"

"Only a little pebble," said Dubosc, smiling and throwing it away.

Gradually a different spirit - a spirit of tension - came over the search. They were not said aloud, but the words "eighty thousand dollars" were present in everybody's mind.

"You are sure you had it, Carol?" snapped her father. "I mean, perhaps you dropped it on the way up."

"I had it just as we stepped onto the plateau here," said Carol. "I know, because Doctor Carver pointed out to me that it was loose and he screwed it up for That's so, isn't it, doctor?"

Doctor Carver assented. It was Sir Donald who voiced the thoughts in everybody's mind.

"This is rather an unpleasant business, Mr Blundell," he said. "You were telling us last night what the value of these earrings is. One of them alone is worth a small fortune. If this earring is not found, and it does not look as though it will be found, every one of us will be under a certain suspicion."

"And for one, I ask to be searched," broke in Colonel Dubosc. "I do not ask, I demand it as a right!"

"You can search me, too," said Hurst. His voice sounded harsh.

"What does everyone else feel?" asked Sir Donald, looking around.

"Certainly," said Mr Parker Pyne.

"An excellent idea," said Doctor Carver.

"I'll be in on this too, gentlemen," said Mr Blundell. "I've got my reasons, though I don't want to state them."

"Just as you like, of course, Mr Blundell," said Sir Donald courteously.

"Carol, my dear, will you go down and wait with the guides?"

Without a word the girl left them. Her face was sore and grim. There was a despairing look upon it that caught the attention of one member of the party, at least. He wondered just what it meant.

The search proceeded. It was drastic and thorough and completely unsatisfactory. One thing was certain.

No one was carrying the earring on his person. It was subdued little troop that negotiated the descent and listened half-heartedly to the guide's descriptions and information.

Mr Parker Pyne had just finished dressing for lunch, when a figure appeared at the door of his tent.

"Mr Pyne, may I come in?"

"Certainly, my dear young lady, certainly."

Carol came in and sat down on the bed. Her face had the same grim look upon it that he had noticed earlier in the day.

"You pretend to straighten out things for people when they are unhappy, don't you?" she demanded.

"I am on holiday, Miss Blundell. I am not taking any cases."

"Well, you're going to take this one," said the girl calmly. "Look here, Mr Pyne, I'm just as wretched as anyone could well be."

"What is troubling you?" he asked. "Is it this business of the earring?"

"That's just it. You've said it. Jim Hurst didn't take it, Mr Pyne. I know he didn't."

"I don't quite follow you, Miss Blundell. Why should anyone assume he had?"

"Because of his record. Jim Hurst was once a thief, Mr Pyne. He was caught in our house. I - I was sorry for him. He looked so young and desperate -"

"And so good-looking!" thought Mr Parker Pyne.

"I persuaded Pop to give him a chance to make good. My father will do anything for me. Well, he gave Jim his chance and Jim has made good. Father's come to rely on him and to trust him with all his business secrets. And in the end he'll come around altogether, or would have if this hadn't happened."

"When you say 'come around'-?"

"I mean that I want to marry Jim and he wants to marry me."

"And Sir Donald?"

"Sir Donald is Father's idea. He's not mine. Do you think I want to marry a stuffed fish like Sir Donald?"

Without expressing any views as to this description of the young Englishman, Mr Parker Pyne asked: "And Sir Donald himself?"

"I dare say he thinks I'd be good for his impoverished acres," said Carol scornfully.

Mr Parker Pyne considered the situation. "I should like to ask you about two things," he said. "Last night the remark was made, 'once a thief, always a thief.'"

The girl nodded.

"I see now the reason for the embarrassment the remark seemed to cause."

"Yes, it was awkward for Jim - and for me and Pop too. I was so afraid Jim's face would show something that I just trotted out the first remarks I could think of."

Mr Parker Pyne nodded thoughtfully. Then he asked: "Just why did your father insist on being searched today?"

"You didn't get that? I did. Pop had it in his mind that I might think the whole business was a frame-up against Jim. You see, he's crazy for me to marry the Englishman. Well, he wanted to show me that he had not done the dirty on Jim."

"Dear me," said Mr Parker Pyne, "this is all very illuminating. In a general sense, I mean. It hardly helps us in our particular inquiry."

"You're not going to hand in your checks?"

"No, no." He was silent a moment, then he said, "What is it exactly you want me to do, Miss Carol?"

"Prove it wasn't Jim who took that pearl."

"And suppose - excuse me - that it was?"

"If you think so, you're wrong - dead wrong."

"Yes, but have you really considered the case carefully? Don't you think that the pearl might prove a sudden temptation to Mr Hurst? The sale of it would bring in a large sum of money - a foundation on which to speculate, shall we say? - which will make him independent, so that he can marry you with or without your father's consent."

"Jim didn't do it," said the girl simply.

This time Mr Parker Pyne accepted her statement.

"Well, I'll do my best."

She nodded abruptly and left the tent. Mr Parker Pyne in his turn sat down on the bed. He gave himself up to thought. Suddenly he chuckled.

"I'm growing slow-witted," he said, aloud. At lunch he was very cheerful.

The afternoon passed peacefully. Most people slept. When Mr Parker Pyne came into the big tent at a quarter past four only Doctor Carver was there. He was examining some fragments of pottery.

"Ah!" said Mr Parker Pyne, drawing up a chair to the table. "Just the man I want to see. Can you let me have that bit of plasticine you carry about?"

The doctor felt in his pockets and produced a stick of plasticine, which he offered to Mr Parker Pyne.

"No," said Mr Parker Pyne, waving it away, "that's not the one I want. I want that lump you had last night. To be frank, it's not the plasticine I want. It's the contents of it."

There was a pause, and then Doctor Carver said quietly. "I don't think I quite understand you."

"I think you do," said Mr Parker Pyne. "I want Miss Blundell's pearl earring."

There was a minute's dead silence. Then Carver slipped his hand into his pocket and took out a shapeless lump of plasticine.

"Clever of you," he said. His face was expressionless.

"I wish you'd tell me about it," said Mr Parker Pyne. His fingers were busy. With a grunt, he extracted a somewhat smeared pearl earring. "Just curiosity, I know," he added apologetically. "But I should like to hear about it."

"I'll tell you," said Carver, "if you'll tell me just how you happened to pitch upon me. You didn't see anything, did you?"

Mr Parker Pyne shook his head. "I just thought about it," he said.

"It was really sheer accident, to start with," said Carver. "I was behind you all this morning and I came across it lying in front of me - it must have fallen from the girl's ear a moment before. She hadn't noticed it. Nobody had. I picked it up and put it into my pocket, meaning to return it to her as soon as I caught her up. But I forgot.

"And then, halfway up that climb, I began to think. The jewel meant nothing to that fool of a girl - her father would buy her another without noticing the cost. And it would mean a lot to me. The sale of that pearl would equip an expedition." His impassive face suddenly twitched and came to life. "Do you know the difficulty there is nowadays in raising subscriptions for digging? No, you don't. The sale of that pearl would make everything easy. There's a site I want to dig up in Baluchistan. There's a whole chapter of the past there waiting to be discovered...

"What you said last night came into my mind - about a suggestible witness. I thought the girl was that type. As we reached the summit I told her her earring was loose. I pretended to tighten it. What I really did was to press the point of a small pencil into her ear. A few

minutes later I dropped a little pebble. She was quite ready to swear then that the earring had been in her ear and had just dropped off. In the meantime I pressed the pearl into a lump of plasticine in my pocket. That's my story. Not a very edifying one. Now for your turn."

"There isn't much of my story," said Mr Parker Pyne. "You were the only man who'd picked up things from the ground - that's what made me think of you. And finding that little pebble was significant. It suggested the trick you'd played. And then -"

"Go on," said Carver.

"Well, you see, you'd talked about honesty a little too vehemently last night. Protesting overmuch - well, you know what Shakespeare says. It looked, somehow, as though you were trying to convince yourself. And you were a little too scornful about money."

The face of the man in front of him looked lined and weary. "Well, that's that," he said. "It's all up with me now. You'll give the girl back her gewgaw, I suppose? Odd thing, the barbaric instinct for ornamentation. You find it going back as far as paleolithic times. One of the first instincts of the female sex."

"I think you misjudge Miss Carol," said Mr Parker Pyne. "She has brains - and what is more, a heart. I think she will keep this business to herself."

"Father won't, though," said the archaeologist.

"I think he will. You see, 'Pop' has his own reasons for keeping quiet. There's no forty-thousand-dollar touch about this earring. A mere fiver would cover its value."

"You mean -?"

"Yes. The girl doesn't know. She thinks they are genuine, all right. I had my suspicions last night. Mr Blundell talked a little too much about all the money he had. When things go wrong and you're caught in the slump - well, the best thing to do is to put a good face on it and bluff. Mr Blundell was bluffing."

Suddenly Doctor Carver grinned. It was an engaging small-boy grin, strange to see on the face of an elderly man. "Then we're all poor devils together," he said.

"Exactly," said Mr Parker Pyne and quoted, "'A fellow feeling makes us wondrous kind.'"

DEATH ON THE NILE

Lady Grayle was nervous. From the moment of coming on board the S.S. Fayoum she complained of everything. She did not like her cabin. She could bear the morning sun, but not the afternoon sun. Pamela Grayle, her niece, obligingly gave up her cabin on the other side. Lady Grayle accepted it grudgingly.

She snapped at Miss MacNaughton, her nurse, for having given her the wrong scarf and for having packed her little pillow instead of leaving it out. She snapped at her husband, Sir George, for having just bought her the wrong string of beads. It was lapis she wanted, not carnelian. George was a fool!

Sir George said anxiously, "Sorry, me dear, sorry. I'll go back and change 'em. Plenty of time."

She did not snap at Basil West, her husband's private secretary, because nobody ever snapped at Basil. His smile disarmed you before you began.

But the worst of it fell assuredly to the dragoman - an imposing and richly dressed personage whom nothing could disturb. When Lady Grayle caught sight of a stranger in a basket chair and realized that he was a fellow passenger, the vials of her wrath were poured out like water.

"They told me distinctly at the office that we were the only passengers! It was the end of the season and there was no one else going!"

"That right, lady," said Mohammed calmly. "Just you and party and one gentleman, that's all."

"But I was told that there would be only ourselves."

"That quite right, lady."

"It's not all right! It was a lie! What is that man doing there?"

"He come later, lady. After you take tickets. He only decide come this morning."

"It's an absolute swindle!"

"That all right, lady; him very quiet gentleman, very nice, very quiet."

"You're a fool! You know nothing about it. Miss MacNaughton, where are you? Oh, there you are. I've repeatedly asked you to stay near me. I might feel faint. Help me to my cabin and give me an aspirin, and don't let Mohammed come near me. He keeps on saying 'That right, lady,' till I feel I could scream."

Miss MacNaughton proffered an arm without a word. She was a tall woman of about thirty-five, handsome in a quiet, dark way. She settled Lady Grayle in the cabin, propped her up with cushions, administered an aspirin and listened to the thin flow of complaint.

Lady Grayle was forty-eight. She had suffered since she was sixteen from the complaint of having too much money. She had married that impoverished baronet, Sir George Grayle, ten years before.

She was a big woman, not bad-looking as regarded features, but her face was fretful and lined, and the lavish make-up she applied only accentuated the blemishes of time and temper. Her hair had

been in turn platinum-blond and henna-red, and was looking tired in consequence. She was overdressed and wore too much jewelry.

"Tell Sir George," she finished, while the silent Miss MacNaughton waited with an expressionless face, "tell Sir George that he must get that man off the boat! I must have privacy. All I've gone through lately -" She shut her eyes.

"Yes, Lady Grayle," said Miss MacNaughton, and left the cabin.

The offending last-minute passenger was still sitting in the deck chair. He had his back to Luxor and was staring out across the Nile to where the distant hills showed golden above a line of dark green. Miss MacNaughton gave him a swift, appraising glance as she passed.

She found Sir George in the lounge. He was holding a string of beads in his hand and looking at it doubtfully.

"Tell me, Miss MacNaughton, do you think these will be all right?"

Miss MacNaughton gave a swift glance at the lapis.

"Very nice indeed," she said.

"You think Lady Grayle will be pleased - eh?"

"Oh, no, I shouldn't say that, Sir George. You see, nothing would please her. That's the real truth of it. By the way, she sent me with a message to you. She wants you to get rid of this extra passenger."

Sir George's jaw dropped. "How can I? What could I say to the fellow?"

"Of course you can't." Elsie MacNaughton's voice was brisk and kindly. "Just say there was nothing to be done." She added encouragingly, "It will be all right."

"You think it will, eh?" His face was ludicrously pathetic.

Elsie MacNaughton's voice was still kinder as she said: "You really must not take these things to heart, Sir George. It's just health, you know. Don't take it seriously."

"You think she's really bad, nurse?"

A shade crossed the nurse's face. There was something odd in her voice as she answered: "Yes, I - I don't quite like her condition. But please don't worry, Sir George. You mustn't. You really mustn't." She gave him a friendly smile and went out.

Pamela came in, very languid and cool in her white.

"Hullo, Nunks."

"Hullo, Pam, me dear."

"What have you got there? Oh, nice!"

"Well, I'm glad you think so. Do you think your aunt will think so, too?"

"She's incapable of liking anything. I can't think why you married the woman, Nunks."

Sir George was silent. A confused panorama of unsuccessful racing, pressing creditors and a handsome, if domineering woman rose before his mental vision.

"Poor old dear," said Pamela. "I suppose you had to do it. But she does give us both rather hell, doesn't she?"

"Since she's been ill -" began Sir George.

Pamela interrupted him. "She's not ill! Not really. She can always do anything she wants to. Why, while you were up at Assouan she was as merry as a - a cricket. I bet you Miss MacNaughton knows she's a fraud."

"I don't know what we'd do without Miss MacNaughton," said Sir George, with a sigh.

"She's an efficient creature," admitted Pamela. "I don't exactly dote on her as you do, though, Nunks. Oh, you do! Don't contradict. You think she's wonderful. So she is, in a way. But she's a dark horse. I never know what she's thinking. Still, she manages the old cat quite well."

"Look here, Pam, you mustn't speak of your aunt like that. Dash it all, she's very good to you."

"Yes, she pays all our bills, doesn't she? It's the hell of a life, though."

Sir George passed on to a less painful subject. "What are we to do about this fellow who's coming on the trip? Your aunt wants the boat to herself."

"Well, she can't have it," said Pamela coolly. "The man's quite presentable. His name's Parker Pyne. I should think he was a civil servant out of the Records Department - if there is such a thing. Funny thing is, I seem to have heard the name somewhere. Basil!" The secretary had just entered. "Where have I seen the name Parker Pyne?"

"Front page of the 'Times.' Agony Column," replied the young man promptly. "'Are you happy? If not, consult Mr Parker Pyne.'"

"Never! How frightfully amusing! Let's tell him all our troubles all the way to Cairo."

"I haven't any," said Basil West simply. "We're going to glide down the golden Nile, and see temples -" he looked quickly at Sir George, who had picked up a paper - "together."

The last word was only just breathed, but Pamela caught it. Her eyes met his.

"You're right, Basil," she said lightly. "It's good to be alive."

Sir George got up and went out. Pamela's face clouded over.

"What's the matter, my sweet?"

"My detested aunt-by-marriage -"

"Don't worry," said Basil quickly. "What does it matter what she gets in her head? Don't contradict her. You see," he laughed, "it's good camouflage."

The benevolent figure of Mr Parker Pyne entered the lounge. Behind him came the picturesque figure of Mohammed, prepared to say his piece.

"Lady, gentlemans, we start now. In a few minutes we pass temples of Karnak right-hand side. I tell you story now about little boy who went to buy a roasted lamb for his father..."

Mr Parker Pyne mopped his forehead. He had just returned from a visit to the Temple of Dendera. Riding on a donkey was, he felt, an exercise ill suited to his figure. He was proceeding to remove his collar when a note propped up on the dressing table caught his attention. He opened it. It ran as follows:

Dear Sir,

I should be obliged if you would not visit the Temple of Abydos but would remain on the boat, as I wish to consult you.

Yours truly,

Ariadne Grayle

A smile creased Mr Parker Pyne's large, bland face. He reached for a sheet of paper and unscrewed his fountain pen.

Dear Lady Grayle (he wrote),

I am sorry to disappoint you, but I am at present on holiday and am not doing any professional business.

He signed his name and dispatched the letter by a steward. As he completed his change of toilet, another note was brought to him.

Dear Mr Parker Pyne,

I appreciate the fact that you are on holiday, but I am prepared to pay a fee of a hundred pounds for a consultation.

Yours truly,

Ariadne Grayle

Mr Parker Pyne's eyebrows rose. He tapped his teeth thoughtfully with his fountain pen. He wanted to see Abydos, but a hundred pounds was a hundred pounds. And Egypt had been even more wickedly expensive than he had imagined.

Dear Lady Grayle (he wrote),

I shall not visit the Temple of Abydos.

Yours faithfully,

J. Parker Pyne

Mr Parker Pyne's refusal to leave the boat was a source of great grief to Mohammed.

"Very nice temple. All my gentlemans like see that temple. I get you carriage. I get you chair, and sailors carry you."

Mr Parker Pyne refused all these tempting offers. The others set off.

Mr Parker Pyne waited on deck. Presently the door of Lady Grayle's cabin opened and the lady herself trailed out on deck.

"Such a hot afternoon," she observed graciously. "I see you have stayed behind, Mr Pyne. Very wise of you. Shall we have some tea together in the lounge?"

Mr Parker Pyne rose promptly and followed her. It cannot be denied that he was curious.

It seemed as though Lady Grayle felt some difficulty in coming to the point. She fluttered from this subject to that. But finally she spoke in an altered voice.

"Mr Pyne, what I am about to tell you is in the strictest confidence! You do understand that, don't you?"

"Naturally."

She paused, took a deep breath. Mr Parker Pyne waited.

"I want to know whether or not my husband is poisoning me."

Whatever Mr Parker Pyne had expected, it was not this. He showed his astonishment plainly. "That is a very serious accusation to make, Lady Grayle."

"Well, I'm not a fool and I wasn't born yesterday. I've had my suspicions for some time. Whenever George goes away I get better. My food doesn't disagree with me and I feel a different woman. There must be some reason for that."

"What you say is very serious, Lady Grayle. You must remember I am not a detective. I am, if you like to put it that way, a heart specialist -"

She interrupted him. "Eh - and don't you think it worries me, all this? It's not a policeman I want - I can look after myself, thank you - it's certainty I want. I've got to know. I'm not a wicked woman, Mr Pyne. I act fairly by those who act fairly by me. A bargain's a bargain. I've kept my side of it. I've paid my husband's debts and I've not stinted him in money."

Mr Parker Pyne had a fleeting pang of pity for Sir George.

"And as for the girl, she's had clothes and parties and this, that and the other. Common gratitude is all I ask."

"Gratitude is not a thing that can be produced to order, Lady Grayle."

"Nonsense!" said Lady Grayle. She went on. "Well, there it is! Find out the truth for me! Once I know -"

He looked at her curiously. "Once you know, what then, Lady Grayle?"

"That's my business." Her lips closed sharply.

Mr Parker Pyne hesitated a minute, then he said:

"You will excuse me, Lady Grayle, but I have the impression that you are not being entirely frank with me."

"That's absurd. I've told you exactly what I want you to find out."

"Yes, but not the reason why?"

Their eyes met. Hers fell first.

"I should think the reason was self-evident," she said.

"No, because I am in doubt upon one point."

"What is that?"

"Do you want your suspicions proved right or wrong?"

"Really, Mr Pyne!" The lady rose to her feet, quivering with indignation.

Mr Parker Pyne nodded his head gently. "Yes, yes," he said. "But that doesn't answer my question, you know."

"Oh!" Words seemed to fail her. She swept out of the room.

Left alone, Mr Parker Pyne became very thoughtful. He was so deep in his own thoughts that he started perceptibly when someone came in and sat down opposite him. It was Miss MacNaughton.

"Surely you're all back very soon," said Mr Parker Pyne.

"The others aren't back. I said I had a headache and came back alone." She hesitated. "Where is Lady Grayle?"

"I should imagine lying down in her cabin."

"Oh, then that's all right. I don't want her to know I've come back."

"You didn't come back on her account, then?"

Miss MacNaughton shook her head. "No, I came back to see you."

Mr Parker Pyne was surprised. He would have said offhand that Miss MacNaughton was eminently capable of looking after her troubles herself without seeking outside advice. It seemed that he was wrong.

"I've watched you since we all came on board. I think you're a person of wide experience and good judgment. And I want advice very badly."

"And yet - excuse me, Miss MacNaughton - I think you're not the type that usually seeks advice. I should say that you were a person who was quite content to rely on her own judgment."

"Normally, yes. But I am in a very peculiar position." She hesitated a moment. "I do not usually talk about my cases. But in this instance I think it is necessary. Mr Pyne, when I left England with Lady Gray she was a straightforward case. In plain language, there was nothing the matter with her. That's not quite true, perhaps. Too much leisure and too much money do produce a definite pathological condition. Having some floors to scrub every day and five or six children to look after would have made Lady Grayle a perfectly healthy and a much happier woman."

Mr Parker Pyne nodded.

"As a hospital nurse, one sees a lot of these nervous cases. Lady Grayle enjoyed her bad health. It was my part not to minimize her sufferings, to be as tactful as I could - and to enjoy the trip myself as much as possible."

"Very sensible," said Mr Parker Pyne.

"But Mr Pyne, things are not as they were. The suffering that Lady Grayle complains of now is real and not imagined."

"You mean?"

"I have come to suspect that Lady Grayle is being poisoned."

"Since when have you suspected this?"

"For the past three weeks."

"Do you suspect - any particular person?"

Her eyes dropped. For the first time her voice lacked sincerity. "No."

"I put it to you, Miss MacNaughton, that you do suspect one particular person, and that that person is Sir George Grayle."

"Oh, no, no, I can't believe it of him! He is so pathetic, so childlike. He couldn't be a cold-blooded poisoner." Her voice had an anguished note in it.

"And yet you have noticed that whenever Sir George is absent his wife is better, and that her periods of illness correspond with his return."

She did not answer.

"What poison do you suspect? Arsenic?"

"Something of that kind. Arsenic or antimony."

"And what steps have you taken?"

"I have done my utmost to supervise what Lady Grayle eats and drinks."

Mr Parker Pyne nodded. "Do you think Lady Grayle has any suspicion herself?" he asked casually.

"Oh, no, I'm sure she hasn't."

"There you are wrong," said Mr Parker Pyne. "Lady Grayle does suspect."

Miss MacNaughton showed her astonishment.

"Lady Grayle is more capable of keeping a secret than you imagine," said Mr Parker Pyne. "She is a woman who knows how to keep her own counsel very well."

"That surprises me very much," said Miss MacNaughton slowly.

"I should to ask one more question, Miss MacNaughton. Do you think Lady Grayle likes you?"

"I've never thought about it."

They were interrupted. Mohammed came in, his face beaming, his robes flowing behind him.

"Lady, she hear you come back; she ask for you. She say why you not come to her?"

Elsie MacNaughton rose hurriedly. Mr Parker Pyne rose also.

"Would a consultation early tomorrow morning suit you?" he asked.

"Yes, that would be the best time. Lady Grayle sleeps late. In the meantime, I shall be very careful."

"I think Lady Grayle will be careful, too."

Miss MacNaughton disappeared.

Mr Parker Pyne did not see Lady Grayle till just before dinner. She was sitting smoking a cigarette and burning what seemed to be a letter. She took no notice at all of him, by which he gathered that she was still offended.

After dinner he played bridge with Sir George, Pamela and Basil. Everyone seemed a little distrait and the bridge game broke up early.

It was some hours later when Mr Parker Pyne was roused. It was Mohammed who came to him.

"Old lady, she very ill. Nurse, she very frightened. I try get doctor."

Mr Parker Pyne hurried on some clothes. He arrived in the doorway of Lady Grayle's cabin at the same time as Basil West. Sir George and Pamela were inside. Elsie MacNaughton was working desperately over her patient. As Mr Parker Pyne arrived, a final convulsion seized the poor lady. Her arched body writhed and stiffened. Then she fell back on her pillows.

Mr Parker Pyne drew Pamela gently outside.

"How awful!" the girl was half sobbing. "How awful! Is she, is she - ?"

"Dead? Yes, I am afraid it is all over."

He put her into Basil's keeping. Sir George came out of the cabin, looking dazed.

"I never thought she was really ill," he was muttering. "Never thought it for a moment."

Mr Parker Pyne pushed past him and entered the cabin.

Elsie MacNaughton's face was white and drawn.

"They have sent for a doctor?" she asked.

"Yes." Then he said: "Strychnine?"

"Yes. Those convulsions are unmistakable. Oh, I can't believe it!" She sank into a chair, weeping. He patted her shoulder.

Then an idea seemed to strike him. He left the cabin hurriedly and went to the lounge. There was a little scrap of paper left unburnt in an ash tray. Just a few words were distinguishable:



"Now, that's interesting," said Mr Parker Pyne.

Mr Parker Pyne sat in the room of a prominent official. "So that's the evidence," he said.

"Yes, complete. Man must have been a complete idiot."

"I wouldn't call Sir George a brainy man."

The other recapitulated: "Lady Grayle asks for a cup of soup. The nurse makes it for her. Then she asks for a bit of sherry in it. Sir George produces the sherry. Two hours later, Lady Grayle dies with unmistakable signs of strychnine poisoning. A packet of strychnine is found in Sir George's cabin and another packet actually in the pocket of his dinner jacket."

"Very thorough," said Mr Parker Pyne. "Where did the strychnine come from, by the way?"

"There's a little doubt over that. The nurse had some - in case Lady Grayle's heart troubled her - but she's contradicted herself once or twice. First she said her supply was intact, and now she says it isn't."

"Very unlike her not to be sure," was Mr Parker Pyne's comment.

"They were in it together, in my opinion. They've got a weakness for each other, those two."

"Possibly; but if Miss MacNaughton had been planning murder, she'd have done it a good deal better. She's an efficient young woman."

"Well, there it is. In my opinion, Sir George is in for it. He hasn't a dog's chance."

"Well, well," said Mr Parker Pyne, "I must see what I can do."

He sought out the pretty niece.

Pamela was white and indignant. "Nunks never did such a thing - never - never - never!"

"Then who did?" said Mr Parker Pyne placidly.

Pamela came nearer. "Do you know what I think? She did it herself. She's been frightfully queer lately. She used to imagine things."

"What things?"

"Queer things. Basil, for instance. She was always hinting that Basil was in love with her. And Basil and I are - we are -"

"I realize that," said Mr Parker Pyne, smiling.

"All that about Basil was pure imagination. I think she had a down on poor little Nunks, and I think she made up that story and told it to you, and then put the strychnine in his cabin and in his pocket and poisoned herself. People have done things like that, haven't they?"

"They have," admitted Mr Parker Pyne. "But I don't think that Lady Grayle did. She wasn't, if you'll allow me to say so, the type."

"But the delusions?"

"Yes, I'd like to ask Mr West about that."

He found the young man in his room. Basil answered his questions readily enough.

"I don't want to sound fatuous, but she took a fancy to me. That's why I daren't let her know about me and Pamela. She'd have had Sir George fire me."

"You think Miss Grayle's theory a likely one?"

"Well, it's possible, I suppose." The young man was doubtful.

"But not good enough," said Mr Parker Pyne quietly. "No, we must find something better." He became lost in meditation for a minute or two. "A confession would be best," he said briskly. He unscrewed his fountain pen and produced a sheet of paper. "Just write it out, will you?"

Basil West stared at him in amazement. "Me? What on earth do you mean?"

"My dear young man -" Mr Parker Pyne sounded almost paternal - "I know all about it. How you made love to the good lady. How she had scruples. How you fell in love with the pretty, penniless niece. How you arranged your plot. Slow poisoning. It might pass for natural death from gastroenteritis - if not, it would be laid to Sir George's doing, since you were careful to let the attacks coincide with his presence.

"Then your discovery that the lady was suspicious and had talked to me about the matter. Quick action! You abstracted some strychnine from Miss MacNaughton's store. Planted some of it in Sir George's cabin, and some in his pocket and put sufficient into a cachet which you enclosed with a note to the lady, telling her it was a 'cachet of dreams.'

"A romantic idea. She'd take it as soon as the nurse had left her, and no one would know anything about it. But you made one mistake, my young man. It is useless asking a lady to burn letters. They never do. I've got all that pretty correspondence, including the one about the cachet."

Basil West had turned green. All his good looks had vanished. He looked like a trapped rat.

"Damn you!" he snarled. "So you know all about it. You damned interfering Nosey Parker."

Mr Parker Pyne was saved from physical violence by the appearance of the witnesses he had thoughtfully arranged to have listening outside the half-closed door.

Mr Parker Pyne was again discussing the case with his friend the high official.

"And I hadn't a shred of evidence! Only an almost indecipherable fragment, with 'Burn this!' on it. I deduced the whole story and tried it on him. It worked. I'd stumbled on the truth. The letters did it. Lady Grayle had burned every scrap he wrote, but he didn't know that.

"She was really a very unusual woman. I was puzzled when she came to me. What she wanted was for me to tell her that her husband was poisoning her. In that case, she meant to go off with young West. But she wanted to act fairly. Curious character."

"That poor little girl is going to suffer," said the other.

"She'll get over it," said Mr Parker Pyne callously. "She's young. I'm anxious that Sir George should get a little enjoyment before it's too late. He's been treated like a worm for ten years. Now, Elsie MacNaughton will be very kind to him."

He beamed. Then he sighed. "I am thinking of going incognito to Greece. I really must have a holiday!"

THE ORACLE AT DELPHI

Mrs Willard J. Peters did not really care for Greece. And of Delphi she had, in her secret heart, no opinion at all.

Mrs Peters' spiritual homes were Paris, London and the Riviera. She was a woman who enjoyed hotel life, but her idea of a hotel bedroom was a soft-pile carpet, a luxurious bed, a profusion of different arrangements of electric light, including a shaded bedside lamp, plenty of hot and cold water and a telephone beside the bed, by means of which you could order tea, meals, mineral waters, cocktails and speak to your friends.

In the hotel at Delphi there were none of these things. There was a marvelous view from the windows, the bed was clean and so was the whitewashed room. There was a chair, a washstand and a chest of drawers. Baths took place by arrangement and were occasionally disappointing as regarded hot water.

It would, she supposed, be nice to say that you had been to Delphi, and Mrs Peters had tried hard to take an interest in Ancient Greece, but she found it difficult.

Their statuary seemed so unfinished; so lacking in heads and arms and legs. Secretly, she much preferred the handsome marble angel complete with wings which was erected on the late Mr Willard Peters' tomb. But all these secret opinions she kept carefully to herself, for fear her son Willard should despise her. It was for

Willard's sake that she was here, in this chilly and uncomfortable room, with a sulky maid and a disgusted chauffeur in the offing.

For Willard (until recently called Junior - a title which he hated) was Mrs Peters' eighteen-year-old son, and she worshiped him to distraction. It was Willard who had this strange passion for bygone art. It was Willard, thin, pale, spectacled and dyspeptic, who had dragged his adoring mother on this tour through Greece.

They had been to Olympia, which Mrs Peters thought a sad mess. She had enjoyed the Parthenon, but she considered Athens a hopeless city. And a visit to Corinth and Mycenae had been agony to both her and the chauffeur.

Delphi, Mrs Peters thought unhappily, was the last straw. Absolutely nothing to do but walk along the road and look at the ruins. Willard spent long hours on his knees deciphering Greek inscriptions, saying, "Mother, just listen to this! Isn't it splendid?" And he would then read out something that seemed to Mrs Peters the quintessence of dullness.

This morning Willard had started early to see some Byzantine mosaics. Mrs Peters, feeling instinctively that Byzantine mosaics would leave her cold (in the literal as well as the spiritual sense), had excused herself.

"I understand, Mother," Willard had said. "You want to be alone just to sit in the theater or up in the Stadium and look down over it all and let it sink in."

"That's right, pet," said Mrs Peters.

"I knew this place would get you," said Willard exultantly, and departed.

Now, with a sigh, Mrs Peters prepared to rise and breakfast.

She came into the dining room to find it empty save for four people. A mother and daughter, dressed in what seemed to Mrs Peters a most peculiar style (not recognizing the peplum as such), who were discoursing on the art of self-expression in dancing; a plump, middle-aged gentleman who had rescued a suitcase for her when she got off the train and whose name was Thompson; and a newcomer, a middle-aged gentleman with a bald head who had arrived on the preceding evening.

This personage was the last left in the breakfast room, and Mrs Peters soon fell into conversation with him. She was a friendly woman and liked someone to talk to. Mr Thompson had been distinctly discouraging in manner (British reserve, Mrs Peters called it), and the mother and daughter had been very superior and high-brow, though the girl had got on rather well with Willard.

Mrs Peters found the newcomer a very pleasant person. He was informative without being highbrow. He told her several interesting, friendly little details about the Greeks, which made her feel much more as though they were real people and not just tiresome history out of a book.

Mrs Peters told her new friend all about Willard and what a clever boy he was, and how Culture might be said to be his middle name. There was something about this benevolent and bland personage which made him easy to talk to.

What he himself did and what his name was, Mrs Peters did not learn. Beyond the fact that he had been traveling and that he was having a complete rest from business (what business?) he was not communicative about himself.

Altogether, the day passed more quickly than might have been anticipated. The mother and daughter and Mr Thompson continued to be unsociable. They encountered the latter coming out of the museum, and he immediately turned in the opposite direction.

Mrs Peters' new friend looked after him with a little frown.

"Now, I wonder who that fellow is!" he said.

Mrs Peters supplied him with the other's name, but could do no more.

"Thompson - Thompson. No, I don't think I've met him before, and yet somehow or other his face seems familiar. But I can't place him."

In the afternoon Mrs Peters enjoyed a quiet nap in a shady spot. The book she took with her to read was not the excellent one on Grecian Art recommended to her by her son, but was, on the contrary, entitled "The River Launch Mystery." It had four murders

in it, three abductions, and a large and varied gang of dangerous criminals. Mrs Peters found herself both invigorated and soothed by the perusal of it.

It was four o'clock when she returned to the hotel. Willard, she felt sure, would be back by this time. So far was she from any presentiment of evil that she almost forgot to open a note which the proprietor said had been left for her by a strange man during the afternoon.

It was an extremely dirty note. Idly she ripped it open. As she read the first few lines, her face blanched and she put out a hand to steady herself. The handwriting was foreign but the language employed was English.

Lady (it began):

This to hand to inform you that your son is being held captive by us in place of great security. No harm shall happen to honored young gentleman if you obey orders of yours truly. We demand for him ransom of ten thousand English pounds sterling. If you speak of this to hotel proprietor or police or any such person your son will be killed. This is given you to reflect. Tomorrow directions in way of paying money will be given. If not obeyed the honored young gentleman's ears will be cut off and sent you. And following day if still not obeyed he will be killed. Again this is not idle threat. Let the Kyria reflect and - above all - be silent.

Demetrius the Black Browed

It were idle to describe the poor lady's state of mind Preposterous and childishly worded as the demand was, it yet brought home to her a grim atmosphere of peril. Willard, her boy, her pet, her delicate, serious Willard.

She would go at once to the police; she would rouse the neighborhood. But perhaps, if she did... She shivered.

Then, rousing herself, she went out of her room in search of the hotel proprietor - the sole person in the hotel who could speak English.

"It is getting late," she said. "My son has not returned yet."

The pleasant little man beamed at her. "True. Monsieur dismissed the mules. He wished to return on foot. He should have been here by now, but doubtless he has lingered on the way." He smiled happily.

"Tell me," said Mrs Peters abruptly, "have you any bad characters in the neighborhood?"

Bad characters was a term not embraced by the little man's knowledge of English. Mrs Peters made her meaning plainer. She

received in reply an assurance that all around Delphi were very good, very quiet people - all well disposed towards foreigners.

Words trembled on her lips, but she forced them back. That sinister threat tied her tongue. It might be the merest bluff. But suppose it wasn't? A friend of hers in America had had a child kidnaped, and on her informing the police, the child had been killed. Such things did happen.

She was nearly frantic. What was she to do? Ten thousand pounds - what was that? - between forty or fifty thousand dollars! What was that to her in comparison with Willard's safety? But how could she obtain such a sum? There were endless difficulties just now as regarded money and the drawing of cash. A letter of credit for a few hundred pounds was all she had with her.

Would the bandits understand this? Would they be reasonable? Would they wait?

When her maid came to her, she dismissed the girl fiercely. A bell sounded for dinner, and the poor lady was driven to the dining room. She ate mechanically. She saw no one. The room might have been empty as far as she was concerned.

With the arrival of fruit, a note was placed before her. She winced, but the handwriting was entirely different from that which she had feared to see - a neat, clerkly English hand. She opened it without much interest, but she found its contents intriguing:

At Delphi you can no longer consult the Oracle (so it ran), but you can consult Mr Parker Pyne.

Below that was a cutting of an advertisement pinned to the paper, and at the bottom of the sheet a passport photograph was attached. It was the photograph of her bald-headed friend of the morning.

Mrs Peters read the printed cutting twice.

'Are you happy? If not, consult Mr Parker Pyne.'

Happy? Happy? Had anyone ever been so unhappy? It was like an answer to prayer.

Hastily she scribbled on a loose sheet of paper she happened to have in her bag:

Please help me. Will you meet me outside the hotel in ten minutes?

She enclosed it in an envelope and directed the waiter to take it to the gentleman at the table by the window. Ten minutes later, enveloped in a fur coat, for the night was chilly, Mrs Peters went out of the hotel and strolled slowly along the road to the ruins. Mr Parker Pyne was waiting for her.

"It's just the mercy of heaven you're here," said Mrs Peters breathlessly. "But how did you guess the terrible trouble I'm in? That's what I want to know."

"The human countenance, my dear madam," said Mr Parker Pyne gently. "I knew at once that something had happened, but what it is I am waiting for you to tell me."

Out it came in a flood. She handed him the letter which he read by the light of his pocket torch.

"H'm," he said. "A remarkable document. A most remarkable document. It has certain points -"

But Mrs Peters was in no mood to listen to a discussion of the finer points of the letter. What was she to do about Willard? Her own dear, delicate Willard.

Mr Parker Pyne was soothing. He painted an attractive picture of Greek bandit life. They would be especially careful of their captive, since he represented a potential gold mine. Gradually he calmed her down.

"But what am I to do?" wailed Mrs Peters.

"Wait till tomorrow," said Mr Parker Pyne. "That is, unless you prefer to go straight to the police."

Mrs Peters interrupted him with a shriek of terror. Her darling Willard would be murdered out of hand!

"You think I'll get Willard back safe and sound?"

"There is no doubt of that," said Mr Parker Pyne soothingly. "The only question is whether you can get him back without paying ten thousand pounds."

"All I want is my boy."

"Yes, yes," said Mr Parker Pyne soothingly. "Who brought the letter, by the way?"

"A man the landlord didn't know. A stranger."

"Ah! There are possibilities there. The man who brings the letter tomorrow might be followed. What are you telling the people at the hotel about your son's absence?"

"I haven't thought."

"I wonder, now." Mr Parker Pyne reflected. "I think you might quite naturally express alarm and concern at his absence. A search party could be sent out."

"You don't think these fiends -?" She choked.

"No, no. So long as there is no word of the kidnaping or the ransom, they cannot turn nasty. After all, you can't be expected to take your son's disappearance with no fuss at all."

"Can I leave it all to you?"

"That is my business," said Mr Parker Pyne.

They started back towards the hotel again but almost ran into a burly figure.

"Who was that?" asked Mr Parker Pyne sharply.

"I think it was Mr Thompson."

"Oh!" said Mr Parker Pyne thoughtfully. "Thompson, was it? Thompson - h'm."

Mrs Peters felt as she went to bed that Mr Parker Pyne's idea about the letter was a good one. Whoever brought it must be in touch with the bandits. She felt consoled, and fell asleep much sooner than she could ever have believed possible.

When she was dressing on the following morning, she suddenly noticed something lying on the floor by the window. She picked it up - and her heart missed a beat. The same dirty, cheap envelope; the same hateful characters. She tore it open.

Good morning, lady. Have you made reflections? Your son is well and unharmed - so far. But we must have the money. It may not be easy for you to get this sum, but it has been told us that you have with you a necklace of diamonds. Very fine stones. We will be

satisfied with that, instead. Listen, this is what you must do. You, or anyone you choose to send must take this necklace and bring it to the Stadium. From there go up to where there is a tree by a big rock. Eyes will watch and see that only one person comes. Then your son will be exchanged for necklace. The time must be tomorrow six o'clock in morning just after sunrise. If you put police on us afterwards we shoot your son as your car drives to station.

This is our last word, lady. If no necklace tomorrow morning your son's ears sent you. Next day he die.

With salutations, lady,

Demetrius

Mrs Peters hurried to find Mr Parker Pyne. He read the letter attentively.

"Is this true," he asked, "about a diamond necklace?"

"Absolutely. A hundred thousand dollars, my husband paid for it."

"Our well-informed thieves," murmured Mr Parker Pyne.

"What's that you say?"

"I was just considering certain aspects of the affair."

"My word, Mr Pyne, we haven't got time for aspects, I've got to get my boy back."

"But you are a woman of spirit, Mrs Peters. Do you enjoy being bullied and cheated out of ten thousand pounds? Do you enjoy giving up your diamonds meekly to a set of ruffians?"

"Well, of course, if you put it like that!" The woman of spirit in Mrs Peters wrestled with the mother. "How I'd like to get even with them - the cowardly brutes! The very minute I get my boy back, Mr Pyne, I shall set the whole police of the neighborhood on them. And if necessary I shall hire an armored car to take Willard and myself to the railway station!" Mrs Peters was flushed and vindictive.

"Ye-es," said Mr Parker Pyne. "You see, my dear madam, I'm afraid they will be prepared for that move on your part. They know that once Willard is restored to you nothing will keep you from setting the whole neighborhood on the alert. Which leads one to suppose that they have prepared for that move."

"Well, what do you want to do?"

Mr Parker Pyne smiled. "I want to try a little plan of my own." He looked round the dining room. It was empty and the doors at both ends were closed. "Mrs Peters, there is a man I know in Athens - a jeweler. He specializes in good artificial diamonds - first-class stuff." His voice dropped to a whisper. "I'll get him by telephone. He can get here this afternoon, bringing a good selection of stones with him."

"You mean?"

"He'll extract the real diamonds and replace them with paste replicas."

"Why, if that isn't the cutest thing I've ever heard of!" Mrs Peters gazed at him with admiration.

"Sh! Not so loud. Will you do something for me?"

"Surely."

"See that nobody comes within earshot of the telephone."

Mrs Peters nodded.

The telephone was in the manager's office, who vacated it obligingly, after having helped Mr Parker Pyne to obtain the number. When he emerged, he found Mrs Peters outside.

"I'm just waiting for Mr Parker Pyne," she said. "We're going for a walk."

"Oh, yes, Madam."

Mr Thompson was also in the hall. He came towards them and engaged the manager in conversation. Were there any villas to be let in Delphi? No? But surely there was one above the hotel.

"That belongs to a Greek gentleman, Monsieur. He does not let it."

"And there are no other villas?"

"There is one belonging to an American lady. That on the other side of the village. It is shut up now. And there is one belonging to an English gentleman, an artist - that one is on the cliff edge looking down to Itea."

Mrs Peters broke in. Nature had given her a lot of voice and she purposely made it louder. "Why," she said, "I'd just adore to have a villa here! So unspoiled and natural. I'm simply crazy about the place, aren't you, Mr Thompson? But of course you must be if you want a villa. Is it your first visit here? You don't say so."

She ran on determinedly till Mr Parker Pyne emerged from the office. He gave her just the faintest smile of approval.

Mr Thompson walked slowly down the steps and out into the road, where he joined the highbrow mother and daughter, who seemed to be feeling the wind cold on their exposed arms.

All went well. The jeweler arrived just before dinner with a car full of other tourists. Mrs Peters took her necklace to his room. He grunted approval. Then he spoke in French.

"Madame peut reste tranquille. Je reussirai." He extracted some tools from his little bag and began work.

At eleven o'clock, Mr Parker Pyne tapped on Mrs Peters' door. "Here you are!"

He handed her a little chamois bag. She glanced inside.

"My diamonds!"

"Hush. Here is the necklace with the paste replacing the diamonds. Pretty good, don't you think?"

"Simply wonderful."

"Aristopoulos is a clever fellow."

"You don't think they'll suspect?"

"How should they? They know you have the necklace with you. You hand it over. How can they suspect the trick?"

"Well, I think it's wonderful," Mrs Peters reiterated, handing the necklace back to him. "Will you take it to them? Or is that asking too much of you?"

"Certainly I will take it. Just give me the letter, so that I have the directions clear. Thank you. Now, good night and bon courage. Your boy will be with you tomorrow for breakfast."

"Oh, if only that's true!"

"Now, don't worry. Leave everything in my hands."

Mrs Peters did not spend a good night. When she slept, she had terrible dreams. Dreams where armed bandits in armored cars fired off a fusillade at William, who was running down the mountain in his pajamas.

She was thankful to wake. At last came the first glitter of dawn. Mrs Peters got up and dressed. She sat up waiting.

At seven o'clock there came a tap on her door. Her throat was so dry she could hardly speak.

"Come in," she said.

The door opened and Mr Thompson entered. She stared at him. Words failed her. She had a sinister presentiment of disaster. And yet his voice when he spoke was completely natural and matter-of-fact. It was a rich, bland voice.

"Good morning, Mrs Peters," he said.

"How dare you, sir! How dare you -"

"You must excuse my unconventional visit at so early an hour," said Mr Thompson. "But you see, I have a matter of business to transact."

Mrs Peters leaned forward with accusing eyes. "So it was you who kidnaped my boy! It wasn't bandits at all!"

"It certainly wasn't bandits. Most unconvincingly done, that part of it, I thought. Inartistic, to say the least of it."

Mrs Peters was a woman of a single idea. "Where is my boy?" she demanded, with the eyes of an angry tigress.

"As a matter of fact," said Mr Thompson, "he is just outside the door."

"Willard!"

The door was flung open. Willard, sallow and spectacled and distinctly unshaven, was clasped to his mother's heart. Mr Thompson stood looking benignly on.

"All the same," said Mrs Peters, suddenly recovering herself and turning on him, "I'll have the law on you for this. Yes, I will."

"You've got it all wrong, Mother," said Willard. "This gentleman rescued me."

"Where were you?"

"In a house on the cliff point. Just a mile from here."

"And allow me, Mrs Peters," said Mr Thompson, "to restore your property."

He handed her a small packet loosely wrapped in tissue paper. The paper fell away and revealed the diamond necklace.

"You need not treasure that other little bag of stones, Mrs Peters," said Mr Thompson, smiling. "The real stones are still in the necklace. The chamois bag contains some excellent imitation stones. As your friend said, Aristopoulos is quite a genius."

"I just don't understand a word of all this," said Mrs Peters faintly.

"You must look at the case from my point of view," said Mr Thompson. "My attention was caught by the use of a certain name. I took the liberty of following you and your fat friend out of doors and I listened - I admit it frankly - to your exceedingly interesting conversation. I found it remarkably suggestive, so much so that I took the manager into my confidence. He took a note of the number to which your plausible friend telephoned, and he also arranged that a waiter should listen to your conversation in the dining room this morning.

"The whole scheme worked out very clearly. You were being made the victim of a couple of clever jewel thieves. They know all about your diamond necklace; they follow you here; they kidnap your son, and write the rather comic 'bandit' letter, and they arrange that you shall confide in the chief instigator of the plot.

"After that, all is simple. The good gentleman hands you a bag of imitation diamonds and - clears out with his pal. This morning, when your son did not appear, you would be frantic. The absence of your friend would lead you to believe that he had been kidnaped, too. I gather that they had arranged for someone to go to the villa tomorrow. That person would have discovered your son, and by the

time you and he had put your heads together you might have got an inkling of the plot. But by that time the villains would have got an excellent start."

"And now?"

"Oh, now they are safely under lock and key. I arranged for that."

"The villain," said Mrs Peters, wrathfully remembering her own trustful confidences. "The oily, plausible villain."

"Not at all a nice fellow," agreed Mr Thompson.

"It beats me how you got on to it," said Willard admiringly. "Pretty smart of you."

The other shook his head deprecatingly. "No, no," he said. "When you are traveling incognito and hear your own name being taken in vain -"

Mrs Peters stared at him. "Who are you?" she demanded abruptly.

"I am Mr Parker Pyne, " explained that gentleman.

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Swan Song

THE LISTERDALE MYSTERY

Mrs St Vincent was adding up figures. Once or twice she sighed, and her hand stole to her aching forehead. She had always disliked arithmetic. It was unfortunate that nowadays her life should seem to be composed entirely of one particular kind of sum, the ceaseless adding together of small necessary items of expenditure making a total that never failed to surprise and alarm her.

Surely it couldn't come to that! She went back over the figures. She had made a trifling error in the pence, but otherwise the figures were correct.

Mrs St Vincent sighed again. Her headache by now was very bad indeed. She looked up as the door opened and her daughter Barbara came into the room. Barbara St Vincent was a very pretty girl; she had her mother's delicate features, and the same proud turn of the head, but her eyes were dark instead of blue, and she had a different mouth, a sulky red mouth not without attraction.

"Oh, Mother!" she cried. "Still juggling with those horrid old accounts? Throw them all into the fire."

"We must know where we are," said Mrs St Vincent uncertainly.

The girl shrugged her shoulders.

"We're always in the same boat," she said dryly. "Damned hard up. Down to the last penny as usual."

Mrs St Vincent sighed.

"I wish -" she began, and then stopped.

"I must find something to do," said Barbara in hard tones. "And find it quickly. After all, I have taken that shorthand and typing course. So have about one million other girls from all I can see! 'What experience?' 'None, but -' 'Oh! Thank you, good morning.

We'll let you know.' But they never do! I must find some other kind of a job - any job."

"Not yet, dear," pleaded her mother. "Wait a little longer."

Barbara went to the window and stood looking out with unseeing eyes that took no note of the dingy line of houses opposite.

"Sometimes," she said slowly, "I'm sorry Cousin Amy took me with her to Egypt last winter. Oh! I know I had fun - about the only fun I've ever had or am likely to have in my life. I did enjoy myself - enjoyed myself thoroughly. But it was very unsettling. I mean - coming back to this."

She swept a hand round the room. Mrs St Vincent followed it with her eyes and winced. The room was typical of cheap furnished lodgings. A dusty aspidistra, showily ornamental furniture, a gaudy wallpaper faded in patches. There were signs that the personality of the tenants had struggled with that of the landlady; one or two pieces of good china, much cracked and mended, so that their saleable value was nil, a piece of embroidery thrown over the back of the sofa, a water colour sketch of a young girl in the fashion of twenty years ago, near enough still to Mrs St Vincent not to be mistaken.

"It wouldn't matter," continued Barbara, "if we'd never known anything else. But to think of Ansteys -"

She broke off, not trusting herself to speak of that dearly loved home which had belonged to the St Vincent family for centuries and which was now in the hands of strangers.

"If only Father - hadn't speculated - and borrowed -"

"My dear," said Mrs St Vincent. "Your father was never, in any sense of the word, a businessman."

She said it with a graceful kind of finality, and Barbara came over and gave her an aimless sort of kiss as she murmured, "Poor old Mums. I won't say anything."

Mrs St Vincent took up her pen again and bent over her desk. Barbara went back to the window. Presently the girl said:

"Mother. I heard from - from Jim Masterton this morning. He wants to come and see me."

Mrs St Vincent laid down her pen and looked up sharply.

"Here?" she exclaimed.

"Well, we can't ask him to dinner at the Ritz very well," sneered Barbara.

Her mother looked unhappy. Again she looked round the room with innate distaste.

"You're right," said Barbara. "It's a disgusting place. Genteel poverty! Sounds all right - a whitewashed cottage in the country, shabby chintzes of good design, bowls of roses, crown Derby tea service that you wash up yourself. That's what it's like in books. In real life, with a son starting on the bottom rung of office life, it means London. Frowsy landladies, dirty children on the stairs, haddocks for breakfasts that aren't quite - quite and so on."

"If only -" began Mrs St Vincent. "But, really, I'm beginning to be afraid we can't afford even this room much longer."

"That means a bed-sitting-room - horror! - for you and me," said Barbara. "And a cupboard under the tiles for Rupert. And when Jim comes to call, I'll receive him in that dreadful room downstairs with tabbies all round the walls knitting, and stating at us, and coughing that dreadful kind of gulping cough they have!"

There was a pause.

"Barbara," said Mrs St Vincent at last. "Do you - I mean - would you -?"

She stopped, flushing a little.

"You needn't be delicate, Mother," said Barbara. "Nobody is nowadays. Marry him, I suppose you mean? I would like a shot if he asked me. But I'm so awfully afraid he won't."

"Oh! Barbara, dear."

"Well, it's one thing seeing me out there with Cousin Amy, moving (as they say in novelettes) in the best society. He did take a fancy to me. Now he'll come here and see me in this! And he's a funny creature, you know, fastidious and old-fashioned. I - I rather like him for that. It reminds me of Ansteys and the village - everything a hundred years behind the times, but so - so - oh! I don't know - so fragrant. Like lavender!"

She laughed, half-ashamed of her eagerness. Mrs Vincent spoke with a kind of earnest simplicity.

"I should like you to marry Jim Masterton," she said. "He is - one of us. He is very well off, also, but that I don't mind about so much."

"I do," said Barbara. "I'm sick of being hard up."

"But, Barbara, it isn't -"

"Only for that? No. I do really. I - oh! Mother, can't you see I do?"

Mrs St Vincent looked very unhappy.

"I wish he could see you in your proper setting, darling," she said wistfully.

"Oh, well!" said Barbara. "Why worry? We might as well try and be cheerful about things. Sorry I've had such a grouch. Cheer up, darling."

She bent over her mother, kissed her forehead lightly, and went out. Mrs St Vincent, relinquishing all attempts at finance, sat down on the uncomfortable sofa. Her thoughts ran round in circles like squirrels in a cage.

"One may say what one likes, appearances do put a man off. Not later - not if they were really engaged. He'd know then what a sweet, dear girl she is. But it's so easy for young people to take the tone of their surroundings. Rupert, now, he's quite different from what he used to be. Not that I want my children to be stuck-up. That's not it a bit. But I should hate it if Rupert got engaged to that dreadful girl in the tobacconist's. I daresay she may be a very nice girl, really. But she's not our kind. It's all so difficult. Poor little Babs. If I could do anything - anything. But where's the money to come from? We've sold everything to give Rupert his start. We really can't even afford this."

To distract herself Mrs St Vincent picked up the Morning Post and glanced down the advertisements on the front page. Most of them she knew by heart. People who wanted capital, people who had capital and were anxious to dispose of it on note of hand alone, people who wanted to buy teeth (she always wondered why), people who wanted to sell furs and gowns and who had optimistic ideas on the subject of price.

Suddenly she stiffened to attention. Again and again she read the printed words.

"To gentlepeople only. Small house in Westminster, exquisitely furnished, offered to those who would really care for it. Rent purely nominal. No agents."

A very ordinary advertisement. She had read many the same or - well, nearly the same. Nominal rent, that was where the trap lay.

Yet, since she was restless and anxious to escape from her thoughts, she put on her hat straightaway and took a convenient bus to the address given in the advertisement.

It proved to be that of a firm of house agents. Not a new bustling firm - a rather decrepit, old-fashioned place. Rather timidly she produced the advertisement, which she had torn out, and asked for particulars.

The white-haired old gentleman who was attending to her stroked his chin thoughtfully.

"Perfectly. Yes, perfectly, madam. That house, the house mentioned in the advertisement, is No. 7 Cheviot Place. You would like an order?"

"I should like to know the rent first?" said Mrs St Vincent.

"Ah! The rent. The exact figure is not settled, but I can assure you that it is purely nominal."

"Ideas of what is purely nominal can vary," said Mrs St Vincent.

The old gentleman permitted himself to chuckle a little.

"Yes, that's an old trick - an old trick. But you can take my word for it, it isn't so in this case. Two or three guineas a week, perhaps, not more."

Mrs St Vincent decided to have the order. Not, of course, that there was any real likelihood of her being able to afford the place. But, after all, she might just see it. There must be some grave disadvantage attaching to it, to be offered at such a price.

But her heart gave a little throb as she looked up at the outside of 7 Cheviot Place. A gem of a house. Queen Anne, and in perfect condition! A butler answered the door. He had grey hair and little side whiskers, and the meditative calm of an archbishop. A kindly archbishop, Mrs St Vincent thought.

He accepted the order with a benevolent air.

"Certainly, madam, I will show you over. The house is ready for occupation."

He went before her, opening doors, announcing rooms.

"The drawing room, the white study, a powder closet through here, madam."

It was perfect - a dream. The furniture all of the period, each piece with signs of wear, but polished with loving care. The loose rugs were of beautiful dim old colours. In each room were bowls of

fresh flowers. The back of the house looked over the Green Park. The whole place radiated an old-world charm.

The tears came into Mrs St Vincent's eyes, and she fought them back with difficulty. So had Ansteys looked - Ansteys...

She wondered whether the butler had noticed her emotion. If so, he was too much the perfectly trained servant to show it. She liked these old servants, one felt safe with them, at ease. They were like friends.

"It is a beautiful house," she said softly. "Very beautiful. I am glad to have seen it."

"Is it for yourself alone, madam?"

"For myself and my son and daughter. But I'm afraid -"

She broke off. she wanted it so dreadfully - so dreadfully.

She felt instinctively that the butler understood. He did not look at her, as he said in a detached, impersonal way:

"I happen to be aware, madam, that the owner requires above all suitable tenants. The rent is of no importance to him. He wants the house to be tenanted by someone who will really care for and appreciate it."

"I should appreciate it," said Mrs St Vincent in a low voice.

She turned to go.

"Thank you for showing me over," she said courteously.

"Not at all, madam."

He stood in the doorway, very correct and upright as she walked away down the street. She thought to herself: "He knows. He's sorry for me. He's one of the old lot too. He'd like me to have it - not a labour member, or a button manufacturer! We're dying out, our sort, but we hang together."

In the end she decided not to go back to the agents. What was the good? She could afford the rent - but there were servants to be considered. There would have to be servants in a house like that.

The next morning a letter lay by her plate. It was from the house agents. It offered her the tenancy of 7 Cheviot Place for six months at two guineas a week, and went on: "You have, I presume, taken into consideration the fact that the servants are remaining at the landlord's expense? It is really a unique offer."

It was. So startled was she by it, that she read the letter out. A fire of questions followed and she described her visit of yesterday.

"Secretive little Mums!" cried Barbara. "Is it really so lovely?"

Rupert cleared his throat and began a judicial cross-questioning.

"There's something behind all this. It's fishy, if you ask me. Decidedly fishy."

"So's my egg," said Barbara, wrinkling her nose. "Ugh! Why should there be something behind it? That's just like you, Rupert, always making mysteries out of nothing. It's those dreadful detective stories you're always reading."

"The rent's a joke," said Rupert. "In the city," he added importantly, "one gets wise to all sorts of queer things. I tell you, there's something very fishy about this business."

"Nonsense," said Barbara. "House belongs to a man with lots of money, he's fond of it, and he wants it lived in by decent people while he's away. Something of that kind. Money's probably no object to him."

"What did you say the address was?" asked Rupert of his mother.

"Seven Cheviot Place."

"Whew!" He pushed back his chair. "I say, this is exciting. That's the house Lord Listerdale disappeared from."

"Are you sure?" asked Mrs St Vincent doubtfully.

"Positive. He's got a lot of other houses all over London, but this is the one he lived in. He walked out of it one evening saying he was going to his club, and nobody ever saw him again. Supposed to have done a bunk to East Africa or somewhere like that, but

nobody knows why. Depend upon it, he was murdered in hat house. You say there's a lot of panelling?"

"Ye-es," said Mrs St Vincent faintly; "but -"

Rupert gave her no time. He went on with immense enthusiasm.

"Panelling! There you are. Sure to be a secret recess somewhere. Body's been stuffed in there and has been there ever since. Perhaps it was embalmed first."

"Rupert, dear, don't talk nonsense," said his mother.

"Don't be a double-dyed idiot," said Barbara. "You've been taking that peroxide blonde to the pictures too much."

Rupert rose with dignity - such dignity as his lanky and awkward age allowed, and delivered a final ultimatum.

"You take that house, Mums. I'll ferret out the mystery. You see if I don't."

Rupert departed hurriedly, in fear of being late at the office.

The eyes of the two women met.

"Could we, Mother?" murmured Barbara tremulously. "Oh! If we could."

"The servants," said Mrs St Vincent pathetically, "would eat, you know. I mean, of course, one would want them to - but that's the drawback. One can so easily - just do without things - when it's only oneself."

She looked piteously at Barbara, and the girl nodded.

"We must think it over," said the mother.

But in reality her mind was made up. She had seen the sparkle in the girl's eyes. She thought to herself: "Jim Masterton must see her in proper surroundings. This is a chance - a wonderful chance. I must take it."

She sat down and wrote to the agents accepting their offer.

II

"Quentin, where did the lilies come from? I really can't buy expensive flowers."

"They were sent up from King's Cheviot, madam. It has always been the custom here."

The butler withdrew. Mrs St Vincent heaved a sigh of relief. What would she do without Quentin? He made everything so easy. She

thought to herself: "It's too good to last. I shall wake up soon, I know I shall, and find it's been all a dream. I'm so happy here - two months already, and it's passed like a flash."

Life indeed had been astonishingly pleasant. Quentin, the butler, had displayed himself the autocrat of 7 Cheviot Place. "If you will leave everything to me, madam," he had said respectfully. "You will find it the best way."

Each week, he brought her the housekeeping books, their totals astonishingly low. There were only two other servants, a cook and a housemaid. They were pleasant in manner, and efficient in their duties, but it was Quentin who ran the house. Game and poultry appeared on the table sometimes, causing Mrs St Vincent solicitude. Quentin reassured her. Sent up from Lord Listerdale's country seat, King's Cheviot, or from his Yorkshire moor. "It has always been the custom, madam."

Privately Mrs St Vincent doubted whether the absent Lord Listerdale would agree with those words. She was inclined to suspect Quentin of usurping his master's authority. It was clear that he had taken a fancy to them, and that in his eyes nothing was too good for them.

Her curiosity aroused by Rupert's declaration, Mrs St Vincent had made a tentative reference to Lord Listerdale when she next interviewed the house agents. The white-haired old gentleman had responded immediately.

Yes, Lord Listerdale was in East Africa, had been there for the last eighteen months.

"Our client is rather an eccentric man," he had said, smiling broadly. "He left London in a most unconventional manner, as you may perhaps remember? Not a word to anyone. The newspapers got hold of it. There were actually inquiries on foot at Scotland Yard. Luckily, news was received from Lord Listerdale himself from East Africa. He invested his cousin, Colonel Carfax, with power of attorney. It is the latter who conducts all Lord Listerdale's affairs. Yes, rather eccentric, I fear. He has always been a great traveller in the wilds - it is quite on the cards that he may not return for years to England, though he is getting on in years."

"Surely lie is not so very old," said Mrs St Vincent, with a sudden memory of a bluff, bearded face, rather like an Elizabethan sailor, which she had once noticed in an illustrated magazine.

"Middle-aged," said the white-haired gentleman. "Fifty-three, according to Debrett."

This conversation Mrs St Vincent had retailed to Rupert with the intention of rebuking that young gentleman.

Rupert, however, was undismayed.

"It looks fishier than ever to me," he had declared. "Who's this Colonel Carfax? Probably comes into the title if anything happens to Listerdale. The letter from East Africa was probably forged. In

three years, or whatever it is, this Carfax will presume death, and take the title. Meantime, he's got all the handling of the estate. Very fishy, I call it."

He had condescended graciously to approve the house. In his leisure moments he was inclined to tap the panelling and make elaborate measurements for the possible location of a secret room, but little by little his interest in the mystery of Lord Listerdale abated. He was also less enthusiastic on the subject of the tobacconist's daughter. Atmosphere tells.

To Barbara the house had brought great satisfaction. Jim Masterton had come home, and was a frequent visitor. He and Mrs St Vincent got on splendidly together, and he said something to Barbara one day that startled her.

"This house is a wonderful setting for your mother, you know."

"For Mother?"

"Yes. It was made for her! She belongs to it in an extraordinary way. You know there's something queer about this house altogether, something uncanny and haunting."

"Don't get like Rupert," Barbara implored him. "He is convinced that the wicked Colonel Carfax murdered Lord Listerdale and hid his body under the floor."

Masterton laughed.

"I admire Rupert's detective zeal. No, I didn't mean anything of that kind. But there's something in the air, some atmosphere that one doesn't quite understand."

They had been three months in Cheviot Place when Barbara came to her mother with a radiant face.

"Jim and I - we're engaged. Yes - last night. Oh, Mother! It all seems like a fairy tale come true."

"Oh, my dear! I'm so glad - so glad."

Mother and daughter clasped each other close.

"You know Jim's almost as much in love with you as he is with me," said Barbara at last, with a mischievous laugh.

Mrs St Vincent blushed very prettily.

"He is," persisted the girl. "You thought this house would make such a beautiful setting for me, and all the time it's really a setting for you. Rupert and I don't quite belong here. You do."

"Don't talk nonsense, darling."

"It's not nonsense. There's a flavour of enchanted castle about it, with you as an enchanted princess and Quentin as - as - oh! - a benevolent magician."

Mrs St Vincent laughed and admitted the last item.

Rupert received the news of his sister's engagement very calmly.

"I thought there was something of the kind in the wind," he observed sapiently.

He and his mother were dining alone together. Barbara was out with Jim.

Quentin placed the port in front of him and withdrew noiselessly.

"That's a rum old bird," said Rupert, nodding towards the closed door. "There's something odd about him, you know, something -"

"Not fishy?" interrupted Mrs St Vincent, with a faint smile.

"Why, Mother, how did you know what I was going to say?" demanded Rupert in all seriousness.

"It's rather a word of yours, darling. You think everything is fishy. I suppose you have an idea that it was Quentin who did away with Lord Listerdale and put him under the floor?"

"Behind the panelling," corrected Rupert. "You always get things a little bit wrong, Mother. No, I've inquired about that. Quentin was down at King's Cheviot at the time."

Mrs St Vincent smiled at him, as she rose from the table and went up to the drawing room. In some ways Rupert was a long time growing up.

Yet a sudden wonder swept over her for the first time as to Lord Listerdale's reasons for leaving England so abruptly. There must be something behind it, to account for that sudden decision. She was still thinking the matter over when Quentin came in with the coffee tray, and she spoke out impulsively.

"You have been with Lord Listerdale a long time, haven't you, Quentin?"

"Yes, madam; since I was a lad of twenty-one. That was in the late lord's time. I started as third footman."

"You must know Lord Listerdale very well. What kind of a man is he?"

The butler turned the tray a little, so that she could help herself to sugar more conveniently, as he replied in even unemotional tones:

"Lord Listerdale was a very selfish gentleman, madam; with no consideration for others."

He removed the tray and bore it from the room. Mrs St Vincent sat with her coffee cup in her hand and a puzzled frown on her face. Something struck her as odd in the speech apart from the views it expressed. In another minute it flashed home to her.

Quentin had used the word "was," not "is." But then, he must think - must believe - She pulled herself up. She was as bad as Rupert!

But a very definite uneasiness assailed her. Afterwards she dated her first suspicions from that moment.

With Barbara's happiness and future assured, she had time to think her own thoughts, and against her will, they began to centre round the mystery of Lord Listerdale. What was the real story? Whatever it was, Quentin knew something about it. Those had been odd words of his - "a very selfish gentleman - no consideration for others." What lay behind them? He had spoken as a judge might speak, detachedly and impartially.

Was Quentin involved in Lord Listerdale's disappearance? Had he taken an active part in any tragedy there might have been? After all, ridiculous as Rupert's assumption had seemed at the time, that single letter with its power of attorney coming from East Africa was - well, open to suspicion.

But try as she would, she could not believe any real evil of Quentin. Quentin, she told herself over and over again, was good - she used the word as simply as a child might have done. Quentin was good. But he knew something!

She never spoke with him again of his master. The subject was apparently forgotten. Rupert and Barbara had other things to think of, and there were no further discussions.

It was towards the end of August that her vague surmises crystallized into realities. Rupert had gone for a fortnight's holiday with a friend who had a motorcycle and trailer. It was some ten

days after his departure that Mrs St Vincent was startled to see him rush into the room where she sat writing.

"Rupert!" she exclaimed.

"I know, Mother. You didn't expect to see me for another three days. But something's happened. Anderson - my pal, you know - didn't much care where he went, so I suggested having a look in at King's Cheviot -"

"King's Cheviot? But why -?"

"You know perfectly well, Mother, that I've always scented something fishy about things here. Well, I had a look at the old place - it's let, you know - nothing there. Not that I actually expected to find anything - I was just nosing round, so to speak."

Yes, she thought, Rupert was very like a dog at this moment. Hunting in circles for something vague and undefined, led by instinct, busy and happy.

"It was when we were passing through a village about eight or nine miles away that it happened - that I saw him, I mean."

"Saw whom?"

"Quentin - just going into a little cottage. Something fishy here, I said to myself, and we stopped the bus, and I went back. I rapped on the door and he himself opened it."

"But I don't understand. Quentin hasn't been away -"

"I'm coming to that, Mother. If you'd only listen and not interrupt. It was Quentin, and it wasn't Quentin, if you know what I mean."

Mrs St Vincent clearly did not know, so he elucidated matters further.

"It was Quentin all right, but it wasn't our Quentin. It was the real man."

"Rupert!"

"You listen. It was taken in myself at first, and said: 'It is Quentin, isn't it?' And the old johnny said: 'Quite right, sir, that is my name. What can I do for you?' And then I saw that it wasn't our man, though it was precious like him, voice and all. I asked a few questions, and it all came out. The old chap hadn't an idea of anything fishy being on. He'd been butler to Lord Listerdale, all right, and was retired on a pension and given this cottage just about the time that Lord Listerdale was supposed to have gone off to Africa. You see where that leads us. This man's an impostor - he's playing the part of Quentin for purposes of his own. My theory is that he came up to town that evening, pretending to be the butler from King's Cheviot, got an interview with Lord Listerdale, killed him and hid his body behind the panelling. It's an old house, there's sure to be a secret recess -"

"Oh, don't let's go into all that again," interrupted Mrs St Vincent wildly. "I can't bear it. Why should he - that's what I want to know -

why? If he did such a thing - which I don't believe for one minute, mind you - what was the reason for it all?"

"You're right," said Rupert. "Motive - that's important. Now I've made inquiries. Lord Listerdale had a lot of house property. In the last two days I've discovered that practically every one of these houses of his have been let in the last eighteen months to people like ourselves for a merely nominal rent - and with the proviso that the servants should remain. And in every case Quentin himself - the man calling himself Quentin, I mean - has been there for part of the time as butler. That looks as though there were something - jewels, or papers - secreted in one of Lord Listerdale's houses, and the gang doesn't know which. I'm assuming a gang, but of course this fellow Quentin may be in it single-handed. There's a -"

Mrs St Vincent interrupted him with a certain amount of determination:

"Rupert! Do stop talking for one minute. You're making my head spin. Anyway, what you are saying is nonsense - about gangs and hidden papers."

"There's another theory," admitted Rupert. "This Quentin may be someone that Lord Listerdale has injured. The real butler told me a long story about a man called Samuel Lowe - an undergardener he was, and about the same height and build as Quentin himself. He'd got a grudge against Listerdale -"

Mrs St Vincent started.

"With no consideration for others." The words came back to her mind in their passionless, measured accents. Inadequate words, but what might they not stand for?

In her absorption she hardly listened to Rupert. He made a rapid explanation of something that she did not take in, and went hurriedly from the room.

Then she woke up. Where had Rupert gone? What was he going to do? She had not caught his last words. Perhaps he was going for the police. In that case -

She rose abruptly and rang the bell. With his usual promptness, Quentin answered it.

"You rang, madam?"

"Yes. Come in, please, and shut the door."

The butler obeyed, and Mrs St Vincent was silent a moment while she studied him with earnest eyes.

She thought: "He's been kind to me - nobody knows how kind. The children wouldn't understand. This wild story of Rupert's may be all nonsense - On the other hand, there may - yes, there may - be something in it. Why should one judge? One can't know. The rights and wrongs of it, I mean... And I'd stake my life - yes, I would! - on his being a good man."

Flushed and tremulous, she spoke.

"Quentin, Mr Rupert has just got back. He has been down to King's Cheviot - to a village near there -"

She stopped, noticing the quick start he was not able to conceal.

"He has - seen someone," she went on in measured accents.

She thought to herself: "There - he's warned. At any rate, he's warned."

After that first quick start, Quentin had resumed his unruffled demeanour, but his eyes were fixed on her face, watchful and keen, with something in them she had not seen there before. They were, for the first time, the eyes of a man and not of a servant.

He hesitated for a minute, then said in a voice which also had subtly changed:

"Why do you tell me this, Mrs St Vincent?"

Before she could answer, the door flew open and Rupert strode into the room. With him was a dignified middle-aged man with little side whiskers and the air of a benevolent archbishop. Quentin!

"Here he is," said Rupert. "The real Quentin. I had him outside in the taxi. Now, Quentin, look at this man and tell me - is he Samuel Lowe?"

It was for Rupert a triumphant moment. But it was short-lived; almost at once he scented something wrong. For while the real Quentin was looking abashed and highly uncomfortable, the second Quentin was smiling a broad smile of undisguised enjoyment.

He slapped his embarrassed duplicate on the back.

"It's all right, Quentin. Got to let the cat out of the bag sometime, I suppose. You can tell 'em who I am."

The dignified stranger drew himself up.

"This, sir," he announced in a reproachful tone, "is my master, Lord Listerdale, sir."

The next minute beheld many things. First, the complete collapse of the cocksure Rupert. Before he knew what was happening, his mouth still open from the shock of the discovery, he found himself being gently manoeuvred towards the door, a friendly voice that was, and yet was not, familiar in his ear.

"It's quite all right, my boy. No bones broken. But I want a word with your mother. Very good work of yours, to ferret me out like this."

He was outside on the landing gazing at the shut door. The real Quentin was standing by his side, a gentle stream of explanation

flowing from his lips. Inside the room Lord Listerdale was fronting Mrs St Vincent.

"Let me explain - if I can! I've been a selfish devil all my life - the fact came home to me one day. I thought I'd try a little altruism for a change, and being a fantastic kind of fool, I started my career fantastically. I'd sent subscriptions to odd things, but I felt the need of doing something - well, something personal. I've been sorry always for the class that can't beg, that must suffer in silence - poor gentlefolk. I have a lot of house property. I conceived the idea of leasing these houses to people who - well, needed and appreciated them. Young couples with their way to make, widows with sons and daughters starting in the world. Quentin has been more than butler to me; he's a friend. With his consent and assistance I borrowed his personality. I've always had a talent for acting. The idea came to me on my way to the club one night, and I went straight off to talk it over with Quentin. When I found they were making a fuss about my disappearance, I arranged that a letter should come from me in East Africa. In it, I gave full instructions to my cousin, Maurice Carfax. And - well, that's the long and short of it."

He broke off rather lamely, with an appealing glance at Mrs St Vincent. She stood very straight, and her eyes met his steadily.

"It was a kind plan," she said. "A very unusual one, and one that does you credit. I am - most grateful. But - of course, you understand that we cannot stay?"

"I expected that," he said. "Your pride won't let you accept what you'd probably style 'charity.'"

"Isn't that what it is?" she asked steadily.

"No," he answered. "Because I ask something in exchange."

"Something?"

"Everything." His voice rang out, the voice of one accustomed to dominate.

"When I was twenty-three," he went on, "I married the girl I loved. She died a year later. Since then I have been very lonely. I have wished very much I could find a certain lady - the lady of my dreams..."

"Am I that?" she asked, very low. "I am so old - so faded."

He laughed.

"Old? You are younger than either of your children. Now I am old, if you like."

But her laugh rang out in turn, a soft ripple of amusement.

"You? You arc a boy still. A boy who loves to dress up!"

She held out her hands and he caught them in his.

PHILOMEL COTTAGE

"Good-bye, darling."

"Good-bye, sweetheart."

Alix Martin stood leaning over the small rustic gate, watching the retreating figure of her husband, as he walked down the road in the direction of the village.

Presently he turned a bend and was lost to sight, but Alix still stayed in the same position, absentmindedly smoothing a lock of the rich brown hair which had blown across her face, her eyes far-away and dreamy.

Alix Martin was not beautiful, nor even, strictly speaking, pretty. But her face, the face of a woman no longer in her first youth, was irradiated and softened until her former colleagues of the old office days would hardly have recognized her. Miss Alix King had been a trim business-like young woman, efficient, slightly brusque in manner, obviously capable and matter-of-fact. She had made the least, not the most, of her beautiful brown hair. Her mouth, not ungenerous in its lines, had always been severely compressed. Her clothes had been neat and suitable, without a hint of coquetry.

Alix had graduated in a hard school. For fifteen years, from the age of eighteen until she was thirty-three, she had kept herself (and for seven years of the time, an invalid mother) by her work as a shorthand-typist. It was the struggle for existence which had hardened the soft lines of her girlish face.

True, there had been romance - of a kind. Dick Windyford, a fellow clerk. Very much of a woman at heart, Alix had always known without seeming to know that he cared. Outwardly they had been friends, nothing more. Out of his slender salary, Dick had been hard put to it to provide for the schooling of a younger brother. For the moment, he could not think of marriage. Nevertheless, when Alix envisaged the future, it was with the half acknowledged certainty that she would one day be Dick's wife. They cared for one another, so she would have put it, but they were both sensible people. Plenty of time, no need to do anything rash. So the years had gone on.

And then suddenly deliverance from daily toil had come to the girl in the most unexpected manner. A distant cousin had died leaving her money to Alix. A few thousand pounds, enough to bring in a couple of hundred a year. To Alix, it was freedom, life, independence. Now she and Dick need wait no longer.

But Dick reacted unexpectedly. He had never directly spoken of his love to Alix, now he seemed less inclined to do so than ever. He avoided her, became morose and gloomy. Alix was quick to realize the truth. She had become a woman of means. Delicacy and pride stood in the way of Dick's asking her to be his wife.

She liked him none the worse for it and was indeed deliberating as to whether she herself might not take the first step when for the second time the unexpected descended upon her.

She met Gerald Martin at a friend's house. He fell violently in love with her and within a week they were engaged. Alix, who had always considered herself "not the falling-in-love kind," was swept clean off her feet.

Unwittingly she had found the way to arouse her former lover. Dick Windyford had come to her stammering with rage and anger.

"The man's a perfect stranger to you. You know nothing about him."

"I know that I love him."

"How can you know - in a week?"

"It doesn't take everyone eleven years to find out that they're in love with a girl," cried Alix angrily.

His face went white.

"I've cared for you ever since I met you. I thought that you cared also."

Alix was truthful.

"I thought so, too," she admitted. "But that was because I didn't know what love was."

Then Dick had burst out again. Prayers, entreaties, even threats. Threats against the man who had supplanted him. It was amazing to Alix to see the volcano that existed beneath the reserved exterior of the man she thought she knew so well. Also, it frightened her a little... Dick, of course, couldn't possibly mean the things he was saying, the threats of vengeance against Gerald Martin. He was angry, that was all...

Her thoughts had gone back to that interview now, on this sunny morning, as she leaned on the gate of the cottage. She had been married a month, and she was idyllically happy. Yet, in the momentary absence of the husband who was everything to her, a tinge of anxiety invaded her perfect happiness, and the cause of that anxiety was Dick Windyford.

Three times since her marriage she had dreamed the same dream. The environment differed, but the main facts were always the same. She saw her husband lying dead and Dick Windyford standing over him, and she knew clearly and distinctly that his was the hand which had dealt the fatal blow.

But horrible though that was, there was something more horrible still - horrible that was, on awakening, for in the dream it seemed perfectly natural and inevitable. She, Alix Martin, was glad that her husband was dead - she stretched out grateful hands to the murderer, sometimes she thanked him. The dream always ended the same way, with herself clasped in Dick Windyford's arms.

She had said nothing of this dream to her husband, but secretly it had perturbed her more than she liked to admit. Was it a warning - a warning against Dick Windyford? Had he some secret power which he was trying to establish over her at a distance? She did not know much about hypnotism, but surely she had always heard that persons could not be hypnotized against their will.

Alix was roused from her thoughts by the sharp ringing of the telephone bell from within the house. She entered the cottage, and picked up the receiver. Suddenly she swayed, and put out a hand to keep herself from falling.

"Who did you say was speaking?"

"Why, Alix, what's the matter with your voice? I wouldn't have known it. It's Dick."

"Oh!" said Alix - "Oh! Where are you?"

"At the Travelers Arms - that's the right name, isn't it? Or don't you even know of the existence of your village pub? I'm on my holiday - doing a bit of fishing here. Any objection to my looking you two good people up this evening after dinner?"

"No," said Alix sharply. "You mustn't come."

There was a pause, and Dick's voice, with a subtle alteration in it, spoke again.

"I beg your pardon," he said formally. "Of course I won't bother you -"

Alix broke in hastily. Of course he must think her behavior too extraordinary. It was extraordinary. Her nerves must be all to pieces. It wasn't Dick's fault that she had these dreams.

"I only meant that we were - engaged tonight," she explained, trying to make her voice sound as natural as possible. "Won't you - won't you come to dinner tomorrow night?"

But Dick evidently noticed the lack of cordiality in her tone.

"Thanks very much," he said, in the same formal voice. "But I may be moving on any time. Depends upon whether a pal of mine turns up or not. Good-bye, Alix." He paused, and then added hastily, in a different tone, "Best of luck to you, my dear."

Alix hung up the receiver with a feeling of relief.

"He mustn't come here," she repeated to herself. "He mustn't come here. Oh! what a fool I am! To imagine myself into a state like this. All the same, I'm glad he's not coming."

She caught up a rustic rush hat from a table, and passed out into the garden again, pausing to look up at the name carved over the porch, Philomel Cottage.

"Isn't it a very fanciful name?" she had said to Gerald once before they were married. He had laughed.

"You little Cockney," he had said, affectionately. "I don't believe you have ever heard a nightingale. I'm glad you haven't Nightingales should sing only for lovers. We'll hear them together on a summer's evening outside our own home."

And at the remembrance of how they had indeed heard them, Alix, standing in the doorway of her home, blushed happily.

It was Gerald who had found Philomel Cottage. He had come to Alix bursting with excitement. He had found the very spot for them - unique - a gem - the chance of a lifetime. And when Alix had seen it, she too was captivated. It was true that the situation was rather lonely - they were two miles from the nearest village - but the cottage itself was so exquisite with its Old World appearance, and its solid comfort of bathrooms, hot-water system, electric light and telephone, that she fell a victim to its charm immediately. And then a hitch occurred. The owner, a rich man who had made it his whim, declined to rent it. He would only sell.

Gerald Martin, though possessed of a good income, was unable to touch his capital. He could raise at most a thousand pounds. The owner was asking three. But Alix, who had set her heart on the place, came to the rescue. Her own capital was easily realized, being in bearer bonds. She would contribute half of it to the purchase of the home. So Philomel Cottage became their very own, and never for a minute had Alix regretted the choice. It was true that servants did not appreciate the rural solitude - indeed at the moment they had none at all - but Alix, who had been starved of

domestic life, thoroughly enjoyed cooking dainty little meals and looking after the house.

The garden which was magnificently stocked with flowers was attended to by an old man from the village who came twice a week, and Gerald Martin, who was keen on gardening, spent most of his time there.

As she rounded the corner of the house, Alix was surprised to see the old gardener in question busy over the flower beds. She was surprised because his days for work were Mondays and Fridays, and today was Wednesday.

"Why, George, what are you doing here?" she asked, as she came towards him.

The old man straightened up with a chuckle, touching the brim of an aged cap.

"I thought as how you'd be surprised, ma'am. But 'tis this way. There be a fκte over to Squire's on Friday, and I sez to myself, I sez, neith Mr Martin nor yet his good lady won't take it amiss if I comes for once on a Wednesday instead of a Friday."

"That's quite all right," said Alix. "I hope you'll enjoy yourself at the fκte."

"I reckon to," said George simply. "It's a fine thing to be able to eat your fill and know all the time as it's not you as is paying for it. Squire allus has a proper sit-down tea for 'is tenants. Then I

thought too, ma'am, as I might as well see you before you goes away so as to learn your wishes for the borders. You'll have no idea when you'll be back, ma'am, I suppose?"

"But I'm not going away."

George stared at her.

"Bain't you going to Lunnon tomorrow?"

"No. What put such an idea into your head?"

George jerked his head over his shoulder.

"Met Maister down to village yesterday. He told me you was both going away to Lunnon tomorrow, and it was uncertain when you'd be back again."

"Nonsense," said Alix, laughing. "You must have misunderstood him."

All the same, she wondered exactly what it could have been that Gerald had said to lead the old man into such a curious mistake. Going to London? She never wanted to go to London again.

"I hate London," she said suddenly and harshly.

"Ah!" said George placidly. "I must have been mistook somehow, and yet he said it plain enough it seemed to me. I'm glad you're stopping on here - I don't hold with all this gallivanting about, and I

don't think nothing of Lunnon. I've never needed to go there. Too many moty cars - that's the trouble nowadays. Once people have got a moty car, blessed if they can stay still anywheres. Mr Ames, wot used to have this house - nice peaceful sort of gentleman he was until he bought one of them things. Hadn't 'ad it a month before he put up this cottage for sale. A tidy lot he'd spent on it, too, with taps in all the bedrooms, and the electric light and all. 'You'll never see your money back,' I sez to him. 'It's not everyone as'll have your fad for washing themselves in every room in the house, in a manner of speaking.' But 'George,' he sez to me, 'I'll get every penny of two thousand pounds for this house.' And sure enough, he did."

"He got three thousand," said Alix, smiling.

"Two thousand," repeated George. "The sum he was asking was talked of at the time. And a very high figure it was thought to be."

"It really was three thousand," said Alix.

"Women never understand figures," said George, unconvinced. "You'll not tell me that Mr Ames had the face to stand up to you, and say three thousand brazen like in a loud voice."

"He didn't say it to me," said Alix. "He said it to my husband."

George stooped again to his flower bed.

"The price was two thousand," he said obstinately.

Alix did not trouble to argue with him. Moving to one of the further beds, she began to pick an armful of flowers. The sunshine, the scent of the flowers, the faint hum of hurrying bees, all conspired to make the day a perfect thing.

As she moved with her fragrant posy towards the house, Alix noticed a small dark green object, peeping from between some leaves in one of the beds. She stooped and picked it up, recognizing it for her husband's pocket diary. It must have fallen from his pocket when he was weeding.

She opened it, scanning the entries with some amusement. Almost from the beginning of their married life, she had realized that the impulsive and emotional Gerald had the uncharacteristic virtues of neatness and method. He was extremely fussy about meals being punctual, and always planned his day ahead with the accuracy of a time table. This morning, for instance, he had announced that he should start for the village after breakfast - at 10:15. And at 10:15 to the minute he had left the house.

Looking through the diary, she was amused to notice the entry on the date of May 14th. "Marry Alix St Peter's 2:30."

"The big silly," murmured Alix to herself, turning the pages.

Suddenly she stopped.

"Thursday, June 18th - why that's today."

In the space for that day was written in Gerald's neat precise hand: "9 p.m." Nothing else. What had Gerald planned to do at 9 p.m. Alix wondered. She smiled to herself as she realized that had this been a story, like those she had so often read, the diary would doubtless have furnished her with some sensational revelation. It would have had in it for certain the name of another woman. She fluttered the back pages idly. There were dates, appointments, cryptic references to business deals, but only one woman's name - her own.

Yet as she slipped the book into her pocket and went on with her flowers to the house, she was aware of a vague uneasiness. Those words of Dick Windyford's recurred to her, almost as though he had been at her elbow repeating them: "The man's a perfect stranger to you. You know nothing about him."

It was true. What did she know about him. After all, Gerald was forty. In forty years there must have been women in his life...

Alix shook herself impatiently. She must not give way to these thoughts. She had a far more instant preoccupation to deal with. Should she, or should she not, tell her husband that Dick Windyford had rung her up?

There was the possibility to be considered that Gerald might have already run across him in the village. But in that case he would be sure to mention it to her immediately upon his return and matters would be taken out of her hands. Otherwise - what? Alix was aware of a distinct desire to say nothing about it. Gerald had always shown himself kindly disposed towards the other. "Poor devil," he

had said once, "I believe he's just as keen on you as I am. Hard luck on him to be shelved." He had had no doubts of Alix's own feelings.

If she told him, he was sure to suggest asking Dick Windyford to Philomel Cottage. Then she would have to explain that Dick had proposed it himself, and that she had made an excuse to prevent his coming. And when he asked her why she had done so, what could she say? Tell him her dream? But he would only laugh - or worse, see that she attached an importance to it which he did not. Then he would think - oh! he might think anything!

In the end, rather shamefacedly, Alix decided to say nothing. It was the first secret she had ever kept from her husband, and the consciousness of it made her feel ill at ease.

When she heard Gerald returning from the village shortly before lunch, she hurried into the kitchen and pretended to be busy with the cooking so as to hide her confusion.

It was evident at once that Gerald had seen nothing of Dick Windyford. Alix felt at once relieved and embarrassed. She was definitely committed now to a policy of concealment. For the rest of the day she was nervous and absentminded, starting at every sound, but her husband seemed to notice nothing. He himself seemed to have his thoughts far away, and once or twice she had to speak a second time before he answered some trivial remark of hers.

It was not until after their simple evening meal, when they were sitting in the oak beamed living room with the windows thrown open to let in the sweet night air scented with the perfume of the mauve and white stocks that grew outside, that Alix remembered the pocket diary, and seized upon it gladly to distract her thoughts from their doubt and perplexity.

"Here's something you've been watering the flowers with," she said, and threw it into his lap.

"Dropped it in the border, did I?"

"Yes, I know all your secrets now."

"Not guilty," said Gerald, shaking his head.

"What about your assignation at nine o'clock tonight?"

"Oh! that -" he seemed taken back for a moment, then he smiled as though something afforded him particular amusement. "It's an assignation with a particularly nice girl, Alix. She's got brown hair and blue eyes and she's particularly like you."

"I don't understand," said Alix, with mock severity. "You're evading the point."

"No, I'm not. As a matter of fact, that's a reminder that I'm going to develop some negatives tonight, and I want you to help me."

Gerald Martin was an enthusiastic photographer.

He had a somewhat old-fashioned camera, but with an excellent lens, and he developed his own plates in a small cellar which he had fitted up as a dark room. He was never tired of posing Alix in different positions.

"And it must be done at nine o'clock precisely," said Alix teasingly.

Gerald looked a little vexed.

"My dear girl," he said, with a shade of testiness in his manner, "one should always plan a thing for a definite time. Then one gets through one's work properly."

Alix sat for a minute or two in silence watching her husband as he lay in his chair smoking, his dark head flung back and the clear-cut lines of his clean-shaven face showing up against the somber background. And suddenly, from some unknown source, a wave of panic surged over her, so that she cried out before she could stop herself. "Oh! Gerald, I wish I knew more about you."

Her husband turned an astonished face upon her.

"But, my dear Alix, you do know all about me. I've told you of my boyhood in Northumberland, of my life in South Africa, and these last ten years in Canada which have brought me success."

"Oh, business!"

Gerald laughed suddenly.

"I know what you mean - love affairs. You women are all the same. Nothing interests you but the personal element."

Alix felt her throat go dry, as she muttered indistinctly: "Well, but there must have been - love affairs. I mean - If I only knew -"

There was silence again for a minute or two. Gerald Martin was frowning, a look of indecision on his face. When he spoke, it was gravely, without a trace of his former bantering manner.

"Do you think it wise, Alix - this Bluebeard's chamber business? There have been women in my life, yes. I don't deny it. You wouldn't believe me if I did deny it. But I can swear to you truthfully that not one of them meant anything to me."

There was a ring of sincerity in his voice which comforted the listening wife.

"Satisfied, Alix?" he asked, with a smile. Then he looked at her with a shade of curiosity.

"What has turned your mind onto these unpleasant subjects tonight of all nights? You never mentioned them before."

Alix got up and began to walk about restlessly.

"Oh! I don't know," she said. "I've been nervy all day."

"That's odd," said Gerald, in a low voice, as though speaking to himself. "That's very odd."

"Why is it odd?"

"Oh, my dear girl, don't flash out at me so. I only said it was odd because as a rule you're so sweet and serene."

Alix forced a smile.

"Everything's conspired to annoy me today," she confessed. "Even old George had got some ridiculous idea into his head that we were going away to London. He said you had told him so."

"Where did you see him?" asked Gerald sharply.

"He came to work today instead of Friday."

"The old fool," said Gerald angrily.

Alix stared in surprise. Her husband's face was convulsed with rage. She had never seen him so angry. Seeing her astonishment, Gerald made an effort to regain control of himself.

"Well, he is a stupid old fool," he protested.

"What can you have said to make him think that?"

"I? I never said anything. At least - Oh, yes, I remember. I made some weak joke about being 'off to London in the morning' and I

suppose he took it seriously. Or else he didn't hear properly. You undeceived him, of course?"

He waited anxiously for her reply.

"Of course, but he's the sort of old man who if once he gets an idea in his head - well, it isn't so easy to get it out again."

Then she told him of the gardener's insistence on the sum asked for the cottage.

Gerald was silent for a minute or two, then he said slowly:

"Ames was willing to take two thousand in cash and the remaining thousand on mortgage. That's the origin of that mistake, I fancy."

"Very likely," agreed Alix.

Then she looked up at the clock and pointed to it with a mischievous finger.

"We ought to be getting down to it, Gerald. Five minutes behind schedule."

A very peculiar smile came over Gerald Martin's face.

"I've changed my mind," he said quietly. "I shall not do any photography tonight."

A woman's mind is a curious thing. When she went to bed that Thursday night, Alix's mind was contented and at rest. Her momentarily assailed happiness reasserted itself, triumphant as of yore.

But by the evening of the following day, she realized that some subtle forces were at work undermining it. Dick Windyford had not rung up again, nevertheless she felt what she supposed to be his influence at work. Again and again those words of his recurred to her. "The man's a perfect stranger. You know nothing about him." And with them came the memory of her husband's face, photographed clearly on her brain as he said: "Do you think it wise, Alix, this Bluebeard's chamber business?" Why had he said that? What had he meant by those words?

There had been warning in them - a hint of menace. It was as though he had said in effect - "You had better not pry into my life, Alix. You may get a nasty shock if you do." True, a few minutes later, he had sworn to her that there had been no woman in his life that mattered - but Alix tried in vain to recapture her sense of his sincerity. Was he not bound to swear that?

By Friday morning, Alix had convinced herself that there had been a woman in Gerald's life - a Bluebeard's chamber that he had sedulously sought to conceal from her. Her jealousy, slow to awaken, was now rampant.

Was it a woman he had been going to meet that night, at 9 p.m.? Was his story of photographs to develop a lie invented upon the

spur of the moment? With a queer sense of shock Alix realized that ever since she had found that pocket diary she had been in torment. And there had been nothing in it? That was the irony of the whole thing.

Three days ago she would have sworn that she knew her husband through and through. Now it seemed to her that he was a stranger of whom she knew nothing. She remembered his unreasonable anger against old George, so at variance with his usual good-tempered manner. A small thing, perhaps, but it showed her that she did not really know the man who was her husband.

There were several little things required on Friday from the village to carry them over the week-end. In the afternoon Alix suggested that she should go for them whilst Gerald remained in the garden, but somewhat to her surprise he opposed this plan vehemently, and insisted on going himself whilst she remained at home. Alix was forced to give way to him, but his insistence surprised and alarmed her. Why was he so anxious to prevent her going to the village?

Suddenly an explanation suggested itself to her which made the whole thing clear. Was it not possible that, whilst saying nothing to her, Gerald had indeed come across Dick Windyford? Her own jealousy, entirely dormant at the time of their marriage, had only developed afterwards. Might it not be the same with Gerald? Might he not be anxious to prevent her seeing Dick Windyford again? This explanation was so consistent with the facts, and so comforting to Alix's perturbed mind, that she embraced it eagerly.

Yet when tea time had come and past, she was restless and ill at ease. She was struggling with a temptation that had assailed her ever since Gerald's departure. Finally, pacifying her conscience with the assurance that the room did need a thorough tidying, she went upstairs to her husband's dressing room. She took a duster with her to keep up the pretense of housewifery.

"If I were only sure," she repeated to herself. "If I could only be sure."

In vain she told herself that anything compromising would have been destroyed ages ago. Against that she argued that men do sometimes keep the most damning piece of evidence through an exaggerated sentimentality.

In the end Alix succumbed. Her cheeks - burning with the shame of her action, she hunted breathlessly through packets of letters and documents, turned out the drawers, even went through the pockets of her husband's clothes. Only two drawers eluded her - the lower drawer of the chest of drawers and the small right-hand drawer of the writing desk were both locked. But Alix was by now lost to all shame. In one of those drawers she was convinced that she would find evidence of this imaginary woman of the past who obsessed her.

She remembered that Gerald had left his keys lying carelessly on the sideboard downstairs. She fetched them and tried them one by one. The third key fitted the writing table drawer. Alix pulled it open eagerly. There was a check book and a wallet well stuffed

with notes, and at the back of the drawer a packet of letters tied up with a piece of tape.

Her breath coming unevenly, Alix untied the tape. Then a deep burning blush overspread her face, and she dropped the letters back into the drawer, closing and relocking it. For the letters were her own, written to Gerald Martin before she married him.

She turned now to the chest of drawers, more with a wish to feel that she had left nothing undone, than from any expectation of finding what she sought. She was ashamed and almost convinced of the madness of her obsession.

To her annoyance none of the keys on Gerald's bunch fitted the drawer in question. Not to be defeated, Alix went into the other rooms and brought back a selection of keys with her. To her satisfaction, the key of the spare room wardrobe also fitted the chest of drawers. She unlocked the drawer and pulled it open. But there was nothing in it but a roll of newspaper clippings already dirty and discolored with age.

Alix breathed a sigh of relief. Nevertheless she glanced at the clippings, curious to know what subject had interested Gerald so much that he had taken the trouble to keep the dusty roll. They were nearly all American papers, dated some seven years ago, and dealing with the trail of the notorious swindler and bigamist, Charles LeMaitre. LeMaitre had been suspected of doing away with his women victims. A skeleton had been found beneath the floor of one of the houses he had rented, and most of the women he had "married" had never been heard of again.

He had defended himself from the charge with consummate skill, aided by some of the best legal talent in the United States. The Scottish verdict of "Non proven" might perhaps have stated the case best. In its absence, he was found Not Guilty on the capital charge, though sentenced to a long term of imprisonment on the other charges proferred against him.

Alix remembered the excitement caused by the case at the time, and also the sensation aroused by the escape of LeMaitre some three years later. He had never been recaptured. The personality of the man and his extraordinary power over women had been discussed at great length in the English papers at the time, together with an account of his excitability in court, his passionate protestations, and his occasional sudden physical collapses, due to the fact that he had a weak heart, though the ignorant accredited it to his dramatic powers.

There was a picture of him in one of the clippings Alix held, and she studied it with some interest - a long-bearded, scholarly looking gentleman. It reminded her of someone, but for the moment she could not tell who that someone was. She had never known that Gerald took an interest in crime and famous trials, though she knew that it was a hobby with many men.

Who was it the face reminded her of? Suddenly, with a shock, she realized that it was Gerald himself. The eyes and brows bore a strong resemblance to him. Perhaps he had kept the cutting for that reason. Her eyes went on to the paragraph beside the picture. Certain dates, it seemed, had been entered in the accused's

pocketbook, and it was contended that these were dates when he had done away with his victims. Then a woman gave evidence and identified the prisoner positively by the fact that he had a mole on his left wrist, just below the palm of the left hand

Alix dropped the papers from a nerveless hand, and swayed as she stood. On his left wrist, just below the palm, Gerald had a small scar...

The room whirled round her... Afterwards it struck her as strange that she should have leaped at once to such absolute certainty. Gerald Martin was Charles LeMaitre! She knew it and accepted it in a flash. Disjointed fragments whirled through her brain, like pieces of a jigsaw puzzle fitting into place.

The money paid for the house - her money - her money only. The Bearer bonds she had entrusted to his keeping. Even her dream appeared in its true significance. Deep down in her, her subconscious self had always feared Gerald Martin and wished to escape from him. And it was to Dick Windyford this self of hers had looked for help. That, too, was why she was able to accept the truth so easily, without doubt or hesitation. She was to have been another of LeMaitre's victims. Very soon, perhaps.

A half cry escaped her as she remembered something. Thursday 9 p.m. The cellar, with the flagstones that were so easily raised. Once before, he had buried one of his victims in a cellar. It had been all planned for Thursday night. But to write it down beforehand in that methodical manner - insanity! No, it was logical.

Gerald always made a memorandum of his engagements - murder was, to him, a business proposition like any other.

But what had saved her? What could possibly have saved her? Had he relented at the last minute? No - in a flash the answer came to her. Old George. She understood now her husband's uncontrollable anger. Doubtless he had paved the way by telling everyone he met that they were going to London the next day. Then George had come to work unexpectedly, had mentioned London to her, and she had contradicted the story. Too risky to do away with her that night, with old George repeating that conversation. But what an escape! If she had not happened to mention that trivial matter - Alix shuddered.

But there was no time to be lost. She must get away at once - before he came back. For nothing on earth would she spend another night under the same roof with him. She hurriedly replaced the roll of clippings in the drawer, shut it to and locked it.

And then she stayed motionless as though frozen to stone. She had heard the creak of the gate into the road. Her husband had returned.

For a moment Alix stayed as though petrified, then she crept on tiptoe to the window, looking out from behind the shelter of the curtain.

Yes, it was her husband. He was smiling to himself and humming a little tune. In his hand he held an object which almost made the terrified girl's heart stop beating. It was a brand new spade.

Alix leaped to a knowledge born of instinct. It was to be tonight...

But there was still a chance. Gerald, still humming his little tune, went round to the back of the house.

"He's going to put it in the cellar - ready," thought Alix with a shiver.

Without hesitating a moment, she ran down the stairs and out of the cottage. But just as she emerged from the door, her husband came round the other side of the house.

"Hullo," he said. "Where are you running off to in such a hurry?"

Alix strove desperately to appear calm and as usual. Her chance was gone for the moment, but if she was careful not to arouse his suspicions, it would come again later. Even now, perhaps...

"I was going to walk to the end of the lane and back," she said, in a voice that sounded weak and uncertain to her own ears.

"Right," said Gerald, "I'll come with you."

"No - please, Gerald. I'm - nervy, headachy - I'd rather go alone."

He looked at her attentively. She fancied a momentary suspicion gleamed in his eye.

"What's the matter with you, Alix? You're pale - trembling."

"Nothing," she forced herself to be brusque - smiling. "I've got a headache, that's all. A walk will do me good."

"Well, it's no good you're saying you don't want me," declared Gerald with his easy laugh. "I'm coming whether you want me or not."

She dared not protest further. If he suspected that she knew -

With an effort she managed to regain something of her normal manner. Yet she had an uneasy feeling that he looked at her sideways every now and then, as though not quite satisfied. She felt that his suspicions were not completely allayed.

When they returned to the house, he insisted on her lying down, and brought some eau de cologne to bathe her temples. He was, as ever, the devoted husband, yet Alix felt herself as helpless as though bound hand and foot in a trap.

Not for a minute would he leave her alone. He went with her into the kitchen and helped her to bring in the simple cold dishes she had already prepared.

Supper was a meal that choked her, yet she forced herself to eat, and even to appear gay and natural. She knew now that she was fighting for her life. She was alone with this man, miles from help, absolutely at his mercy. Her only chance was so to lull his suspicions that he would leave her alone for a few moments - long enough for her to get to the telephone in the hall and summon

assistance. That was her only hope now. He would overtake her if she took to flight long before she could reach assistance.

A momentary hope flashed over her as she remembered how he had abandoned his plan before. Suppose she told him that Dick Windyford was coming up to see them that evening?

The words trembled on her lips - then she rejected them hastily. This man would not be balked a second time. There was a determination, an elation underneath his calm bearing that sickened her. She would only precipitate the crime. He would murder her there and then, and calmly ring up Dick Windyford with a tale of having been suddenly called away. Oh! if only Dick Windyford were coming to the house this evening. If Dick -

A sudden idea flashed into her mind. She looked sharply sideways at her husband as though she feared that he might read her mind. With the forming of a plan, her courage was reinforced. She became so completely natural in manner that she marveled at herself. She felt that Gerald now was completely reassured.

She made the coffee and took it out to the porch where they often sat on fine evenings.

"By the way," said Gerald suddenly, "we'll do those photographs later."

Alix felt a shiver run through her, but she replied nonchalantly:

"Can't you manage alone? I'm rather tired tonight."

"It won't take long." He smiled to himself. "And I can promise you you won't be tired afterwards."

The words seemed to amuse him. Alix shuddered. Now or never was the time to carry out her plan.

She rose to her feet.

"I'm just going to telephone to the butcher," she announced nonchalantly. "Don't you bother to move."

"To the butcher? At this time of night?"

"His shop's shut, of course, silly. But he's in his house all right. And tomorrow's Saturday, and I want him to bring me some veal cutlets early, before someone else grabs them from him. The old dear will do anything for me."

She passed quickly into the house, closing the door behind her. She heard Gerald say, "Don't shut the door," and was quick with her light reply. "It keeps the moths out. I hate moths. Are you afraid I'm going to make love to the butcher, silly?"

Once inside she snatched down the telephone receiver and gave the number of the Travelers Arms. She was put through at once.

"Mr Windyford? Is he still there? May I speak to him?"

Then her heart gave a sickening thump. The door was pushed open, and her husband came into the hall.

"Do go away, Gerald," she said pettishly. "I hate anyone listening when I'm telephoning."

He merely laughed and threw himself into a chair.

"Sure it really is the butcher you're telephoning to?" he quizzed.

Alix was in despair. Her plan had failed. In a minute Dick Windyford would come to the phone. Should she risk all and cry out an appeal for help. Would he grasp what she meant before Gerald wrenched her away from the phone. Or would he merely treat it as a practical joke.

And then as she nervously depressed and released the little key in the receiver she was holding, which permits the voice to be heard or not heard at the other end, another plan flashed into her head.

"It will be difficult," she thought. "It means keeping my head, and thinking of the right words, and not faltering for a moment, but I believe I could do it. I must do it."

And at that minute she heard Dick Windyford's voice at the other end of the phone.

Alix drew a deep breath. Then she depressed the key firmly and spoke.

"Mrs Martin speaking - from Philomel Cottage. Please come (she released the key) tomorrow morning with six nice veal cutlets (she depressed the key again) It's very important (she released the key) Thank you so much, Mr Hexworthy, you don't mind my ringing you up so late, I hope, but those veal cutlets are really a matter of (she depressed the key again) life or death... (she released it) Very well - tomorrow morning - (she depressed it) as soon as possible..."

She replaced the receiver on the hook and turned to face her husband, breathing hard.

"So that's how you talk to your butcher, is it?" said Gerald.

"It's the feminine touch," said Alix lightly.

She was simmering with excitement. He had suspected nothing. Surely Dick, even if he didn't understand, would come.

She passed into the sitting room and switched on the electric light. Gerald followed her.

"You seem very full of spirits now," he said, watching her curiously.

"Yes," said Alix, "my headache's gone."

She sat down in her usual seat and smiled at her husband, as he sank into his own chair opposite her. She was saved. It was only five and twenty past eight. Long before nine o'clock Dick would have arrived.

"I didn't think much of that coffee you gave me," complained Gerald. "It tasted very bitter."

"It's a new kind I was trying. We won't have it again if you don't like it, dear."

Alix took up a piece of needlework and began to stitch. She felt complete confidence in her own ability to keep up the part of the devoted wife. Gerald read a few pages of his book. Then he glanced up at the clock and tossed the book away.

"Half-past eight. Time to go down to the cellar and start work."

The work slipped from Alix's fingers.

"Oh! not yet. Let us wait until nine o'clock."

"No, my girl, half-past eight. That's the time I fixed. You'll be able to get to bed all the earlier."

"But I'd rather wait until nine."

"Half-past eight," said Gerald obstinately. "You know when I fix a time, I always stick to it. Come along, Alix. I'm not going to wait a minute longer."

Alix looked up at him, and in spite of herself she felt a wave of terror slide over her. The mask had been lifted; Gerald's hands were twitching; his eyes were shining with excitement; he was

continually passing his tongue over his dry lips. He no longer cared to conceal his excitement.

Alix thought: "It's true - he can't wait - he's like a madman."

He strode over to her, and jerked her onto her feet with a hand on her shoulder.

"Come on, my girl - or I'll carry you there."

His tone was gay, but there was an undisguised ferocity behind it that appalled her. With a supreme effort she jerked herself free and clung cowering against the wall. She was powerless. She couldn't get away - she couldn't do anything - and he was coming towards her.

"Now, Alix -"

"No - no."

She screamed, her hands held out impotently to ward him off.

"Gerald - stop - I've got something to tell you, something to confess..."

He did stop.

"To confess?" he said curiously.

"Yes, to confess." She went on desperately, seeking to hold his arrested attention. "Something I ought to have told you before."

A look of contempt swept over his face. The spell was broken.

"A former lover, I suppose," he sneered.

"No," said Alix. "Something else. You'd call it, I expect - yes, you'd call it a crime."

And at once she saw that she had struck the right note. Again his attention was arrested, held. Seeing that, her nerve came back to her. She felt mistress of the situation once more.

"You had better sit down again," she said quietly.

She herself crossed the room to her old chair and sat down. She even stooped and picked up her needlework. But behind her calmness she was thinking and inventing feverishly. For the story she invented must hold his interest until help arrived.

"I told you," she said, "that I had been a shorthand typist for fifteen years. That was not entirely true. There were two intervals. The first occurred when I was twenty-two. I came across a man, an elderly man with a little property. He fell in love with me and asked me to marry him. I accepted. We were married." She paused. "I induced him to insure his life in my favor."

She saw a sudden keen interest spring up in her husband's face, and went on with renewed assurance.

"During the war I worked for a time in a Hospital Dispensary. There I had the handling of all kinds of rare drugs and poisons. Yes, poisons."

She paused reflectively. He was keenly interested now, not a doubt of it. The murderer is bound to have an interest in murder. She had gambled on that, and succeeded. She stole a glance at the clock. It was five and twenty to nine.

"There is one poison - it is a little white powder. A pinch of it means death. You know something about poisons perhaps?"

She put the question in some trepidation. If he did, she would have to be careful.

"No," said Gerald, "I know very little about them."

She drew a breath of relief. This made her task easier.

"You have heard of hyoscine, of course? This is a drug that acts much the same way, but it is absolutely untraceable. Any doctor would give a certificate of heart failure. I stole a small quantity of this drug and kept it by me."

She paused, marshaling her forces.

"Go on," said Gerald.

"No. I'm afraid. I can't tell you. Another time."

"Now," he said impatiently. "I want to hear."

"We had been married a month. I was very good to my elderly husband, very kind and devoted. He spoke in praise of me to all the neighbors. Everyone knew what a devoted wife I was. I always made his coffee myself every evening. One evening, when we were alone together, I put a pinch of the deadly alkaloid in his cup."

Alix paused, and carefully rethreaded her needle. She, who had never acted in her life, rivaled the greatest actress in the world at this moment. She was actually living the part of the cold-blooded poisoner.

"It was very peaceful. I sat watching him. Once he gasped a little and asked for air. I opened the window. Then he said he could not move from his chair. Presently he died."

She stopped, smiling. It was a quarter to nine. Surely they would come soon.

"How much," said Gerald, "was the insurance money?"

"About two thousand pounds. I speculated with it, and lost it. I went back to my office work. But I never meant to remain there long. Then I met another man. I had stuck to my maiden name at the office. He didn't know I had been married before. He was a younger man, rather good-looking, and quite well off. We were married quietly in Sussex. He didn't want to insure his life, but of

course he made a will in my favor. He liked me to make his coffee myself also, just as my first husband had done."

Alix smiled reflectively, and added simply:

"I make very good coffee."

Then she went on.

"I had several friends in the village where we were living. They were very sorry for me, with my husband dying suddenly of heart failure one evening after dinner. I didn't quite like the doctor. I don't think he suspected me, but he was certainly very surprised at my husband's sudden death. I don't quite know why I drifted back to the office again. Habit, I suppose. My second husband left about four thousand pounds. I didn't speculate with it this time. I invested it. Then, you see -"

But she was interrupted. Gerald Martin, his face suffused with blood, half choking, was pointing a shaking forefinger at her.

"The coffee - my God! the coffee!"

She stared at him.

"I understand now why it was bitter. You devil. You've poisoned me."

His hands gripped the arms of his chair. He was ready to spring upon her.

"You've poisoned me."

Alix had retreated from him to the fireplace. Now, terrified, she opened her lips to deny - and then paused. In another minute he would spring upon her. She summoned all her strength. Her eyes held his steadily, compellingly.

"Yes," she said, "I poisoned you. Already the poison is working. At this minute you can't move from your chair - you can't move -"

If she could keep him there - even a few minutes -

Ah! what was that? Footsteps on the road. The creak of the gate. Then footsteps on the path outside. The door of the hall opened -

"You can't move," she said again.

Then she slipped past him and fled headlong from the room to fall, half fainting, into Dick Windyford's arms.

"My God! Alix!" he cried.

Then he turned to the man with him, a tall stalwart figure in policeman's uniform.

"Go and see what's been happening in that room."

He laid Alix carefully down on a couch and bent over her.

"My little girl," he murmured. "My poor little girl. What have they been doing to you?"

Her eyelids fluttered and her lips just murmured his name.

Dick was aroused from tumultuous thoughts by the policeman's touching him on the arm.

"There's nothing in that room, sir, but a man sitting in a chair. Looks as though he'd had some kind of bad fright, and -"

"Yes?"

"Well, sir, he's - dead."

They were startled by hearing Alix's voice. She spoke as though in some kind of dream.

"And presently," she said, almost as though she were quoting from something, "he died..."

THE GIRL IN THE TRAIN

"And that's that!" observed George Rowland ruefully, as he gazed up at the imposing smoke-grimed fa3ade of the building he had just quitted.

It might be said to represent very aptly the power of Money - and Money, in the person of William Rowland, uncle to the aforementioned George, had just spoken its mind very freely. In the course of a brief ten minutes, from being the apple of his uncle's eye, the heir to his wealth, and a young man with a promising business career in front of him, George had suddenly become one of the vast army of the unemployed.

"And in these clothes they won't even give me the dole," reflected Mr Rowland gloomily, "and as for writing poems and selling them at the door at twopence (or 'what you care to give, lydy') I simply haven't got the brains."

It was true that George embodied a veritable triumph of the tailor's art. He was exquisitely and beautifully arrayed. Solomon and the lilies of the field were simply not in it with George. But man cannot live by clothes alone - unless he has had some considerable training in the art - and Mr Rowland was painfully aware of the fact.

"And all because of that rotten show last night," he reflected sadly.

The rotten show last night had been a Covent Garden Ball. Mr Rowland had returned from it at a somewhat late - or rather early - hour - as a matter of fact, he could not strictly say that he remembered returning at all. Rogers, his uncle's butler, was a helpful fellow, and could doubtless give more details on the matter. A splitting head, a cup of strong tea, and an arrival at the office at five minutes to twelve instead of half-past nine had precipitated the catastrophe. Mr Rowland, senior, who for twenty-

four years had condoned and paid up as a tactful relative should, had suddenly abandoned these tactics and revealed himself in a totally new light. The inconsequence of George's replies (the young man's head was still opening and shutting like some mediaeval instrument of the Inquisition) had displeased him still further. William Rowland was nothing if not thorough. He cast his nephew adrift upon the world in a few short succinct words, and then settled down to his interrupted survey of some oil fields in Peru.

George Rowland shook the dust of his uncle's office from off his feet, and stepped out into the City of London. George was a practical fellow. A good lunch, he considered, was essential to a review of the situation. He had it. Then he retraced his steps to the family mansion. Rogers opened the door. His well-trained face expressed no surprise at seeing George at this unusual hour.

"Good afternoon, Rogers. Just pack up my things for me, will you? I'm leaving here."

"Yes, sir. Just for a short visit, sir?"

"For good, Rogers. I am going to the colonies this afternoon."

"Indeed, sir?"

"Yes. That is, if there is a suitable boat. Do you know anything about the boats, Rogers?"

"Which colony were you thinking of visiting, sir?"

"I'm not particular. Any of 'em will do. Let's say Australia. What do you think of the idea, Rogers?"

Rogers coughed discreetly.

"Well, sir, I've certainly heard it said that there's room out there for anyone who really wants to work."

Mr Rowland gazed at him with interest and admiration.

"Very neatly put, Rogers. Just what I was thinking myself. I shan't go to Australia - not today, at any rate. Fetch me an ABC, will you? We will select something nearer at hand."

Rogers brought the required volume. George opened it at random and turned the pages with a rapid hand.

"Perth - too far away - Putney Bridge - too near at hand. Ramsgate? I think not. Reigate also leaves me cold. Why - what an extraordinary thing! There's actually a place called Rowland's Castle. Ever heard of it, Rogers?"

"I fancy, sir, that you go there from Waterloo."

"What an extraordinary fellow you are, Rogers. You know everything. Well, well, Rowland's Castle! I wonder what sort of a place it is."

"Not much of a place, I should say, sir."

"All the better; there'll be less competition. These quiet little country hamlets have a lot of the old feudal spirit knocking about. The last of the original Rowlands ought to meet with instant appreciation. I shouldn't wonder if they elected me mayor in a week."

He shut up the ABC with a bang.

"The die is cast. Pack me a small suitcase, will you, Rogers? Also my compliments to the cook, and will she oblige me with a loan of the cat. Dick Whittington, you know. When you set out to become a Lord Mayor, a cat is essential."

"I'm sorry, sir, but the cat is not available at the present moment."

"How is that?"

"A family of eight, sir. Arrived this morning."

"You don't say so. I thought its name was Peter."

"So it is, sir. A great surprise to all of us."

"A case of careless christening and the deceitful sex, eh? Well, well, I shall have to go catless. Pack up those things at once, will you?"

"Very good, sir."

Rogers withdrew, to reappear ten minutes later.

"Shall I call a taxi, sir?"

"Yes, please."

Rogers hesitated, then advanced a little farther into the room.

"You'll excuse the liberty, sir, but if I was you, I shouldn't take too much notice of anything Mr Rowland said this morning. He was at one of those city dinners last night and -"

"Say no more," said George. "I understand."

"And being inclined to gout -"

"I know, I know. Rather a strenuous evening for you, Rogers, with two of us, eh? But I've set my heart on distinguishing myself at Rowland's Castle - the cradle of my historic race - that would go well in a speech, wouldn't it? A wire to me there, or a discreet advertisement in the morning papers, will recall me at any time if a fricassee of veal is in preparation. And now - to Waterloo! - as Wellington said on the eve of the historic battle."

Waterloo Station was not at its brightest and best that afternoon. Mr Rowland eventually discovered a train that would take him to his destination, but it was an undistinguished train, an unimposing train - a train that nobody seemed anxious to travel by. Mr Rowland had a first-class carriage to himself, up in the front of the train. A fog was descending in an indeterminate way over the metropolis,

now it lifted, now it descended. The platform was deserted, and only the asthmatic breathing of the engine broke the silence.

And then, all of a sudden, things began to happen with bewildering rapidity.

A girl happened first. She wrenched open the door and jumped in, rousing Mr Rowland from something perilously near a nap, exclaiming as she did so: "Oh! Hide me - oh! Please hide me."

George was essentially a man of action - his not to reason why, his but to do and die, etc. There is only one place to hide in a railway carriage - under the seat. In seven seconds the girl was bestowed there, and George's suitcase, negligently standing on end, covered her retreat. None too soon. An infuriated face appeared at the carriage window.

"My niece! You have her here. I want my niece."

George, a little breathless, was reclining in the corner, deep in the sporting column of the evening paper, one-thirty edition. He laid it aside with the air of a man recalling himself from far away.

"I beg your pardon, sir?" he said politely.

"My niece - what have you done with her?"

Acting on the policy that attack is always better than defence, George leaped into action.

"What the devil do you mean?" he cried, with a very creditable imitation of his own uncle's manner.

The other paused a minute, taken aback by this sudden fierceness. He was a fat man, still panting a little as though he had run some way. His hair was cut en brosse, and he had a moustache of the Hohenzollern persuasion. His accents were decidedly guttural, and the stiffness of his carriage denoted that he was more at home in uniform than out of it. George had the trueborn Briton's prejudice against foreigners - and an especial distaste for German-looking foreigners.

"What the devil do you mean, sir?" he repeated angrily.

"She came in here," said the other. "I saw her. What have you done with her?"

George flung aside the paper and thrust his head and shoulders through the window.

"So that's it, is it?" he roared. "Blackmail. But you've tried it on the wrong person. I read all about you in the Daily Mail this morning. Here, guard, guard!"

Already attracted from afar by the altercation, that functionary came hurrying up.

"Here, guard," said Mr Rowland, with that air of authority which the lower classes so adore. "This fellow is annoying me. I'll give him in charge for attempted blackmail if necessary. Pretends I've

got his niece hidden in here. There's a regular gang of these foreigners trying this sort of thing on. It ought to be stopped. Take him away, will you? Here's my care if you want it."

The guard looked from one to the other. His mind was soon made up. His training led him to despise foreigners and to respect and admire well-dressed gentlemen who travelled first-class.

He laid his hand on the shoulder of the intruder.

"Here," he said, "you come out of this."

At this crisis the stranger's English failed him, and he plunged into passionate profanity in his native tongue.

"That's enough of that," said the guard. "Stand away, will you? She's due out."

Flags were waved and whistles were blown. With an unwilling jerk the train drew out of the station.

George remained at his observation post until they were clear of the platform. Then he drew in his head, and picking up the suitcase tossed it into the rack.

"It's quite all right. You can come out," he said reassuringly.

The girl crawled out.

"Oh!" she gasped. "How can I thank you?"

"That's quite all right. It's been a pleasure, I assure you," returned George nonchalantly.

He smiled at her reassuringly. There was a slightly puzzled look in her eyes. She seemed to be missing something to which she was accustomed. At that moment, she caught sight of herself in the narrow glass opposite, and gave a heartfelt gasp.

Whether the carriage cleaners do, or do not, sweep under the seats every day is doubtful. Appearances were against their doing so, but it may be that every particle of dirt and smoke finds its way there like a homing bird. George had hardly had time to take in the girl's appearance, so sudden had been her arrival, and so brief the space of time before she crawled into hiding, but it was certainly a trim and well-dressed young woman who had disappeared under the seat. Now her little red hat was crushed and dented, and her face was disfigured with long streaks of dirt.

"Oh!" said the girl.

She fumbled for her bag. George, with the tact of a true gentleman, looked fixedly out of the window and admired the streets of London south of the Thames.

"How can I thank you?" said the girl again.

Taking this as a hint that conversation might now be resumed, George withdrew his gaze and made another polite disclaimer, but this time with a good deal of added warmth in his manner.

The girl was absolutely lovely! Never before, George told himself, had he seen such a lovely girl. The empressement of his manner became even more marked.

"I think it was simply splendid of you," said the girl with enthusiasm.

"Not at all. Easiest thing in the world. Only too pleased been of use," mumbled George.

"Splendid," she reiterated emphatically.

It is undoubtedly pleasant to have the loveliest girl you have ever seen gazing into your eyes and telling you how splendid you are. George enjoyed it as much as anyone would.

Then there came a rather difficult silence. It seemed to dawn upon the girl that further explanation might be expected. She flushed a little.

"The awkward part of it is," she said nervously, "that I'm afraid I can't explain."

She looked at him with a piteous air of uncertainty.

"You can't explain?"

"No."

"How perfectly splendid!" said Mr Rowland with enthusiasm.

"I beg your pardon?"

"I said, 'How perfectly splendid.' Just like one of those books that keep you up all night. The heroine always says, 'I can't explain' in the first chapter. She explains in the last, of course, and there's never any real reason why she shouldn't have done so in the beginning - except that it would spoil the story. I can't tell you how pleased I am to be mixed up in a real mystery - I didn't know there were such things. I hope it's got something to do with secret documents of immense importance, and the Balkan express. I dote upon the Balkan express."

The girl stared at him with wide, suspicious eyes.

"What makes you say the Balkan express?" she asked sharply.

"I hope I haven't been indiscreet," George hastened to put in. "Your uncle travelled by it, perhaps."

"My uncle -" She paused, then began again, "My uncle -"

"Quite so" said George sympathetically. "I've got an uncle myself. Nobody should be held responsible for their uncles. Nature's little throwbacks - that's how I look at it."

The girl began to laugh suddenly. When she spoke, George was aware of the slight foreign inflection in her voice. At first he had taken her to be English.

"What a refreshing and unusual person you are, Mr -"

"Rowland. George to my friends."

"My name is Elizabeth -"

She stopped abruptly.

"I like the name of Elizabeth," said George, to cover her momentary confusion. "They don't call you Bessie or anything horrible like that, I hope?"

She shook her head.

"Well," said George, "now that we know each other, we'd better get down to business. If you'll stand up, Elizabeth, I'll brush down the back of your coat." She stood up obediently, and George was as good as his word.

"Thank you, Mr Rowland."

"George. George to my friends, remember. And you can't come into my nice empty carriage, roll under the seat, induce me to tell lies to your uncle, and then refuse to be friends, can you?"

"Thank you, George."

"That's better."

"Do I look quite all right now?" asked Elizabeth, trying to see over her left shoulder.

"You look - oh! you look - you look all right," said George, curbing himself sternly.

"It was all so sudden, you see," explained the girl.

"It must have been."

"He saw us in the taxi, and then at the station I just bolted in here knowing he was close behind me. Where is this train going to, by the way?"

"Rowland's Castle," said George firmly.

The girl looked puzzled.

"Rowland's Castle?"

"Not at once, of course. Only after a good deal of stopping and slow going. But I confidently expect to be there before midnight. The old South-Western was a very reliable line - slow but sure - and I'm sure the Southern Railway is keeping up the old traditions."

"I don't know that I want to go to Rowland's Castle," said Elizabeth doubtfully.

"You hurt me. It's a delightful spot."

"Have you ever been there?"

"Not exactly. But there are lots of other places you can go to, if you don't fancy Rowland's Castle. There's Woking, and Weybridge, and Wimbledon. The train is sure to stop at one or other of them."

"I see," said the girl. "Yes, I can get out there, and perhaps motor back to London. That would be the best plan, I think."

Even as she spoke, the train began to slow up. Mr Rowland gazed at her with appealing eyes.

"If I can do anything -"

"No, indeed. You've done a lot already."

There was a pause, then the girl broke out suddenly:

"I - I wish I could explain. I -"

"For heaven's sake, don't do that! It would spoil everything. But look here, isn't there anything that I could do? Carry the secret papers to Vienna - or something of that kind? There always are secret papers. Do give me a chance."

The train had stopped. Elizabeth jumped quickly out onto the platform. She turned and spoke to him through the window.

"Are you in earnest? Would you really do something for us - for me?"

"I'd do anything in the world for you, Elizabeth."

"Even if I could give you no reasons?"

"Rotten things, reasons!"

"Even if it were - dangerous?"

"The more danger, the better."

She hesitated a minute, then seemed to make up her mind.

"Lean out of the window. Look down the platform as though you weren't really looking." Mr Rowland endeavoured to comply with this somewhat difficult recommendation. "Do you see that man getting in - with a small dark beard - light overcoat? Follow him, see what he does and where he goes."

"Is that all?" asked Mr Rowland. "What do I -"

She interrupted him.

"Further instructions will be sent to you. Watch him - and guard this." She thrust a small sealed packet into his hand. "Guard it with your life. It's the key to everything."

The train went on. Mr Rowland remained staring out of the window, watching Elizabeth's tall, graceful figure threading its way down the platform. In his hand he clutched the small sealed packet.

The rest of his journey was both monotonous and uneventful. The train was a slow one. It stopped everywhere. At every station, George's head shot out of the window, in case his quarry should alight. Occasionally he strolled up and down the platform when the wait promised to be a long one, and reassured himself that the man was still there.

The eventual destination of the train was Portsmouth, and it was there that the black-bearded traveller alighted. He made his way to a small second-class hotel where he booked a room. Mr Rowland also booked a room.

The rooms were in the same corridor, two doors from each other. The arrangement seemed satisfactory to George. He was a complete novice in the art of shadowing, but was anxious to acquit himself well, and justify Elizabeth's trust in him.

At dinner George was given a table not far from that of his quarry. The room was not full, and the majority of the diners George put down as commercial travellers, quiet respectable men who ate their food with appetite. Only one man attracted his special notice, a small man with ginger hair and moustache and a suggestion of horsiness in his apparel. He seemed to be interested in George also, and suggested a drink and a game of billiards when the meal had come to a close. But George had just espied the black-bearded man putting on his hat and overcoat, and declined politely. In another minute he was out in the street, gaining fresh insight into the difficult art of shadowing. The chase was a long and a weary one - and in the end it seemed to lead nowhere. After

twisting and turning through the streets of Portsmouth for about four miles, the man returned to the hotel, George hard upon his heels. A faint doubt assailed the latter. Was it possible that the man was aware of his presence? As be debated this point, standing in the hall, the outer door was pushed open, and the little ginger man entered. Evidently he, too, had been out for a stroll.

George was suddenly aware that the beauteous damsel in the office was addressing him.

"Mr Rowland, isn't it? Two gentlemen have called to see you. Two foreign gentlemen. They are in the little room at the end of the passage."

Somewhat astonished, George sought the room in question. Two men who were sitting there rose to their feet and bowed punctiliously.

"Mr Rowland? I have no doubt, sir, that you can guess our identity."

George gazed from one to the other of them. The spokesman was the elder of the two, a grey-haired, pompous gentleman who spoke excellent English. The other was a tall, somewhat pimply young man, with a blond Teutonic cast of countenance which was not rendered more attractive by the fierce scowl which he wore at the present moment.

Somewhat relieved to find that neither of his visitors was the old gentleman he had encountered at Waterloo George assumed his most debonair manner.

"Pray sit down, gentlemen. I'm delighted to make your acquaintance. How about a drink?"

The elder man held up a protesting hand.

"Thank you, Lord Rowland - not for us. We have but a few brief moments - just time for you to answer one question."

"It's very kind of you to elect me to the peerage," said George. "I'm sorry you won't have a drink. And what is this momentous question?"

"Lord Rowland, you left London in company with a certain lady. You arrived here alone. Where is the lady?"

George rose to his feet.

"I fail to understand the question," he said coldly, speaking as much like the hero of a novel as he could. "I have the honour to wish you good evening, gentlemen."

"But you do understand it. You understand it perfectly," cried the younger man, breaking out suddenly. "What have you done with Alexa?"

"Be calm, sir," murmured the other. "I beg of you to be calm."

"I can assure you," said George, "that I know no lady of that name. There is some mistake."

The older man was eyeing him keenly.

"That can hardly be," he said dryly. "I took the liberty of examining the hotel register. You entered yourself as Mr G. Rowland of Rowland's Castle."

George was forced to blush.

"A - a little joke of mine," he explained feebly.

"A somewhat poor subterfuge. Come, let us not beat about the bush. Where is Her Highness?"

"If you mean Elizabeth -"

With a howl of rage the young man flung himself forward again.

"Insolent pig-dog! To speak of her thus."

"I am referring," said the other slowly, "as you very well know, to the Grand Duchess Anastasia Sophia Alexandra Marie Helena Olga Elizabeth of Catonia."

"Oh!" said Mr Rowland helplessly.

He tried to recall all that he had ever known of Catonia. It was, as far as he remembered, a small Balkan kingdom, and he seemed to remember something about a revolution having occurred there. He rallied himself with an effort.

"Evidently we mean the same person," he said cheerfully, "only I call her Elizabeth."

"You will give me satisfaction for that," snarled the younger man. "We will fight."

"Fight?"

"A duel."

"I never fight duels," said Mr Rowland firmly.

"Why not?" demanded the other unpleasantly.

"I'm too afraid of getting hurt."

"Aha! Is that so? Then I will at least pull your nose for you."

The young man advanced fiercely. Exactly what happened was difficult to see, but he described a sudden semicircle in the air and fell to the ground with a heavy thud. He picked himself up in a dazed manner. Mr Rowland was smiling pleasantly.

"As I was saying," he remarked, "I'm always afraid of getting hurt. That's why I thought it well to learn ju-jitsu."

There was a pause. The two foreigners looked doubtfully at this amiable-looking young man, as though they suddenly realized that some dangerous quality lurked behind the pleasant nonchalance of his manner. The young Teuton was white with passion.

"You will repent this," he hissed.

The older man retained his dignity.

"That is your last word, Lord Rowland? You refuse to tell us Her Highness's whereabouts?"

"I am unaware of them myself."

"You can hardly expect me to believe that."

"I am afraid you are of an unbelieving nature, sir."

The other merely shook his head, and murmuring: "This is not the end; you will hear from us again," the two men took their leave.

George passed his hand over his brow. Events were proceeding at a bewildering rate. He was evidently mixed up in a first-class European scandal.

"It might even mean another war," said George hopefully, as he hunted round to see what had become of the man with the black beard.

To his great relief, he discovered him sitting in a corner of the commercial room. George sat down in another corner. In about three minutes the black-bearded man got up and went up to bed. George followed and saw him go into his room and close the door. George heaved a sigh of relief.

"I need a night's rest," he murmured. "Need it badly."

Then a dire thought struck him. Supposing the black-bearded man had realized that George was on his trail? Supposing that he should slip away during the night while George himself was sleeping the sleep of the just? A few minutes' reflection suggested to Mr Rowland a way of dealing with this difficulty. He unravelled one of his socks till he got a good length of neutral-coloured wool, then creeping quietly out of his room, he pasted one end of the wool to the farther side of the stranger's door with stamp paper, carrying the wool across it and along to his own room. There he hung the end with a small silver bell - a relic of last night's entertainment. He surveyed these arrangements with a good deal of satisfaction. Should the black-bearded man attempt to leave his room, George would be instantly warned by the ringing of the bell.

This matter disposed of, George lost no time in seeking his couch. The small packet he placed carefully under his pillow. As he did so, he fell into a momentary brown study. His thoughts could have been translated thus:

"Anastasia Sophia Marie Alexandra Olga Elizabeth. Hang it all, I've missed out one. I wonder now -"

He was unable to go to sleep immediately, being tantalized with his failure to grasp the situation. What was it all about? What was the connection between the escaping Grand Duchess, the sealed packet and the black-bearded man? What was the Grand Duchess escaping from? Were the two foreigners aware that the sealed packet was in his possession? What was it likely to contain?

Pondering these matters, with an irritated sense that he was no nearer their solution, Mr Rowland fell asleep.

He was awakened by the faint jangle of a bell. Not one of those men who awake to instant action, it took him just a minute and a half to realize the situation. Then he jumped up, thrust on some slippers, and, opening the door with the utmost caution, slipped out into the corridor. A faint moving patch of shadow at the far end of the passage showed him the direction taken by his quarry. Moving as noiselessly as possible, Mr Rowland followed the trail. He was just in time to see the black-bearded man disappear into a bathroom. That was puzzling, particularly so as there was a bathroom just opposite his own room. Moving up close to the door, which was ajar, George peered through the crack. The man was on his knees by the side of the bath, doing something to the skirting board immediately behind it. He remained there for about five minutes, then he rose to his feet, and George beat a prudent retreat. Safe in the shadow of his own door, he watched the other pass and regain his own room.

"Good," said George to himself. "The mystery of the bathroom will be investigated tomorrow morning."

He got into bed and slipped his hand under the pillow to assure himself that the precious packet was still there. In another minute, he was scattering the bedclothes in a panic. The packet was gone!

It was a sadly chastened George who sat consuming eggs and bacon the following morning. He had failed Elizabeth. He had allowed the precious packet she had entrusted to his charge to be taken from him, and the "Mystery of the Bathroom" was miserably inadequate. Yes, undoubtedly George had made a mutt of himself.

After breakfast he strolled upstairs again. A chambermaid was standing in the passage looking perplexed.

"Anything wrong, my dear?" said George kindly.

"It's the gentleman here, sir. He asked to be called at half-past eight, and I can't get any answer and the door's locked."

"You don't say so," said George.

An uneasy feeling arose in his own breast. He hurried into his room. Whatever plans he was forming were instantly brushed aside by a most unexpected sight. There on the dressing table was the little packet which had been stolen from him the night before!

George picked it up and examined it. Yes, it was undoubtedly the same. But the seals had been broken. After a minute's hesitation, he unwrapped it. If other people had seen its contents, there was no reason why he should not see them also. Besides, it was possible that the contents had been abstracted. The unwound

paper revealed a small cardboard box, such as jewellers use. George opened it. Inside, nestling on a bed of cotton wool, was a plain gold wedding ring.

He picked it up and examined it. There was no inscription inside - nothing whatever to mark it out from any other wedding ring. George dropped his head into his hands with a groan.

"Lunacy," he murmured. "That's what it is. Stark, staring lunacy. There's no sense anywhere."

Suddenly he remembered the chambermaid's statement, and at the same time he observed that there was a broad parapet outside the window. It was not a feat he would ordinarily have attempted, but he was so aflame with curiosity and anger that he was in the mood to make light of difficulties. He sprang upon the window sill. A few seconds later he was peering in at the window of the room occupied by the black-bearded man. The window was open and the room was empty. A little farther along was a fire escape. It was clear how the quarry had taken his departure.

George jumped in through the window. The missing man's effects were still scattered about. There might be some clue among them to shed light on George's perplexities. He began to hunt about, starting with the contents of a battered kit bag.

It was a sound that arrested his search - a very slight sound, but a sound indubitably in the room. George's glance leapt to the big wardrobe. He sprang up and wrenched open the door. As he did so, a man jumped out from it and went rolling over the floor locked

in George's embrace. He was no mean antagonist. All George's special tricks availed very little. They fell apart at length in sheer exhaustion, and for the first time George saw who his adversary was. It was the little man with the ginger moustache!

"Who the devil are you?" demanded George.

For answer the other drew out a card and handed it to him. George read it aloud.

"Detective-Inspector Jarrold, Scotland Yard."

"That's right, sir. And you'd do well to tell me all you know about this business."

"I would, would I?" said George thoughtfully. "Do you know, inspector, I believe you're right. Shall we adjourn to a more cheerful spot?"

In a quiet corner of the bar George unfolded his soul. Inspector Jarrold listened sympathetically.

"Very puzzling, as you say, sir," he remarked when George had finished. "There's a lot as I can't make head or tail of myself, but there's one or two points I can clear up for you. I was here after Mardenberg (your black-bearded friend) and your turning up and watching him the way you did made me suspicious. I couldn't place you. I slipped into your room last night when you were out of it, and it was I who sneaked the little packet from under your pillow. When

I opened it and found it wasn't what I was after, I took the first opportunity of returning it to your room."

"That makes things a little clearer certainly," said George thoughtfully. "I seem to have made rather an ass of myself all through."

"I wouldn't say that, sir. You did uncommon well for a beginner. You say you visited the bathroom this morning and took away what was concealed behind the skirting board?"

"Yes. But it's only a rotten love letter," said George gloomily. "Dash it all, I didn't mean to go nosing out the poor fellow's private life."

"Would you mind letting me see it, sir?"

George took a folded letter from his pocket and passed it to the inspector. The latter unfolded it.

"As you say, sir. But I rather fancy that if you drew lines from one dotted i to another, you'd get a different result. Why, bless you, sir, this is a plan of the Portsmouth harbour defences."

"What?"

"Yes. We've had our eye on the gentleman for some time. But he was too sharp for us. Got a woman to do most of the dirty work."

"A woman?" said George in a faint voice. "What was her name?"

"She goes by a good many, sir. Most usually known as Betty Brighteyes. A remarkably good-looking young woman she is."

"Betty - Brighteyes," said George. "Thank you, inspector."

"Excuse me, sir, but you're not looking well."

"I'm not well. I'm very ill. In fact, I think I'd better take the first train back to town."

The inspector looked at his watch.

"That will be a slow train, I'm afraid, sir. Better wait for the express."

"It doesn't matter," said George gloomily. "No train could be slower than the one I came down by yesterday."

Seated once more in a first-class carriage, George leisurely perused the day's news. Suddenly he sat bolt upright and stared at the sheet in front of him.

"A romantic wedding took place yesterday in London when Lord Roland Gaigh, second son of the Marquis of Axminster, was married to the Grand Duchess Anastasia of Catonia. The ceremony was kept a profound secret. The Grand Duchess has been living in Paris with her uncle since the upheaval in Catonia. She met Lord Roland when he was secretary to the British Embassy in Catonia and their attachment dates from that time."

"Well, I'm -"

Mr Rowland could not think of anything strong enough to express his feelings. He continued to stare into space. The train stopped at a small station and a lady got in. She sat down opposite him.

"Good morning, George," she said sweetly.

"Good heavens!" cried George. "Elizabeth!"

She smiled at him. She was, if possible, lovelier than ever.

"Look here," cried George, clutching his head. "For God's sake tell me. Are you the Grand Duchess Anastasia, or are you Betty Brighteyes?"

She stared at him.

"I'm not either. I'm Elizabeth Gaigh. I can tell you all about it now. And I've got to apologize too. You see, Roland (that's my brother) has always been in love with Alexa -"

"Meaning the Grand Duchess?"

"Yes that's what the family call her. Well, as I say, Roland was always in love with her, and she with him. And then the revolution came, and Alexa was in Paris, and they were just going to fix it up when old Stьrm, the chancellor, came along and insisted on

carrying off Alexa and forcing her to marry Prince Karl, her cousin, a horrid pimply person -"

"I fancy I've met him," said George.

"Whom she simply hates. And old Prince Osric, her uncle, forbade her to see Roland again. So she ran away to England, and I came up to town and met her, and we wired to Roland, who was in Scotland. And just at the very last minute, when we were driving to the Registry Office in a taxi, whom should we meet in another taxi face to face, but old Prince Osric. Of course he followed us, and we were at our wits' end what to do because he'd have made the most fearful scene, and, anyway, he is her guardian. Then I had the brilliant idea of changing places. You can practically see nothing of a girl nowadays but the tip of her nose. I put on Alexa's red hat and brown wrap coat, and she put on my grey. Then we told the taxi to go to Waterloo, and I skipped out there and hurried into the station. Old Osric followed the red hat all right, without a thought for the other occupant of the taxi sitting huddled up inside, but of course it wouldn't do for him to see my face. So I just bolted into your carriage and threw myself on your mercy."

"I've got that all right," said George. "It's the rest of it."

"I know. That's what I've got to apologize about. I hope you won't be awfully cross. You see, you looked so keen on its being a real mystery - like in books, that I really couldn't resist the temptation. I picked out a rather sinister-looking man on the platform and told you to follow him. And then I thrust the parcel on you."

"Containing a wedding ring."

"Yes. Alexa and I bought that, because Roland wasn't due to arrive from Scotland until just before the wedding. And of course I knew that by the time I got to London, they wouldn't want it - they would have had to use a curtain ring or something."

"I see," said George. "It's like all these things - so simple when you know! Allow me, Elizabeth."

He stripped off her left glove and uttered a sigh of relief at the sight of the bare third finger.

"That's all right," he remarked. "That ring won't be wasted after all."

"Oh!" cried Elizabeth. "But I don't know anything about you."

"You know how nice I am," said George. "By the way, it has just occurred to me, you are the Lady Elizabeth Gaigh, of course."

"Oh! George, are you a snob?"

"As a matter of fact, I am, rather. My best dream was one where King George borrowed half a crown from me to see him over the weekend. But I was thinking of my uncle - the one from whom I am estranged. He's a frightful snob. When he knows I'm going to marry you, and that we'll have a title in the family, he'll make me a partner at once!"

"Oh! George, is he very rich?"

"Elizabeth, are you mercenary?"

"Very. I adore spending money. But I was thinking of Father. Five daughters, full of beauty and blue blood. He's just yearning for a rich son-in-law."

"H'm," said George. "It will be one of those marriages made in heaven and approved on earth. Shall we live at Rowland's Castle? They'd be sure to make me Lord Mayor with you for a wife. Oh! Elizabeth, darling, it's probably contravening the company's bylaws, but I simply must kiss you!"

SING A SONG OF SIXPENCE

Sir Edward Palliser, K.C., lived at No. 9 Queen Anne's Close. Queen Anne's Close is a cul-de-sac. In the very heart of Westminster it manages to have a peaceful Old World atmosphere far removed from the turmoil of the twentieth century. It suited Sir Edward Palliser admirably.

Sir Edward had been one of the most eminent criminal barristers of his day and now that he no longer practiced at the bar he had amused himself by amassing a very fine criminological library. He

was also the author of a volume of Reminiscences of Eminent Criminals.

On this particular evening Sir Edward was sitting in front of his library fire, sipping some very excellent black coffee and shaking his head over a volume of Lombroso. Such ingenious theories and so completely out of date!

The door opened almost noiselessly and his well-trained manservant approached over the thick pile carpet, and murmured discreetly:

"A young lady wishes to see you, sir."

"A young lady!"

Sir Edward was surprised. Here was something quite out of the usual course of events. Then he reflected that it might be his niece, Ethel - but no, in that case Armour would have said so.

He inquired cautiously. "The lady did not give her name?"

"No, sir, but she said she was quite sure you would wish to see her."

"Show her in," said Sir Edward Palliser. He felt pleasurably intrigued.

A tall, dark girl of close on thirty, wearing a black coat and skirt, well cut, and a little black hat, came to Sir Edward with

outstretched hand and a look of eager recognition on her face. Armour withdrew, closing the door noiselessly behind him.

"Sir Edward - you do know me, don't you? I'm Magdalen Vaughan."

"Why, of course." He pressed the outstretched hand warmly.

He remembered her perfectly now. That trip home from America on the Siluric! This charming child - for she had been little more than a child. He had made love to her, he remembered, in a discreet, elderly man-of-the-world fashion. She had been so adorably young - so eager - so full of admiration and hero-worship - just made to captivate the heart of a man near sixty. The remembrance brought additional warmth into the pressure of his hand.

"This is most delightful of you. Sit down, won't you." He arranged an armchair for her, talking easily and evenly, wondering all the time why she had come. When at last he brought the easy flow of small talk to an end, there was a silence.

Her hand closed and unclosed on the arm of the chair, she moistened her lips. Suddenly she spoke - abruptly.

"Sir Edward - I want you to help me."

He was surprised and murmured mechanically: "Yes?"

She went on, speaking more intensely: "You said that if ever I needed help - that if there were anything in the world you could do for me - you would do it."

Yes, he had said that. It was the sort of thing one did say - particularly at the moment of parting. He could recall the break in his voice - the way he had raised her hand to his lips.

"If there is ever anything I can do - remember, I mean it..."

Yes, one said that sort of thing... But very, very rarely did one have to fulfil one's words! And certainly not after - how many? - nine or ten years. He flashed a quick glance at her - she was still a very good-looking girl, but she had lost what had been to him her charm - that look of dewy untouched youth. It was a more interesting face now, perhaps - a younger man might have thought so - but Sir Edward was far from feeling the tide of warmth and emotion that had been his at the end of that Atlantic voyage.

His face became legal and cautious. He said in a rather brisk way: "Certainly, my dear young lady, I shall be delighted to do anything in my power - though I doubt if I can be very helpful to anyone in these days."

If he were preparing his way of retreat she did not notice it. She was of the type that can only see one thing at a time and what she was seeing at this moment was her own need. She took Sir Edward's willingness to help for granted.

"We are in terrible trouble, Sir Edward."

"We? You are married?"

"No - I meant my brother and I. Oh, and William and Emily, too, for that matter. But I must explain. I have - I had an aunt - Miss Crabtree. You may have read about her in the papers? It was horrible. She was killed - murdered."

"Ah!" A flash of interest lit up Sir Edward's face. "About a month ago, wasn't it?"

The girl nodded. "Rather less than that - three weeks."

"Yes, I remember. She was hit on the head in her own house. They didn't get the fellow who did it."

Again Magdalen Vaughan nodded. "They didn't get the man - I don't believe they ever will get the man. You see - there mightn't be any man to get."

"What?"

"Yes - it's awful. Nothing's come out about it in the papers. But that's what the police think. They know nobody came to the house that night."

"You mean -?"

"That it's one of us four. It must be. They don't know which - and we don't know which... We don't know. And we sit there every day

looking at each other surreptitiously and wondering. Oh! if only it could have been someone from outside - but I don't see how it can..."

Sir Edward stared at her, his interest rising.

"You mean that the members of the family are under suspicion?"

"Yes, that's what I mean. The police haven't said so, of course. They've been quite polite and nice. But they've ransacked the house, they've questioned us all, and Martha again and again... And because they don't know which, they're holding their hand. I'm so frightened - so horribly frightened..."

"My dear child. Come now, surely you are exaggerating."

"I'm not. It's one of us four - it must be."

"Who are the four to whom you refer?"

Magdalen sat up straight and spoke more composedly.

"There's myself and Matthew. Aunt Lily was our great aunt. She was my grandmother's sister. We've lived with her ever since we were fourteen (we're twins, you know). Then there was William Crabtree. He was her nephew - her brother's child. He lived there, too, with his wife, Emily."

"She supported them?"

"More or less. He has a little money of his own, but he's not strong and has to live at home. He's a quiet, dreamy sort of man. I'm sure it would have been impossible for him to have - oh! it's awful of me to think of it even!"

"I am still very far from understanding the position. Perhaps you would not mind running over the facts - if it does not distress you too much."

"Oh, no! I want to tell you. And it's all quite clear in my mind still - horribly clear. We'd had tea, you understand, and we'd all gone off to do things of our own. I to do some dressmaking, Matthew to type an article - he does a little journalism; William to do his stamps. Emily hadn't been down to tea. She'd taken a headache powder and was lying down. So there we were, all of us, busy and occupied. And when Martha went in to lay supper at half-past seven, there Aunt Lily was - dead. Her head - oh, it's horrible! - all crushed in."

"The weapon was found, I think?"

"Yes. It was a heavy paper weight that always lay on the table by the door. The police tested it for fingerprints, but there were none. It had been wiped clean."

"And your first surmise?"

"We thought, of course, it was a burglar. There were two or three drawers of the bureau pulled out, as though a thief had been looking for something. Of course we thought it was a burglar! And

then the police came - and they said she had been dead at least an hour, and asked Martha who had been to the house, and Martha said nobody. And all the windows were fastened on the inside, and there seemed no signs of anything having been tampered with. And then they began to ask us questions..."

She stopped. Her breast heaved. Her eyes, frightened and imploring, sought Sir Edward's in search of reassurance.

"For instance, who benefited by your aunt's death?"

"That's simple. We all benefit equally. She left her money to be divided in equal shares among the four of us."

"And what was the value of her estate?"

"The lawyer told us it will come to about eighty thousand pounds after the death duties are paid."

Sir Edward opened his eyes in some slight surprise.

"That is quite a considerable sum. You knew, I suppose, the total of your aunt's fortune?"

Magdalen shook her head.

"No - it came quite as a surprise to us. Aunt Lily was always terribly careful about money. She kept just the one servant and always talked a lot about economy."

Sir Edward nodded thoughtfully. Magdalen leaned forward a little in her chair.

"You will help me - you will?"

Her words came to Sir Edward as an unpleasant shock just at the moment when he was becoming interested in her story for its own sake.

"My dear young lady - what can I possibly do? If you want good legal advice, I can give you the name -"

She interrupted him. "Oh! I don't want that sort of thing! I want you to help me personally - as a friend."

"That's very charming of you, but -"

"I want you to come to our house. I want you to ask questions. I want you to see and judge for yourself. "

"But my dear young -"

"Remember, you promised. Anywhere - any time - you said, if I wanted help..."

Her eyes, pleading yet confident, looked into his. He felt ashamed and strangely touched. That terrific sincerity of hers, that absolute belief in an idle promise, ten years old, as a sacred binding thing. How many men had not said those self-same words - a clichй

almost! - and how few of them had ever been called upon to make good.

He said rather weakly: "I'm sure there are many people who would advise you better than I could."

"I've got lots of friends - naturally." (He was amused by the naive self-assurance of that.) "But, you see, none of them are clever. Not like you. You're used to questioning people. And with all your experience you must know."

"Know what?"

"Whether they're innocent or guilty."

He smiled rather grimly to himself. He flattered himself that, on the whole, he usually had known! Though, on many occasions, his private opinion had not been that of the jury.

Magdalen pushed back her hat from her forehead with a nervous gesture, looked round the room, and said: "How quiet it is here. Don't you sometimes long for some noise?"

The cul-de-sac! All unwittingly her words, spoken at random, touched him on the raw. A cul-de-sac. Yes, but there was always a way out - the way you had come - the way back into the world... Something impetuous and youthful stirred in him. Her simple trust appealed to the best side of his nature - and the condition of her problem appealed to something else - the innate criminologist in

him. He wanted to see these people of whom she spoke. He wanted to form his own judgment.

He said: "If you are really convinced I can be of any use... Mind, I guarantee nothing."

He expected her to be overwhelmed with delight, but she took it very calmly.

"I knew you would do it. I've always thought of you as a real friend. Will you come back with me now?"

"No. I think if I pay you a visit tomorrow it will be more satisfactory. Will you give me the name and address of Miss Crabtree's lawyer? I may want to ask him a few questions."

She wrote it down and handed it to him. Then she got up and said rather shyly: "I - I'm really most awfully grateful. Good-bye."

"And your own address?"

"How stupid of me. 18 Palatine Walk, Chelsea."

It was three o'clock on the following afternoon when Sir Edward Palliser approached the 18 Palatine Walk with a sober, measured tread. In the interval he had found out several things. He had paid a visit that morning to Scotland Yard, where the Assistant Commissioner was an old friend of his, and he had also had an

interview with the late Miss Crabtree's lawyer. As a result he had a clearer vision of the circumstances. Miss Crabtree's arrangements in regard to money had been somewhat peculiar. She never made use of a check book. Instead she was in the habit of writing to her lawyer and asking him to have a certain sum in five-pound notes waiting for her. It was nearly always the same sum. Three hundred pounds four times a year. She came to fetch it herself in a four-wheeler, which she regarded as the only safe means of conveyance. At other times she never left the house.

At Scotland Yard Sir Edward learned that the question of finance had been gone into very carefully. Miss Crabtree had been almost due for her next instalment of money. Presumably the previous three hundred had been spent - or almost spent. But this was exactly the point that had not been easy to ascertain. By checking the household expenditure, it was soon evident that Miss Crabtree's expenditure per quarter fell a good deal short of the three hundred. On the other hand, she was in the habit of sending five-pound notes to needy friends and relatives. Whether there had been much or little money in the house at the time of her death was a debatable point. None had been found.

It was this particular point which Sir Edward was revolving in his mind as he approached Palatine Walk.

The door of the house (which was a non-basement one) was opened to him by a small elderly woman with an alert gaze. He was shown into a big double room on the left of the small hallway and there Magdalen came to him. More clearly than before, he saw the traces of nervous strain in her face.

"You told me to ask questions, and I have come to do so," said Sir Edward, smiling as he shook hands. "First of all, I want to know who last saw your aunt and exactly what time that was?"

"It was after tea - five o'clock. Martha was the last person with her. She had been paying the books that afternoon, and brought Aunt Lily the change and the accounts."

"You trust Martha?"

"Oh, absolutely. She was with Aunt Lily for - oh, thirty years, I suppose. She's honest as the day."

Sir Edward nodded.

"Another question. Why did your cousin, Mrs Crabtree, take a headache powder?"

"Well, because she had a headache."

"Naturally, but was there any particular reason why she should have a headache?"

"Well, yes, in a way. There was rather a scene at lunch. Emily is very excitable and highly strung. She and Aunt Lily used to have rows sometimes."

"And they had one at lunch?"

"Yes. Aunt Lily was rather trying about little things. It all started out of nothing - and then they were at it hammer and tongs - with Emily saying all sorts of things she couldn't possibly have meant - that she'd leave the house and never come back - that she was grudged every mouthful she ate - oh, all sorts of silly things. And Aunt Lily said the sooner she and her husband packed their boxes and went the better. But it all meant nothing, really."

"Because Mr and Mrs Crabtree couldn't afford to pack up and go?"

"Oh, not only that. William was fond of Aunt Emily. He really was."

"It wasn't a day of quarrels, by any chance?"

Magdalen's color heightened.

"You mean me? The fuss about my wanting to be a manikin?"

"Your aunt wouldn't agree?"

"No."

"Why did you want to be a manikin, Miss Magdalen? Does the life strike you as a very attractive one?"

"No, but anything would be better than going on living here."

"Yes, then. But now you will have a comfortable income, won't you?"

"Oh, yes, it's quite different now."

She made the admission with the utmost simplicity.

He smiled but pursued the subject no further. Instead he said: "And your brother? Did he have a quarrel, too?"

"Matthew? Oh, no."

"Then no one can say he had a motive for wishing his aunt out of the way?"

He was quick to seize on the momentary dismay that showed in her face.

"I forgot," he said casually. "He owed a good deal of money, didn't he?"

"Yes; poor old Matthew."

"Still, that will be all right now."

"Yes -" She sighed. "It is a relief."

And still she saw nothing! He changed the subject hastily.

"Your cousins and your brother are at home?"

"Yes; I told them you were coming. They are all so anxious to help. Oh, Sir Edward - I feel, somehow, that you are going to find out that

everything is all right - that none of us had anything to do with it - that, after all, it was an outsider."

"I can't do miracles. I may be able to find out the truth, but I can't make the truth be what you want it to be."

"Can't you? I feel that you could do anything - anything."

She left the room. He thought, disturbed, "What did she mean by that? Does she want me to suggest a line of defense? For whom?"

His meditations were interrupted by the entrance of a man about fifty years of age. He had a naturally powerful frame, but stooped slightly. His clothes were untidy and his hair carelessly brushed. He looked good-natured but vague.

"Sir Edward Palliser? Oh, how do you do? Magdalen sent me along, It's very good of you, I'm sure, to wish to help us, though I don't think anybody will ever be really discovered. I mean, they won't catch the fellow.

"You think it was a burglar, then - someone from outside?"

"Well, it must have been. It couldn't be one of the family. These fellows are very clever nowadays, they climb like cats and they get in and out as they like."

"Where were you, Mr Crabtree, when the tragedy occurred?"

"I was busy with my stamps - in my little sitting-room upstairs."

"You didn't hear anything?"

"No - but then I never do hear anything when I'm absorbed. Very foolish of me, but there it is."

"Is the sitting-room you refer to over this room?"

"No, it's at the back."

Again the door opened. A small, fair woman entered. Her hands were twitching nervously. She looked fretful and excited.

"William, why didn't you wait for me? I said 'wait.'"

"Sorry, my dear, I forgot. Sir Edward Palliser - my wife."

"How do you do, Mrs Crabtree? I hope you don't mind my coming here to ask a few questions. I know how anxious you, must all be to have things cleared up."

"Naturally. But I can't tell you anything - can I, William? I was asleep - on my bed - I only woke up when Martha screamed."

Her hands continued to twitch.

"Where is your room, Mrs Crabtree?"

"It's over this. But I didn't hear anything - how could I? I was asleep."

He could get nothing out of her but that. She knew nothing - she had heard nothing - she had been asleep. She reiterated it with the obstinacy of a frightened woman. Yet Sir Edward knew very well that it might easily be - probably was - the bare truth.

He excused himself at last - said he would like to put a few questions to Martha. William Crabtree volunteered to take him to the kitchen. In the hall Sir Edward nearly collided with a tall, dark young man who was striding towards the front door.

"Mr Matthew Vaughan?"

"Yes - but, look here, I can't wait. I've got an appointment."

"Matthew!" It was his sister's voice from the stairs. "Oh, Matthew, you promised -"

"I know, sis. But I can't. Got to meet a fellow. And, anyway, what's the good of talking about the damned thing over and over again. We have enough of that with the police. I'm fed up with the whole show."

The front door banged. Mr Matthew Vaughan had made his exit.

Sir Edward was introduced into the kitchen. Martha was ironing. She paused, iron in hand. Sir Edward shut the door behind him.

"Miss Vaughan has asked me to help her," he said. "I hope you won't object to my asking you a few questions."

She looked at him, then shook her head.

"None of them did it, sir. I know what you're thinking, but it isn't so. As nice a set of ladies and gentlemen as you could wish to see."

"I've no doubt of it. But their niceness isn't what we call evidence, you know."

"Perhaps not. sir. The law's a funny thing. But there is evidence - as you call it. sir. None of them could have done it without my knowing."

"But surely -"

"I know what I'm talking about, sir. There, listen to that -"

"That" was a creaking sound above their heads.

"The stairs, sir. Every time anyone goes up or down, the stairs creak something awful. It doesn't matter how quiet you go. Mrs Crabtree, she was lying on her bed, and Mr Crabtree was fiddling about with them wretched stamps of his, and Miss Magdalen she was up above, working her sewing machine, and if anyone of those three had come down the stairs I should have known it. And they didn't!"

She spoke with a positive assurance which impressed the barrister. He thought: "A good witness. She'd carry weight."

"You mightn't have noticed."

"Yes, I would. I'd have noticed without noticing, so to speak. Like you notice when a door shuts and somebody goes out."

Sir Edward shifted his ground.

"That is three of them accounted for, but there is a fourth. Was Mr Matthew Vaughan upstairs also?"

"No, but he was in the little room downstairs. Next door. And he was typewriting. You can hear it plain in here. His machine never stopped for a moment. Not for a moment, sir. I can swear to it. A nasty, irritating tap-tapping noise it is, too."

Sir Edward paused a minute.

"It was you who found her, wasn't it?"

"Yes, sir, it was. Lying there with blood on her poor hair. And no one hearing a sound on account of the tap-tapping of Mr Matthew's typewriter."

"I understand you are positive that no one came to the house?"

"How could they, sir, without my knowing? The bell rings in here. And there's only the one door."

He looked at her straight in the face.

"You were attached to Miss Crabtree?"

A warm glow - genuine - unmistakable - came into her face.

"Yes, indeed, I was, sir. But for Miss Crabtree - well, I'm getting on and I don't mind speaking of it now. I got into trouble, sir, when I was a girl, and Miss Crabtree stood by me - took me back into her service, she did. when it was all over. I'd have died for her - I would indeed."

Sir Edward knew sincerity when he heard it. Martha was sincere.

"As far as you know, no one came to the door -?"

"No one could have come."

"I said as far as you know. But if Miss Crabtree had been expecting someone - if she opened the door to that someone herself..."

"Oh!" Martha seemed taken back.

"That's possible, I suppose?" Sir Edward urged.

"It's possible - yes - but it isn't very likely. I mean..."

She was clearly taken aback. She couldn't deny and yet she wanted to do so. Why? Because she knew that the truth lay elsewhere. Was that it? The four people in the house - one of them guilty? Did Martha want to shield that guilty party? Had the stairs

creaked? Had someone come stealthily down and did Martha know who that someone was?

She herself was honest - Sir Edward was convinced of that.

He pressed his point, watching her.

"Miss Crabtree might have done that, I suppose? The window of that room faces the street. She might have seen whoever it was she was waiting for from the window and gone out into the hall and let him - or her - in. She might even have wished that no one should see the person."

Martha looked troubled. She said at last reluctantly:

"Yes, you may be right, sir. I never thought of that. That she was expecting a gentleman - yes, it well might be."

It was as though she began to perceive advantages in the idea.

"You were the last person to see her, were you not?"

"Yes, sir. After I'd cleared away the tea. I took the receipted books to her and the change from the money she'd given me."

"Had she given the money to you in five-pound notes?"

"A five-pound note, sir," said Martha in a shocked voice. "The books never came up as high as five pounds. I'm very careful."

"Where did she keep her money?"

"I don't rightly know, sir. I should say that she carried it about with her - in her black velvet bag. But of course she may have kept it in one of the drawers in her bedroom that were locked. She was very fond of locking up things, though prone to lose her keys."

Sir Edward nodded. "You don't know how much money she had - in five-pound notes, I mean?"

"No, sir, I couldn't say what the exact amount was."

"And she said nothing to you that could lead you to believe that she was expecting anybody?"

"No, sir."

"You're quite sure? What exactly did she say?"

"Well," Martha considered, "she said the butcher was nothing more than a rogue and a cheat, and she said I'd had in a quarter of a pound of tea more than I ought, and she said Mrs Crabtree was full of nonsense for not liking to eat margarine, and she didn't like one of the sixpences I'd brought her back - one of the new ones with oak leaves on it - she said it was bad, and I had a lot of trouble to convince her. And she said - oh, that the fishmonger had sent haddocks instead of whitings, and had I told him about it, and I said I had - and, really, I think that's all, sir."

Martha's speech had made the deceased lady loom clear to Sir Edward as a detailed description would never have done. He said casually: "Rather a difficult mistress to please, eh?"

"A bit fussy, but there, poor dear, she didn't often get out, and staying cooped up she had to leave something to amuse herself like. She was pernickety but kindhearted - never a beggar sent away from the door without something. Fussy she may have been, but a real charitable lady."

"I am glad, Martha, that she leaves one person to regret her."

The old servant caught her breath.

"You mean - oh, but they were all fond of her - really - underneath. They all had words with her now and again, but it didn't mean anything."

Sir Edward lifted his head. There was a crack above.

"That's Miss Magdalen coming down."

"How do you know?" he shot at her.

The old woman flushed. "I know her step," she muttered.

Sir Edward left the kitchen rapidly. Martha had been right. Magdalen had just reached the bottom stair. She looked at him hopefully.

"Not very far on as yet," said Sir Edward, answering her look, and added, "You don't happen to know what letters your aunt received on the day of her death?"

"They are all together. The police have been through them, of course."

She led the way to the big double drawing-room and, unlocking a drawer, took out a large black velvet bag with an old-fashioned silver clasp.

"This is Aunt's bag. Everything is in here just as it was on the day of her death. I've kept it like that."

Sir Edward thanked her and proceeded to turn out the contents of the bag on the table. It was, he fancied, a fair specimen of an eccentric elderly lady's handbag.

There were some odd silver change, two ginger nuts, three newspaper cuttings about Joanna Southcott's box, a trashy, printed poem about the unemployed, an Old Moore's Almanack, a large piece of camphor, some spectacles, and three letters. A spidery one from someone called "Cousin Lucy," a bill for mending a watch, and an appeal from a charitable institution.

Sir Edward went through everything very carefully, then repacked the bag and handed it to Magdalen with a sigh.

"Thank you, Miss Magdalen. I'm afraid there isn't much there."

He rose, observed that the window commanded a good view of the front door steps, then took Magdalen's hand in his.

"You are going?"

"Yes."

"But it's - it's going to be all right?"

"Nobody connected with the law ever commits himself to a rash statement like that," said Sir Edward solemnly, and made his escape.

He walked along the street, lost in thought. The puzzle was there under his hand - and he had not solved it. It needed something - some little thing. Just to point the way.

A hand fell on his shoulder and he started. It was Matthew Vaughan, somewhat out of breath.

"I've been chasing you, Sir Edward. I want to apologize. For my rotten manners half an hour ago. But I've not got the best temper in the world, I'm afraid. It's awfully good of you to bother about this business. Please ask me whatever you like. If there's anything I can do to help -"

Suddenly Sir Edward stiffened. His glance was fixed - not on Matthew - but across the street. Somewhat bewildered, Matthew repeated: "If there's anything I can do to help -"

"You have already done it, my dear young man," said Sir Edward. "By stopping me at this particular spot and so fixing my attention on something I might otherwise have missed."

He pointed across the street to a small restaurant opposite.

"The Four and Twenty Blackbirds?" asked Matthew in a puzzled voice.

"Exactly."

"It's an odd name - but you get quite decent food there, I believe."

"I shall not take the risk of experimenting," said Sir Edward. "Being further from my nursery days than you are, my young friend, I probably remember my nursery rhymes better. There is a classic that runs thus, if I remember rightly: Sing a song of sixpence, a pocket full of rye, Four and twenty blackbirds baked in a pie - and so on. The rest of it does not concern us."

He wheeled round sharply.

"Where are you going?" asked Matthew Vaughan.

"Back to your house, my friend."

They walked there in silence, Matthew Vaughan shooting puzzled glances at his companion. Sir Edward entered, strode to a drawer, lifted out a velvet bag, and opened it. He looked at Matthew and the young man reluctantly left the room.

Sir Edward tumbled out the silver change on the table. Then he nodded. His memory had not been at fault.

He got up and rang the bell, slipping something into the palm of his hand as he did so.

Martha answered the bell.

"You told me, Martha, if I remember rightly, that you had a slight altercation with your late mistress over one of the new sixpences."

"Yes, sir."

"Ah! but the curious thing is, Martha, that among this loose change, there is no new sixpence. There are two sixpences, but they are both old ones."

She stared at him in a puzzled fashion.

"You see what that means? Someone did come to the house that evening - someone to whom your mistress gave sixpence... I think she gave it to him in exchange for this..."

With a swift movement he shot his hand forward, holding out the doggerel verse about unemployment.

One glance at her face was enough.

"The game is up, Martha - you see, I know. You may as well tell me everything."

She sank down on a chair - the tears raced down her face.

"It's true - it's true - the bell didn't ring properly - I wasn't sure, and then I thought I'd better go and see. I got to the door just as he struck her down. The roll of five-pound notes was on the table in front of her - it was the sight of them as made him do it - that and thinking she was alone in the house as she'd let him in. I couldn't scream. I was too paralyzed and then he turned - and I saw it was my boy...

"Oh, he's been a bad one always. I gave him all the money I could. He's been in jail twice. He must have come around to see me, and then Miss Crabtree, seeing as I didn't answer the door, went to answer it herself, and he was taken aback and pulled out one of those unemployment leaflets, and the mistress being kind of charitable, told him to come in, and got out a sixpence. And all the time that roll of notes was lying on the table where it had been when I was giving her the change. And the devil got into my Ben and he got behind her and struck her down."

"And then?" asked Sir Edward.

"Oh, sir, what could I do? My own flesh and blood. His father was a bad one, and Ben takes after him - but he was my own son. I hustled him out, and I went back to the kitchen, and I went to lay for supper at the usual time. Do you think it was very wicked of me, sir? I tried to tell you no lies when you was asking me questions."

Sir Edward rose.

"My poor woman," he said with feeling in his voice. "I am very sorry for you. All the same, the law will have to take its course, you know."

"He's fled the country, sir. I don't know where he is."

"There's a chance, then, that he may escape the gallows, but don't build upon it. Will you send Miss Magdalen to me?"

"Oh, Sir Edward. How wonderful of you - how wonderful you are," said Magdalen when he had finished his brief recital. "You've saved us all. How can I ever thank you?"

Sir Edward smiled down at her and patted her hand gently. He was very much the great man. Little Magdalen had been very charming on the Siluric. That bloom of seventeen - wonderful! She had completely lost it now, of course.

"Next time you need a friend -" he said.

"I'll come straight to you."

"No, no," cried Sir Edward in alarm. "That's just what I don't want you to do. Go to a younger man."

He extricated himself with dexterity from the grateful household and hailing a taxi sank into it with a sigh of relief. Even the charm of a dewy seventeen seemed doubtful.

It could not really compare with a really well-stocked library on criminology.

The taxi turned into Queen Anne's Close.

His cul-de-sac.

THE MANHOOD OF EDWARD ROBINSON

"With a swing of his mighty arms, Bill lifted her right off her feet, crushing her to his breast. With a deep sigh she yielded her lips in such a kiss as he had never dreamed of -"

With a sigh, Mr Edward Robinson put down 'When Love Is King' and stared out of the window of the underground train. They were running through Stamford Brook. Edward Robinson was thinking about Bill. Bill was the real hundred per cent he-man beloved of lady novelists. Edward envied him his muscles, his rugged good looks, and his terrific passions. He picked up the book again and read the description of the proud Marchesa Bianca (she who had

yielded her lips). So ravishing was her beauty, the intoxication of her was so great, that strong men went down before her like ninepins, faint and helpless with love.

"Of course," said Edward to himself, "it's all bosh, this sort of stuff. All bosh, it is. And yet, I wonder -"

His eyes looked wistful. Was there such a thing as a world of romance and adventure somewhere? Where there women whose beauty intoxicated? Was there such a thing as love that devoured one like a flame?

"This is real life, this is," said Edward. "I've got to go on the same just like all the other chaps."

On the whole, he supposed, he ought to consider himself a lucky young man. He had an excellent berth - a clerkship in a flourishing concern. He had good health, no one dependent upon him, and he was engaged to Maud.

But the mere thought of Maud brought a shadow over his face. Though he would never have admitted it, he was afraid of Maud. He loved her - yes - he still remembered the thrill with which he had admired the back of her white neck rising out of the cheap four and elevenpenny blouse on the first occasion they had met. He had sat behind her at the cinema, and the friend he was with had known her and had introduced them. No doubt about it, Maud was very superior. She was good-looking and clever and very ladylike, and she was always right about everything. The kind of girl, everyone said, who would make such an excellent wife.

Edward wondered whether the Marchesa Bianca would have made an excellent wife. Somehow, he doubted it. He couldn't picture the voluptuous Bianca, with her red lips and her swaying form, tamely sewing on buttons, say, for the virile Bill. No, Bianca was Romance, and this was real life. He and Maud would be very happy together. She had so much common sense...

But all the same, he wished that she wasn't quite so - well, sharp in manner. So prone to "jump upon him."

It was, of course, her prudence and her common sense which made her do so. Maud was very sensible. And, as a rule, Edward was very sensible, too, but sometimes - He had wanted to get married this Christmas, for instance. Maud had pointed out how much more prudent it would be to wait a while - a year or two, perhaps. His salary was not large. He had wanted to give her an expensive ring - she had been horror-stricken, and had forced him to take it back and exchange it for a cheaper one. Her qualities were all excellent qualitites, but sometimes Edward wished that she had more faults and less virtues. It was her virtues that drove him to desperate deeds.

For instance -

A blush of guilt overspread his face. He had got to tell her - and tell her soon. His secret guilt was already making him behave strangely. Tomorrow was the first of three days' holiday, Christmas Eve, Christmas Day and Boxing Day. She had suggested that he should come around and spend the day with her people,

and in a clumsy, foolish manner, a manner that could not fail to arouse her suspicions, he had managed to get out of it - had told a long, lying story about a pal of his in the country with whom he had promised to spend the day. And there was no pal in the country. There was only his guilty secret.

Three months ago, Edward Robinson, in company with a few hundred thousand other young men, had gone in for a competition in one of the weekly papers. Twelve girls' names had to be arranged in order of popularity. Edward had had a brilliant idea. His own preference was sure to be wrong - he had noticed that in several similar competitions. He wrote down the twelve names arranged in his own order of merit, then he wrote them down again, this time placing one from the top and one from the bottom of the list alternately.

When the result was announced, Edward had got eight right out of the twelve, and was awarded the first prize of J500. This result, which might easily be ascribed to luck, Edward persisted in regarding as the direct outcome of his "system." He was inordinately proud of himself.

The next thing was, what to do with the J500? He knew very well what Maud would say. Invest it. A nice little nest egg for the future. And, of course, Maud would be quite right, he knew that. But to win money as the result of a competition is an entirely different feeling from anything else in the world.

Had the money been left to him as a legacy, Edward would have invested it religiously in Conversion Loan or Savings Certificates

as a matter of course. But money that one has achieved by a mere stroke of the pen, by a lucky and unbelievable chance, comes under the same heading as a child's sixpence - "for your very own - to spend as you like."

And in a certain rich shop which he passed daily on his way to the office, was the unbelievable dream, a small two-seater car, with a long shining nose, and the price clearly displayed on it - J465.

"If I were rich," Edward had said to it, day after day. "If I were rich, I'd have you."

And now he was - if not rich - at least possessed of a lump sum of money sufficient to realize his dream. That car, that shining, alluring piece of loveliness, was his if he cared to pay the price.

He had meant to tell Maud about the money. Once he had told her, he would have secured himself against temptation. In face of Maud's horror and disapproval, he would never have the courage to persist in his madness. But, as it chanced, it was Maud herself who clinched the matter. He had taken her to the cinema - and to the best seats in the house. She had pointed out to him, kindly but firmly, the criminal folly of his behaviour - wasting good money - three and sixpence against two and fourpence, when one saw just as well from the latter places.

Edward took her reproaches in sullen silence. Maud felt contentedly that she was making an impression. Edward could not be allowed to continue in these extravagant ways. She loved Edward, but she realized that he was weak - hers the task of being

ever at hand to influence him in the way he should go. She observed his wormlike demeanour with satisfaction.

Edward was indeed wormlike. Like worms, he turned. He remained crushed by her words, but it was at that precise minute that he made up his mind to buy the car.

"Damn it," said Edward to himself. "For once in my life, I'll do what I like. Maud can go hang!"

And the very next morning he had walked into that palace of plate glass, with its lordly inmates in their glory of gleaming enamel and shimmering metal, and with an insouciance that surprised himself, he bought the car. It was the easiest thing in the world, buying a car!

It had been his for four days now. He had gone about, outwardly calm, but inwardly bathed in ecstasy. And to Maud he had as yet breathed no word. For four days, in his luncheon hour, he had received instruction in the handling of the lovely creature. He was an apt pupil.

Tomorrow, Christmas Eve, he was to take her out into the country. He had lied to Maud, and he would lie again if need be. He was enslaved body and soul by his new possession. It stood to him for Romance, for Adventure, for all the things that he had longed for and had never had. Tomorrow, he and his mistress would take the road together. They would rush through the keen cold air, leaving the throb and fret of London far behind them - out into the wide, clear spaces...

At this moment, Edward, though he did not know it, was very near to being a poet.

Tomorrow -

He looked down at the book in his hand - When Love Is King. He laughed and stuffed it into his pocket. The car, and the red lips of the Marchesa Bianca, and the amazing prowess of Bill seemed all mixed up together.

Tomorrow -

The weather, usually a sorry jade to those who count upon her, was kindly disposed towards Edward. She gave him the day of his dreams, a day of glittering frost, and pale-blue sky, and a primrose-yellow sun.

So, in a mood of high adventure, of daredevil wickedness, Edward drove out of London. There was trouble at Hyde Park Corner, and a sad contretemps at Putney Bridge, there was much protesting of gears, and a frequent jarring of brakes, and much abuse was freely showered upon Edward by the drivers of other vehicles. But for a novice he did not acquit himself so badly, and presently he came out onto one of those fair, wide roads that are the joy of the motorist. There was little congestion on this particular road today. Edward drove on and on, drunk with his mastery over this creature of the gleaming sides, speeding through the cold white world with the elation of a god.

It was a delirious day. He stopped for lunch at an old-fashioned inn, and again later for tea. Then reluctantly he turned homewards - back again to London, to Maud, to the inevitable explanation, recriminations...

He shook off the thought with a sigh. Let tomorrow look after itself. He still had today. And what could be more fascinating than this? Rushing through the darkness with the headlights searching out the way in front. Why, this was the best of all!

He judged that he had no time to stop anywhere for dinner. This driving through the darkness was a ticklish business. It was going to take longer to get back to London than he had thought. It was just eight o'clock when he passed through Hindhead and came out upon the rim of the Devil's Punch Bowl. There was moonlight, and the snow that had fallen two days ago was still unmelted.

He stopped the car and stood staring. What did it matter if he didn't get back to London until midnight? What did it matter if he never got back? He wasn't going to tear himself away from this all at once.

He got out of the car and approached the edge. There was a path winding down temptingly near him. Edward yielded to the spell. For the next half-hour he wandered deliriously in a snowbound world. Never had he imagined anything quite like this. And it was his, his very own, given to him by his shining mistress who waited for him faithfully on the road above.

He climbed up again, got into the car and drove off, still a little dizzy from that discovery of sheer beauty which comes to the most prosaic men once in a while.

Then, with a sigh, he came to himself, and thrust his hand into the pocket of the car where he had stuffed an additional muffler earlier in the day.

But the muffler was no longer there. The pocket was empty. No, not completely empty - there was something scratchy and hard - like pebbles.

Edward thrust his hand deep down. In another minute he was staring like a man bereft of his senses. The object that he held in his hand, dangling from his fingers, with the moonlight striking a hundred fires from it, was a diamond necklace.

Edward stared and stared. But there was no doubting possible. A diamond necklace worth probably thousands of pounds (for the stones were large ones) had been casually reposing in the side pocket of the car.

But who had put it there? It had certainly not been there when he started from town. Someone must have come along when he was walking about in the snow and deliberately thrust it in. But why? Why choose his car? Had the owner of the necklace made a mistake? Or was it - could it possibly be - a stolen necklace?

And then, as all these thoughts went whirling through his brain, Edward suddenly stiffened and went cold all over. This was not his car.

It was very like it, yes. It was the same brilliant shade of scarlet-red as the Marchesa Bianca's lips - it had the same long and gleaming nose, but by a thousand small signs, Edward realized that it was not his car. Its shining newness was scarred here and there, it bore signs, faint but unmistakable, of wear and tear. In that case...

Edward, without more ado, made haste to turn the car. Turning was not his strong point. With the gear in reverse, he invariably lost his head and twisted the wheel the wrong way. Also, he frequently became entangled between the accelerator and the foot brake with disastrous results. In the end, however, he succeeded, and straightaway the car began purring up the hill again.

Edward remembered that there had been another car standing some little distance away. He had not noticed it particularly at the time. He had returned from his walk by a different path from that by which he had gone down into the hollow. This second path had brought him out on the road immediately behind, as he had thought, his own car. It must really have been the other one.

In about ten minutes he was once more at the spot where he had halted. But there was now no car at all by the roadside. Whoever had owned this car must now have gone off in Edward's - he also, perhaps, misled by the resemblance.

Edward took out the diamond necklace from his pocket and let it run through his fingers perplexedly.

What to do next? Run on to the nearest police station? Explain the circumstances, hand over the necklace, and give the number of his own car.

By the by, what was the number of his car? Edward thought and thought, but for the life of him he couldn't remember. He felt a cold sinking sensation. He was going to look the most utter fool at the police station. There was an eight in it, that was all that he could remember. Of course, it didn't really matter - at least... He looked uncomfortably at the diamonds. Supposing they should think - oh, but they wouldn't - and yet again they might - that he had stolen the car and the diamonds? Because, after all, when one came to think of it, would anyone in their senses thrust a valuable diamond necklace carelessly into the open pocket of a car?

Edward got out and went round to the back of the motor. Its number was XRI006l. Beyond the fact that that was certainly not the number of his car, it conveyed nothing to him. Then he set to work systematically to search all the pockets. In the one where he had found the diamonds he made a discovery - a small scrap of paper with some words pencilled on it. By the light of the headlights, Edward read them easily enough.

"Meet me, Greane, corner of Salter's Lance, ten o'clock."

He remembered the name Greane. He had seen it on a signpost earlier in the day. In a minute, his mind was made up. He would go to this village, Greane, find Salter's Lane, meet the person who had written the note, and explain the circumstances. That would be much better than looking a fool in the local police station.

He started off almost happily. After all, this was an adventure. This was the sort of thing that didn't happen every day. The diamond necklace made it exciting and mysterious.

He had some little difficulty in finding Greane, and still more difficulty in finding Salter's Lane, but after calling at two cottages, he succeeded.

Still, it was a few minutes after the appointed hour when he drove cautiously along a narrow road, keeping a sharp lookout on the left-hand side, where he had been told Salter's Lane branched off.

He came upon it quite suddenly round a bend, and even as he drew up, a figure came forward out of the darkness.

"At last!" a girl's voice cried. "What an age you've been, Gerald!"

As she spoke, the girl stepped right into the glare of the headlights, and Edward caught his breath. She was the most glorious creature he had ever seen.

She was quite young, with hair black as night, and wonderful scarlet lips. The heavy cloak that she wore swung open, and Edward saw that she was in full evening dress - a kind of flame-

coloured sheath, outlining her perfect body. Round her neck was a row of exquisite pearls.

Suddenly the girl started.

"Why," she cried; "it isn't Gerald."

"No," said Edward hastily. "I must explain." He took the diamond necklace from his pocket and held it out to her. "My name is Edward -"

He got no further, for the girl clapped her hands and broke in:

"Edward, of course! I am so glad. But that idiot Jimmy told me over the phone that he was sending Gerald along with the car. It's awfully sporting of you to come. I've been dying to meet you. Remember I haven't seen you since I was six years old. I see you've got the necklace all right. Shove it in your pocket again. The village policeman might come along and see it. Brrr, it's cold as ice waiting here! Let me get in."

As though in a dream Edward opened the door, and she sprang lightly in beside him. Her furs swept his cheek, and an elusive scent, like that of violets after rain, assailed his nostrils.

He had no plan, no definite thought even. In a minute, without conscious volition, he had yielded himself to the adventure. She had called him Edward - what matter if he were the wrong Edward? She would find him out soon enough. In the meantime, let the game go on. He let in the clutch and they glided off.

Presently the girl laughed. Her laugh was just as wonderful as the rest of her.

"It's easy to see you don't know much about cars. I suppose they don't have them out there?"

"I wonder where 'out there' is?" thought Edward. Aloud he said, "Not much."

"Better let me drive," said the girl. "It's tricky work finding your way round these lanes until we get on the main road again."

He relinquished his place to her gladly. Presently they were humming through the night at a pace and with a recklessness that secretly appalled Edward. She turned her head towards him.

"I like pace. Do you? You know - you're not a bit like Gerald. No one would ever take you to be brothers. You're not a bit like what I imagined, either."

"I suppose," said Edward, "that I'm so completely ordinary. Is that it?"

"Not ordinary - different. I can't make you out. How's poor old Jimmy? Very fed-up, I suppose?"

"Oh, Jimmy's all right," said Edward.

"It's easy enough to say that - but it's rough luck on him having a sprained ankle. Did he tell you the whole story?"

"Not a word. I'm completely in the dark. I wish you'd enlighten me."

"Oh, the thing worked like a dream. Jimmy went in at the front door, togged up in his girl's clothes. I gave him a minute or two, and then skinned up to the window. Agnes Larella's maid was there laying out Agnes's dress and jewels, and all the rest. Then there was a great yell downstairs, and the squib went off, and everyone shouted fire. The maid dashed out, and I hopped in, helped myself to the necklace, and was out and down in a flash, and out of the place the back way across the Punch Bowl. I shoved the necklace and the notice where to pick me up in the pocket of the car in passing. Then I joined Louise at the hotel, having shed my snow boots, of course. Perfect alibi for me. She'd no idea I'd been out at all."

"And what about Jimmy?"

"Well, you know more about that than I do."

"Well, in the general rag, he caught his foot in his skirt and managed to sprain it. They had to carry him to the car, and the Larellas' chauffeur drove him home. Just fancy if the chauffeur had happened to put his hand in the pocket!"

Edward laughed with her, but his mind was busy. He understood the position more or less now. The name of Larella was vaguely familiar to him - it was a name that spelt wealth. This girl, and an

unknown man called Jimmy, had conspired together to steal the necklace, and had succeeded. Owing to his sprained ankle and the presence of the Larellas' chauffeur, Jimmy had not been able to look in the pocket of the car before telephoning to the girl - probably had had no wish to do so. But it was almost certain that the other unknown "Gerald" would do so at any early opportunity. And in it, he would find Edward's muffler!

"Good going," said the girl.

A train flashed past them, they were on the outskirts of London. They flashed in and out of the traffic. Edward's heart stood in his mouth. She was a wonderful driver, this girl, but she took risks!

Quarter of an hour later they drew up before an imposing house in a frigid square.

"We can shed some of our clothing here," said the girl, "before we go on to Ritson's."

"Ritson's?" queried Edward. He mentioned the famous nightclub almost reverently.

"Yes, didn't Gerald tell you?"

"He did not," said Edward grimly. "What about my clothes?"

She frowned.

"Didn't they tell you anything? We'll rig you up somehow. We've got to carry this through."

A stately butler opened the door and stood aside to let them enter.

"Mr Gerald Champneys rang up, your ladyship. He was very anxious to speak to you, but he wouldn't leave a message."

"I bet he was anxious to speak to her," said Edward to himself. "At any rate, I know my full name now. Edward Champneys. But who is she? Your ladyship, they called her. What does she want to steal a necklace for? Bridge debts?"

In the magazine stories which he occasionally read, the beautiful and titled heroine was always driven desperate by bridge debts.

Edward was led away by the stately butler and delivered over to a smooth-mannered valet. A quarter of an hour later he rejoined his hostess in the hall, exquisitely attired in evening clothes made in Savile Row which fitted him to a nicety.

Heavens! What a night!

They drove in the car to the famous Ritson's. In common with everyone else, Edward had read scandalous paragraphs concerning Ritson's. Anyone who was anyone turned up at Ritson's sooner or later. Edward's only fear was that someone who knew the real Edward Champneys might turn up. He consoled himself by the reflection that the real man had evidently been out of England for some years.

Sitting at a little table against the wall, they sipped cocktails. Cocktails! To the simple Edward they represented the quintessence of the fast life. The girl, wrapped in a wonderful embroidered shawl, sipped nonchalantly. Suddenly she dropped the shawl from her shoulders and rose.

"Let's dance."

Now the one thing that Edward could do to perfection was to dance. When he and Maud took the floor together at the Palais de Danse, lesser lights stood still and watched in admiration.

"I nearly forgot," said the girl suddenly. "The necklace?"

She held out her hand. Edward, completely bewildered drew it from his pocket and gave it to her. To his utter amazement, she coolly clasped it round her neck. Then she smiled up at him intoxicatingly.

"Now," she said softly, "we'll dance."

They danced. And in all Ritson's nothing more perfect could be seen.

Then, as at length they returned to their table, an old gentleman with a would-be rakish air accosted Edward's companion.

"Ah! Lady Noreen, always dancing! Yes, yes. Is Captain Folliot here tonight?"

"Jimmy's taken a toss - racked his ankle."

"You don't say so? How did that happen?"

"No details as yet."

She laughed and passed on.

Edward followed, his brain in a whirl. He knew now. Lady Noreen Elliot, the famous Lady Noreen herself, perhaps the most talked-of girl in England. Celebrated for her beauty, for her daring - the leader of that set known as the Bright Young People. Her engagement to Captain James Folliot, V.C., of the Household Cavalry, had been recently announced.

But the necklace? He still couldn't understand the necklace. He must risk giving himself away, but know he must.

As they sat down again, he pointed to it.

"Why that, Noreen?" he said. "Tell me why?"

She smiled dreamily, her eyes far away, the spell of the dance still holding her.

"It's difficult for you to understand, I suppose. One gets so tired to the same thing - always the same thing. Treasure hunts were all very well for a while, but one gets used to everything. 'Burglaries' were my idea. Fifty pounds' entrance fee, and lots to be drawn.

This is the third. Jimmy and I drew Agnes Larella. You know the rules? Burglary to be carried out within three days and the loot to be worn for at least an hour in a public place, or you forfeit your stake and a hundred-pound fine. It's rough luck on Jimmy spraining his ankle, but we'll scoop the pool all right."

"I see," said Edward, drawing a deep breath. "I see."

Noreen rose suddenly, pulling her shawl round her.

"Drive me somewhere in the car. Down to the docks. Somewhere horrible and exciting. Wait a minute -" She reached up and unclasped the diamonds from her neck. "You'd better take these again. I don't want to be murdered for them."

They went out of Ritson's together. The car stood in a small by-street, narrow and dark. As they turned the corner towards it, another car drew up to the curb, and a young man sprang out.

"Thank the Lord, Noreen, I've got hold of you at last," he cried. "There's the devil to pay. That ass Jimmy got off with the wrong car. God knows where those diamonds are at this minute. We're in the devil of a mess."

Lady Noreen stared at him.

"What do you mean? We've got the diamonds - at least Edward has."

"Edward?"

"Yes." She might a slight gesture to indicate the figure by her side.

"It's I who am in the devil of a mess," thought Edward. "Ten to one this is brother Gerald."

The young man stared at him.

"What do you mean?" he said slowly. "Edward's in Scotland."

"Oh!" cried the girl. She stared at Edward. "Oh!"

Her colour came and went.

"So you," she said in a low voice, "are the real thing?"

It took Edward just one minute to grasp the situation. There was awe in the girl's eyes - was it, could it be - admiration? Should he explain? Nothing so tame! He would play up to the end.

He bowed ceremoniously.

"I have to thank you, Lady Noreen," he said in the best highwayman manner, "for a most delightful evening."

One quick look he cast at the car from which the other had just alighted. A scarlet car with a shining bonnet. His car!

"And I will wish you good evening."

One quick spring and he was inside, his foot on the clutch. The car started forward. Gerald stood paralyzed, but the girl was quicker. As the car slid past, she leapt for it, alighting on the running board.

The car swerved, shot blindly round the corner and pulled up, Noreen, still panting from her spring, laid her hand on Edward's arm.

"You must give it me - oh, you must give it me. I've got to return it to Agnes Larella. Be a sport - we've had a good evening together - we've danced - we've been - pals. Won't you give it to me? To me?"

A woman who intoxicated you with her beauty. There were such women then...

Also, Edward was only too anxious to get rid of the necklace. It was a heaven-sent opportunity for a beau geste.

He took it from his pocket and dropped it into her outstretched hand.

"We've been - pals," he said.

"Ah!" Her eyes smouldered - lit up.

Then surprisingly she bent her head to him. For a moment he held her, her lips against his...

Then she jumped off. The scarlet car sped forward with a great leap.

Romance!

Adventure!

At twelve o'clock on Christmas Day, Edward Robinson strode into the tiny drawing room of a house in Clapham, with the customary greeting of "Merry Christmas."

Maud, who was rearranging a piece of holly, greeted him coldly.

"Have a good day in the country with that friend of yours?" she inquired.

"Look here," said Edward. "That was a lie I told you. I won a competition - J500, and I bought a car with it. I didn't tell you because I knew you'd kick up a row about it. That's the first thing. I've bought the car and there's nothing more to be said about it. The second thing is this - I'm not going to hang about for years. My prospects are quite good enough and I mean to marry you next month. See?"

"Oh!" said Maud faintly.

Was this - could this be - Edward speaking in this masterful fashion?

"Will you?" said Edward. "Yes or no?"

She gazed at him, fascinated. There was awe and admiration in her eyes, and the sight of that look was intoxicating to Edward. Gone was that patient motherliness which had roused him to exasperation.

So had the Lady Noreen looked at him last night. But the Lady Noreen had receded far away, right into the region of Romance, side by side with the Marchesa Bianca. This was the Real Thing. This was his woman.

"Yes or no?" he repeated, and drew a step nearer.

"Ye-ye-es," faltered Maud. "But, oh, Edward, what has happened to you? You're quite different today."

"Yes," said Edward. "For twenty-four hours I've been a man instead of a worm - and, by God, it pays!"

He caught her in his arms almost as Bill the superman might have done.

"Do you love me, Maud? Tell me, do you love me?"

"Oh, Edward!" breathed Maud. "I adore you..."

ACCIDENT

"And I tell you this - it's the same woman - not a doubt of it!" Captain Haydock looked into the eager, vehement face of his friend and sighed. He wished Evans would not be so positive and so jubilant. In the course of a career spent at sea, the old sea captain had learned to leave things that did not concern him well alone. His friend Evans, late C.I.D. Inspector, had a different philosophy of life. "Acting on information received -" had been his motto in early days, and he had improved upon it to the extent of finding out his own information. Inspector Evans had been a very smart, wide-awake officer, and had justly earned the promotion which had been his. Even now, when he had retired from the force, and had settled down in the country cottage of his dreams, his professional instinct was still active.

"Don't often forget a face," he reiterated complacently. "Mrs Anthony - yes, it's Mrs Anthony right enough. When you said Mrs Merrowdene - I knew her at once."

Captain Haydock stirred uneasily. The Merrowdenes were his nearest neighbors, barring Evans himself, and this identifying of Mrs Merrowdene with a former heroine of a cause cйlиbre distressed him.

"It's a long time ago," he said rather weakly.

"Nine years," said Evans, accurate as ever. "Nine years and three months. You remember the case?"

"In a vague sort of way."

"Anthony turned out to be an arsenic eater," said Evans, "so they acquitted her."

"Well, why shouldn't they?"

"No reason in the world. Only verdict they could give on the evidence. Absolutely correct."

"Then, that's all right," said Haydock. "And I don't see what we're bothering about."

"Who's bothering?"

"I thought you were."

"Not at all."

"The thing's over and done with," summed up the Captain. "If Mrs Merrowdene at one time of her life was unfortunate enough to be tried and acquitted of murder -"

"It's not usually considered unfortunate to be acquitted," put in Evans.

"You know what I mean," said Captain Haydock, irritably. "If the poor lady has been through that harrowing experience, it's no business of ours to rake it up, is it?"

Evans did not answer.

"Come now, Evans. The lady was innocent - you've just said so."

"I didn't say she was innocent. I said she was acquitted."

"It's the same thing."

"Not always."

Captain Haydock, who had commenced to tap his pipe out against the side of his chair, stopped, and sat up with a very alert expression:

"Hullo-ullo-ullo," he said. "The wind's in that quarter, is it? You think she wasn't innocent?"

"I wouldn't say that. I just - don't know. Anthony was in the habit of taking arsenic. His wife got it for him. One day, by mistake, he takes far too much. Was the mistake his or his wife's? Nobody could tell, and the jury very properly gave her the benefit of the doubt. That's all quite right and I'm not finding fault with it. All the same - I'd like to know."

Captain Haydock transferred his attention to his pipe once more.

"Well," he said comfortably, "it's none of our business."

"I'm not so sure..."

"But, surely -"

"Listen to me a minute. This man, Merrowdene - in his laboratory this evening, fiddling round with tests - you remember -"

"Yes. He mentioned Marsh's test for arsenic. Said you would know all about it - it was in your line - and chuckled. He wouldn't have said that if he'd thought for one moment -"

Evans interrupted him.

"You mean he wouldn't have said that if he knew. They've been married how long-six years, you told me? I bet you anything he has no idea his wife is the once notorious Mrs Anthony."

"And he will certainly not know it from me," said Captain Haydock stiffly.

Evans paid no attention, but went on.

"You interrupted me just now. After Marsh's test, Merrowdene heated a substance in a test tube, the metallic residue he dissolved in water and then precipitated it by adding silver nitrate. That was a test for chlorates. A neat, unassuming little test. But I chanced to read these words in a book that stood open on the table. H2SO4 decomposes chlorates with evolution of Cl2O4. If

heated, violent explosions occur, the mixture ought therefore to be kept cool and only very small quantities used."

Haydock stared at his friend.

"Well, what about it?"

"Just this. In my profession we've got tests, too - tests for murder. There's adding up the facts - weighing them, dissecting the residue when you've allowed for prejudice and the general inaccuracy of witnesses. But there's another test for murder - one that is fairly accurate, but rather - dangerous! A murderer is seldom content with one crime. Give him time and a lack of suspicion and he'll commit another. You catch a man - has he murdered his wife or hasn't he? - perhaps the case isn't very black against him. Look into his past - if you find that he's had several wives - and that they've all died, shall we say - rather curiously? - then you know! I'm not speaking legally, you understand. I'm speaking of moral certainty. Once you know, you can go ahead looking for evidence."

"Well?"

"I'm coming to the point. That's all right if there is a past to look into. But suppose you catch your murderer at his or her first crime? Then that test will be one from which you get no reaction. But the prisoner acquitted - starting life under another name. Will or will not the murderer repeat the crime?"

"That's a horrible idea."

"Do you still say it's none of our business?"

"Yes, I do. You've no reason to think that Mrs Merrowdene is anything but a perfectly innocent woman."

The ex-Inspector was silent for a moment. Then he said slowly:

"I told you that we looked into her past and found nothing. That's not quite true. There was a stepfather. As a girl of eighteen she had a fancy for some young man - and her stepfather exerted his authority to keep them apart. She and her stepfather went for a walk along a rather dangerous part of the cliff. There was an accident - the stepfather went too near the edge - it gave way and he went over and was killed."

"You don't think -"

"It was an accident. Accident! Anthony's overdose of arsenic was an accident. She'd never have been tried if it hadn't transpired that there was another man - he sheered off, by the way. Looked as though he weren't satisfied even if the jury were. I tell you, Haydock, where that woman is concerned I'm afraid of another - accident!"

The old Captain shrugged his shoulders.

"Well, I don't know how you're going to guard against that."

"Neither do I," said Evans ruefully.

"I should leave well enough alone," said Captain Haydock. "No good ever came of butting into other people's affairs."

But that advice was not palatable to the ex-Inspector. He was a man of patience but determination. Taking leave of his friend, he sauntered down to the village, revolving in his mind the possibilities of some kind of successful action.

Turning into the post office to buy some stamps, he ran into the object of his solicitude, George Merrowdene. The ex-chemistry professor was a small, dreamy-looking man, gentle and kindly in manner, and usually completely absent-minded. He recognized the other and greeted him amicably, stooping to recover the letters that the impact had caused him to drop on the ground. Evans stooped also and, more rapid in his movements than the other, secured them first, handing them back to their owner with an apology.

He glanced down at them in doing so, and the address on the topmost suddenly awakened all his suspicions anew. It bore the name of a well-known insurance firm.

Instantly his mind was made up. The guileless George Merrowdene hardly realized how it came about that he and the ex-Inspector were strolling down the village together, and still less could he have said how it came about that the conversation should come round to the subject of life insurance.

Evans had no difficulty in attaining his object. Merrowdene of his own accord volunteered the information that he had just insured his life for his wife's benefit, and asked Evans's opinion of the company in question.

"I made some rather unwise investments," he explained. "As a result, my income has diminished. If anything were to happen to me, my wife would be left very badly off. This insurance will put things right."

"She didn't object to the idea?" inquired Evans casually. "Some ladies do, you know. Feel it's unlucky - that sort of thing."

"Oh, Margaret is very practical," said Merrowdene, smiling. "Not at all superstitious. In fact, I believe it was her idea originally. She didn't like my being so worried."

Evans had got the information he wanted. He left the other shortly afterwards, and his lips were set in a grim line. The late Mr Anthony had insured his life in his wife's favor a few weeks before his death.

Accustomed to rely on his instincts, he was perfectly sure in his own mind. But how to act was another matter. He wanted, not to arrest a criminal red-handed, but to prevent a crime being committed and that was a very different and a very much more difficult thing.

All day he was very thoughtful. There was a Primrose League Fκte that afternoon held in the grounds of the local squire, and he went

to it, indulging in the penny dip, guessing the weight of a pig, and shying at coconuts, all with the same look of abstracted concentration on his face. He even indulged in half a crown's worth of Zara the Crystal Gazer, smiling a little to himself as he did so, remembering his own activities against fortune-tellers in his official days.

He did not pay very much heed to her singsong, droning voice till the end of a sentence held his attention.

"- and you will very shortly - very shortly indeed-be engaged on a matter of life or death - life or death to one person."

"Eh - what's that?" he asked abruptly.

"A decision - you have a decision to make. You must be very careful - very, very careful... If you were to make a mistake - the smallest mistake -"

"Yes?"

The fortune-teller shivered. Inspector Evans knew it was all nonsense, but he was nevertheless impressed.

"I warn you - you must not make a mistake. If you do, I see the result clearly, a death..."

Odd, damned odd! A death. Fancy her lighting upon that!

"If I make a mistake a death will result? Is that it?"

"Yes."

"In that case," said Evans, rising to his feet and handing over half a crown, "I mustn't make a mistake, eh?"

He spoke lightly enough, but as he went out of the tent, his jaw set determinedly. Easy to say - not so easy to be sure of doing. He mustn't make a slip. A life, a valuable human life depended on it.

And there was no one to help him. He looked across at the figure of his friend Haydock in the distance. No help there. "Leave things alone," was Haydock's motto. And that wouldn't do here.

Haydock was talking to a woman. She moved away from him and came towards Evans, and the Inspector recognized her. It was Mrs Merrowdene. On an impulse he put himself deliberately in her path.

Mrs Merrowdene was rather a fine-looking woman. She had a broad serene brow, very beautiful brown eyes, and a placid expression. She had the look of an Italian Madonna which she heightened by parting her hair in the middle and looping it over her ears. She had a deep, rather sleepy voice.

She smiled up at Evans, a contented, welcoming smile.

"I thought it was you, Mrs Anthony - I mean Mrs Merrowdene," he said glibly.

He made the slip deliberately, watching her without seeming to do so. He saw her eyes widen, heard the quick intake of her breath. But her eyes did not falter. She gazed at him steadily and proudly.

"I was looking for my husband," she said quietly. "Have you seen him anywhere about?"

"He was over in that direction when I last saw him."

They went side by side in the direction indicated, chatting quietly and pleasantly. The Inspector felt his admiration mounting. What a woman! What self-command! What wonderful poise! A remarkable woman - and a very dangerous one. He felt sure - a very dangerous one.

He still felt very uneasy, though he was satisfied with his initial step. He had let her know that he recognized her. That would put her on her guard. She would not dare attempt anything rash. There was the question of Merrowdene. If he could be warned...

They found the little man absently contemplating a china doll which had fallen to his share in the penny dip. His wife suggested home and he agreed eagerly. Mrs Merrowdene turned to the Inspector.

"Won't you come back with us and have a quiet cup of tea, Mr Evans?"

Was there a faint note of challenge in her voice? He thought there was.

"Thank you, Mrs Merrowdene. I should like to very much."

They walked there, talking together of pleasant ordinary things. The sun shone, a breeze blew gently, everything around them was pleasant and ordinary.

Their maid was out at the Fκte, Mrs Merrowdene explained, when they arrived at the charming Old World cottage. She went into her room to remove her hat, returning to set out tea and boil the kettle on a little silver lamp. From a shelf near the fireplace she took three small bowls and saucers.

"We have some very special Chinese tea," she explained. "And we always drink it in the Chinese manner - out of bowls, not cups."

She broke off, peered into a cup, and exchanged it for another, with an exclamation of annoyance.

"George - it's too bad of you. You've been taking these bowls again."

"I'm sorry, dear," said the professor apologetically. "They're such a convenient size. The ones I ordered haven't come."

"One of these days you'll poison us all," said his wife with a half laugh. "Mary finds them in the laboratory and brings them back here and never troubles to wash them out unless they've something very noticeable in them. Why, you were using one of

them for potassium cyanide the other day. Really, George, it's frightfully dangerous."

Merrowdene looked a little irritated.

"Mary's no business to remove things from the laboratory. She's not to touch anything there."

"But we often leave our teacups there after tea. How is she to know? Be reasonable, dear."

The professor went into his laboratory, murmuring to himself, and with a smile. Mrs Merrowdene poured boiling water on the tea and blew out the flame of the little silver lamp.

Evans was puzzled. Yet a glimmering of light penetrated to him. For some reason or other, Mrs Merrowdene was showing her hand. Was this to be the "accident"? Was she speaking of all this so as deliberately to prepare her alibi beforehand. So that when, one day, the "accident" happened, he would be forced to give evidence in her favor. Stupid of her, if so, because before that -

Suddenly he drew in his breath. She had poured the tea into the three bowls. One she set before him, one before herself, the other she placed on a little table by the fire near the chair her husband usually sat in, and it was as she placed this last one on the table that a little strange smile curved round her lips. It was the smile that did it

He knew!

A remarkable woman - a dangerous woman. No waiting - no preparation. This afternoon - this very afternoon - with him here as witness. The boldness of it took his breath away.

It was clever - it was damnably clever. He would be able to prove nothing. She counted on his not suspecting - simply because it was "so soon." A woman of lightning rapidity of thought and action.

He drew a deep breath and leaned forward.

"Mrs Merrowdene, I'm a man of queer whims. Will you be very kind and indulge me in one of them?"

She looked inquiring but unsuspicious.

He rose, took the bowl from in front of her, and crossed to the little table, where he substituted it for the other. This other he brought back and placed in front of her.

"I want to see you drink this."

Her eyes met his. They were steady, unfathomable. The color slowly drained from her face.

She stretched out her hand, raised the cup. He held his breath.

Supposing all along he had made a mistake.

She raised it to her lips - at the last moment, with a shudder she leaned forward and quickly poured it into a pot containing a fern. Then she sat back and gazed at him defiantly.

He drew a long sigh of relief, and sat down again.

"Well?" she said.

Her voice had altered. It was slightly mocking - defiant.

He answered her soberly and quietly.

"You are a very clever woman, Mrs Merrowdene. I think you understand me. There must be no - repetition. You know what I mean?"

"I know what you mean."

Her voice was even, devoid of expression. He nodded his head, satisfied. She was a clever woman, and she didn't want to be banged.

"To your long life and to that of your husband," he said significantly and raised his tea to his lips. Then his face changed. It contorted horribly... he tried to rise - to cry out... His body stiffened - his face went purple. He fell back sprawling over the chair - his limbs convulsed.

Mrs Merrowdene leaned forward, watching him. A little smile crossed her lips. She spoke to him - very softly and gently.

"You made a mistake, Mr Evans. You thought I wanted to kill George... How stupid of you - how very stupid."

She sat there a minute longer looking at the dead man, the third man who had threatened to cross her path and separate her from the man she loved...

Her smile broadened. She looked more than ever like a Madonna. Then she raised her voice and called.

"George - George... Oh! Do come here. I'm afraid there's been the most dreadful accident... Poor Mr Evans..."

JANE IN SEARCH OF A JOB

Jane Cleveland rustled the pages of the Daily Leader and sighed - a deep sigh that came from the innermost recesses of her being. She looked with distaste at the marble-topped table, the poached egg on toast which reposed on it, and the small pot of tea. Not because she was not hungry. That was far from being the case. Jane was extremely hungry. At that moment she felt like consuming a pound and a half of well-cooked beefsteak, with chip potatoes, and possibly French beans. The whole washed down with some more exciting vintage than tea.

But young women whose exchequers are in a parlous condition cannot be choosers. Jane was lucky to be able to order a poached egg and a pot of tea. It seemed unlikely that she would be able to do so tomorrow. That is unless -

She turned once more to the advertisement columns of the Daily Leader. To put it plainly, Jane was out of a job, and the position was becoming acute. Already the genteel lady who presided over the shabby boarding house was looking askance at this particular young woman.

"And yet," said Jane to herself, throwing up her chin indignantly, which was a habit of hers, "and yet I'm intelligent and good-looking and well-educated. What more does anyone want?"

According to the Daily Leader, they seemed to want shorthand-typists of vast experience, managers for business houses with a little capital to invest, ladies to share in the profits of poultry farming (here again a little capital was required), and innumerable cooks, housemaids and parlourmaids - particularly parlourmaids.

"I wouldn't mind being a parlourmaid," said Jane to herself. "But there again, no one would take me without experience. I could go somewhere, I dare say, as a Willing Young Girl - but they don't pay willing young girls anything to speak of."

She sighed again, propped the paper up in front of her, and attacked the poached egg with all the vigour of healthy youth.

When the last mouthful had been despatched, she turned the paper and studied the Agony and Personal column while she drank her tea. The Agony column was always the last hope.

Had she but possessed a couple of thousand pounds, the thing would have been easy enough. There were at least seven unique opportunities - all yielding not less than three thousand a year. Jane's lip curled a little.

"If I had two thousand pounds," she murmured, "it wouldn't be easy to separate from it."

She cast her eyes rapidly down to the bottom of the column and ascended with the ease born of long practice.

There was the lady who gave such wonderful prices for castoff clothing. "Ladies' wardrobes inspected at their own dwellings." There were the gentlemen who bought ANYTHING - but principally TEETH. There were ladies of title going abroad who would dispose of their furs at a ridiculous figure. There was the distressed clergyman and the hardworking widow, and the disabled officer, all needing sums varying from fifty pounds to two thousand. And then suddenly Jane came to an abrupt halt. She put down her teacup and read the advertisement through again.

"There's a catch in it, of course," she murmured. "There always is a catch in these sort of things. I shall have to be careful. But still -"

The advertisement which so intrigued Jane Cleveland ran as follows:

If a young lady of twenty-five to thirty years of age, eyes dark blue, very fair hair, black lashes and brows, straight nose, slim figure, height five feet seven inches, good mimic and able to speak French, will call at 7 Endersleigh Street, between 5 and 6 P.M., she will hear of something to her advantage.

"Guileless Gwendolen, or why girls go wrong," murmured Jane. "I shall certainly have to be careful. But there are too many specifications, really, for that sort of thing. I wonder now... Let us overhaul the catalogue."

She proceeded to do so.

"Twenty-five to thirty - I'm twenty-six. Eyes dark blue, that's right. Hair very fair - black lashes and brows - all O.K. Straight nose? Ye-es - straight enough, anyway. It doesn't hook or turn up. And I've got a slim figure - slim even for nowadays. I'm only five feet six inches - but I could wear high heels. I am a good mimic - nothing wonderful, but I can copy people's voices, and I speak French like an angel or a Frenchwoman. In fact, I'm absolutely the goods. They ought to tumble over themselves with delight when I turn up. Jane Cleveland, go in and win."

Resolutely Jane tore out the advertisement and placed it in her handbag. Then she demanded her bill, with a new briskness in her voice.

At ten minutes to five Jane was reconnoitring in the neighbourhood of Endersleigh Street. Endersleigh Street itself is a small street sandwiched between two larger streets in the neighbourhood of Oxford Circus. It is drab, but respectable.

No. 7 seemed in no way different from the neighbouring houses. It was composed like they were of offices. But looking up at it, it dawned upon Jane for the first time that she was not the only blue-eyed, fair-haired, straight-nosed, slim-figured girl of between twenty-five and thirty years of age. London was evidently full of such girls, and forty or fifty of them at least were grouped outside No.7 Endersleigh Street.

"Competition," said Jane. "I'd better join the queue quickly."

She did so, just as three more girls turned the corner of the street. Others followed them. Jane amused herself by taking stock of her immediate neighbours. In each case she managed to find something wrong - fair eyelashes instead of dark, eyes more grey than blue, fair hair that owed its fairness to art and not to nature, interesting variations in noses, and figures that only an all-embracing charity could have described as slim. Jane's spirits rose.

"I believe I've got as good an all-around chance as anyone," she murmured to herself. "I wonder what it's all about? A beauty chorus, I hope."

The queue was moving slowly but steadily forward. Presently a second stream of girls began, issuing from inside the house. Some of them tossed their heads, some of them smirked.

"Rejected," said Jane with glee. "I hope to goodness they won't be full up before I get in."

And still the queue of girls moved forward. There were anxious glances in tiny mirrors, and a frenzied powdering of noses. Lipsticks were brandished freely.

"I wish I had a smarter hat," said Jane to herself sadly.

At last it was her turn. Inside the door of the house was a glass door at one side, with the legend Messrs Cuthbertsons inscribed on it. It was through this glass door that the applicants were passing one by one. Jane's turn came. She drew a deep breath and entered.

Inside was an outer office, obviously intended for clerks. At the end was another glass door. Jane was directed to pass through this, and did so. She found herself in a smaller room. There was a big desk in it, and behind the desk was a keen-eyed man of middle age with a thick, rather foreign-looking moustache. His glance swept over Jane, then he pointed to a door on the left.

"Wait in there, please," he said crisply.

Jane obeyed. The apartment she entered was already occupied. Five girls sat there, all very upright and all glaring at each other. It was clear to Jane that she had been included among the likely candidates, and her spirits rose. Nevertheless, she was forced to admit that these five girls were equally eligible with herself as far as the terms of the advertisement went.

The time passed. Streams of girls were evidently passing through the inner office. Most of them were dismissed through another door giving on the corridor, but every now and then a recruit arrived to swell the select assembly. At half-past six there were fourteen girls assembled there.

Jane heard a murmur of voices from the inner office, and then the foreign-looking gentleman, whom she had nicknamed in her mind "the Colonel" owing to the military character of his moustaches, appeared in the doorway.

"I will see you ladies one at a time, if you please," he announced. "In the order in which you arrived, please."

Jane was, of course, the sixth on the list. Twenty minutes elapsed before she was called in. "The Colonel" was standing with his hands behind his back. He put her through a rapid catechism, tested her knowledge of French, and measured her height.

"It is possible, mademoiselle," he Said in French, "that you may suit. I do not know. But it is possible."

"What is this post, may I ask?" said Jane bluntly.

He shrugged his shoulders.

"That I cannot tell you as yet. If you are chosen - then you shall know."

"This seems very mysterious," objected Jane. "I couldn't possibly take up anything without knowing all about it. Is it connected with the stage, may I ask?"

"The stage? Indeed, no."

"Oh!" said Jane, rather taken aback.

He was looking at her keenly.

"You have intelligence, yes? And discretion?"

"I've quantities of intelligence and discretion," said Jane calmly. "What about the pay?"

"The pay will amount to two thousand pounds - for a fortnight's work."

"Oh!" said Jane faintly.

She was too taken aback by the magnificence of the sum named to recover all at once.

The Colonel resumed speaking.

"One other young lady I have already selected. You and she are equally suitable. There may be others I have not yet seen. I will give you instructions as to your further proceedings. You know Harridge's Hotel?"

Jane gasped. Who in England did not know Harridge's Hotel, that famous hostelry situated modestly in a bystreet of Mayfair, where notabilities and royalties arrived and departed as a matter of course? Only this morning Jane had read of the arrival of the Grand Duchess Pauline of Ostrova. She had come over to open a big bazaar in aid of Russian refugees, and was, of course, staying at Harridge's.

"Yes," said Jane, in answer to the Colonel's question.

"Very good. Go there. Ask for Count Streptitch. Send up your card - you have a card?"

Jane produced one. The Colonel took it from her and inscribed in the corner a minute P. He handed the card back to her.

"That ensures that the count will see you. He will understand that you come from me. The final decision lies with him - and another. If he considers you suitable, he will explain matters to you, and you can accept or decline his proposal. Is that satisfactory?"

"Perfectly satisfactory," said Jane.

"So far," she murmured to herself as she emerged into the street, "I can't see the catch. And yet, there must be one. There's no such thing as money for nothing. It must be crime! There's nothing else left."

Her spirits rose. In moderation Jane did not object to crime. The papers had been full lately of the exploits of various girl bandits. Jane had seriously thought of becoming one if all else failed.

She entered the exclusive portals of Harridge's with slight trepidation. More than ever, she wished that she had a new hat.

But she walked bravely up to the bureau and produced her card and asked for Count Streptitch without a shade of hesitation in her manner. She fancied that the clerk looked at her rather curiously. He took the card, however, and gave it to a small page boy with some low-voiced instructions which Jane did not catch. Presently the page returned, and Jane was invited to accompany him. They went up in the lift and along a corridor to some big double doors where the page knocked. A moment later Jane found herself in a big room, facing a tall thin man with a fair beard, who was holding her card in a languid white hand.

"Miss Jane Cleveland," he read slowly. "I am Count Streptitch."

His lips parted suddenly in what was presumably intended to be a smile, disclosing two rows of white even teeth. But no effect of merriment was obtained.

"I understand that you applied in answer to our advertisement," continued the count. "The good Colonel Kranin sent you on here."

"He was a colonel," thought Jane, pleased with her perspicacity, but she merely bowed her head.

"You will pardon me if I ask you a few questions?"

He did not wait for a reply, but proceeded to put Jane through a catechism very similar to that of Colonel Kranin. Her replies seemed to satisfy him. He nodded his head once or twice.

"I will ask you now, mademoiselle, to walk to the door and back again slowly."

"Perhaps they want me to be a mannequin," thought Jane as she complied. "But they wouldn't pay two thousand pounds to a mannequin. Still, I suppose I'd better not ask questions yet awhile."

Count Streptitch was frowning. He tapped on the table with his white fingers. Suddenly he rose, and opening the door of an adjoining room, he spoke to someone inside. He returned to his seat, and a short middle-aged lady came through the door, closing it behind her. She was plump and extremely ugly, but had nevertheless the air of being a person of importance.

"Well, Anna Michaelovna," said the count. "What do you think of her?"

The lady looked Jane up and down much as though the girl had been a waxwork at a show. She made no pretence of any greeting.

"She might do," she said at length. "Of actual likeness in the real sense of the word, there is very little. But the figure and the colouring are very good, better than any of the others. What do you think of it, Feodor Alexandrovitch?"

"I agree with you, Anna Michaelovna."

"Does she speak French?"

"Her French is excellent."

Jane felt more and more of a dummy. Neither of these strange people appeared to remember that she was a human being.

"But will she be discreet?" asked the lady, frowning heavily at the girl.

"This is the Princess Poporensky," said Count Streptitch to Jane in French. "She asks whether you can be discreet?"

Jane addressed her reply to the princess.

"Until I have had the position explained to me, I can hardly make promises."

"It is just what she says there, the little one," remarked the lady. "I think she is intelligent, Feodor Alexandrovitch - more intelligent than the others. Tell me, little one, have you also courage?"

"I don't know," said Jane, puzzled. "I don't particularly like being hurt, but I can bear it."

"Ah! That is not what I mean. You do not mind danger, no?"

"Oh!" said Jane. "Danger! That's all right. I like danger."

"And you are poor? You would like to earn much money?"

"Try me," said Jane with something approaching enthusiasm.

Count Streptitch and Princess Poporensky exchanged glances. Then, simultaneously, they nodded.

"Shall I explain matters, Anna Michaelovna?" the former asked.

The princess shook her head.

"Her Highness wishes to do that herself."

"It is unnecessary - and unwise."

"Nevertheless those are her commands. I was to bring the girl in as soon as you had done with her."

Streptitch shrugged his shoulders. Clearly he was not pleased. Equally clearly he had no intention of disobeying the edict. He turned to Jane.

"The Princess Poporensky will present you to Her Highness the Grand Duchess Pauline. Do not be alarmed."

Jane was not in the least alarmed. She was delighted at the idea of being presented to a real live grand duchess. There was nothing of the Socialist about Jane. For the moment she had even ceased to worry about her hat.

The Princess Poporensky led the way, waddling along with a gait that she managed to invest with a certain dignity in spite of adverse circumstances. They passed through the adjoining room, which was a kind of antechamber, and the princess knocked upon a door in the farther wall. A voice from inside replied and the princess opened the door and passed in, Jane close upon her heels.

"Let me present to you, madame," said the princess in a solemn voice, "Miss Jane Cleveland."

A young woman who had been sitting in a big armchair at the other end of the room jumped up and ran forward.

She stared fixedly at Jane for a minute or two, and then laughed merrily.

"But this is splendid, Anna," she cried. "I never imagined we should succeed so well. Come, let us see ourselves side by side."

Taking Jane's arm, she drew the girl across the room, pausing before a full-length mirror which hung on the wall.

"You see?" she cried delightedly. "It is a perfect match!"

Already, with her first glance at the Grand Duchess Pauline, Jane had begun to understand. The Grand Duchess was a young woman perhaps a year or two older than Jane. She had the same shade of fair hair, and the same slim figure. She was, perhaps, a shade taller. Now that they stood side by side, the likeness was very apparent. Detail for detail, the colouring was almost exactly the same.

The Grand Duchess clapped her hands. She seemed an extremely cheerful young woman.

"Nothing could be better," she declared. "You must congratulate Feodor Alexandrovitch for me, Anna. He has indeed done well."

"As yet, madame," murmured the princess in a low voice, "this young woman does not know what is required of her."

"True," said the Grand Duchess, becoming somewhat calmer in manner. "I forgot. Well, I will enlighten her. Leave us together, Anna Michaelovna."

"But, madame -"

"Leave us alone, I say."

She stamped her foot angrily. With considerable reluctance Anna Michaelovna left the room. The Grand Duchess sat down and motioned to Jane to do the same.

"They are tiresome, these old women," remarked Pauline. "But one has to have them. Anna Michaelovna is better than most. Now, then, Miss - ah, yes, Miss Jane Cleveland. I like the name. I like you too. You are sympathetic. I can tell at once if people are sympathetic."

"That's very clever of you, ma'am," said Jane, speaking for the first time.

"I am clever," said Pauline calmly. "Come now, I will explain things to you. Not that there is much to explain. You know the history of Ostrova. Practically all of my family are dead - massacred by the Communists. I am, perhaps, the last of my line. I am a woman, I cannot sit upon the throne. You think they would let me be. But no, wherever I go, attempts are made to assassinate me. Absurd, is it not? These vodka-soaked brutes never have any sense of proportion."

"I see," said Jane, feeling that something was required of her.

"For the most part I live in retirement - where I can take precautions, but now and then I have to take part in public ceremonies. While I am here, for instance, I have to attend several

semi-public functions. Also in Paris on my way back. I have an estate in Hungary, you know. The sport there is magnificent."

"Is it really?" said Jane.

"Superb. I adore sport. Also - I ought not to tell you this, but I shall because your face is so sympathetic - there are plans being made there - very quietly, you understand. Altogether it is very important that I should not be assassinated during the next two weeks."

"But surely the police -" began Jane.

"The police? Oh, yes, they are very good, I believe. And we too - we have our spies. It is possible that I shall be forewarned when the attempt is to take place. But then, again, I might not."

She shrugged her shoulders.

"I begin to understand," said Jane slowly. "You want me to take your place?"

"Only on certain occasions," said the Grand Duchess eagerly. "You must be somewhere at hand, you understand? I may require you twice, three times, four times in the next fortnight. Each time it will be upon the occasion of some public function. Naturally in intimacy of any kind, you could not represent me."

"Of course not," agreed Jane.

"You will do very well indeed. It was clever of Feodor Alexandrovitch to think of an advertisement, was it not?"

"Supposing," said Jane, "that I get assassinated?"

The Grand Duchess shrugged her shoulders.

"There is the risk, of course, but according to our own secret information, they want to kidnap me, not kill me outright. But I will be quite honest - it is always possible that they might throw a bomb."

"I see," said Jane.

She tried to imitate the lighthearted manner of Pauline. She wanted very much to come to the question of money, but did not quite see how best to introduce the subject. But Pauline saved her the trouble.

"We will pay you well, of course," she said carelessly. "I cannot remember now exactly how much Feodor Alexandrovitch suggested. We were speaking in francs or kronen."

"Colonel Kranin," said Jane, "said something about two thousand pounds."

"That was it," said Pauline, brightening. "I remember now. It is enough, I hope? Or would you rather have three thousand?"

"Well," said Jane, "if it's all the same to you, I'd rather have three thousand."

"You are businesslike, I see," said the Grand Duchess kindly. "I wish I was. But I have no idea of money at all. What I want I have to have, that is all."

It seemed to Jane a simple but admirable attitude of mind.

"And of course, as you say, there is danger," Pauline continued thoughtfully. "Although you do not look to me as though you minded danger. I do not myself. I hope you do not think that it is because I am a coward that I want you to take my place? You see, it is most important for Ostrova that I should marry and have at least two sons. After that, it does not matter what happens to me."

"I see," said Jane.

"And you accept?

"Yes," said Jane resolutely. "I accept."

Pauline clapped her hands vehemently several times. Princess Poporensky appeared immediately.

"I have told her all, Anna," announced the Grand Duchess. "She will do what we want, and she is to have three thousand pounds. Tell Feodor to make a note of it. She is really very like me, is she not? I think she is better-looking, though."

The princess waddled out of the room, and returned with Count Streptitch.

"We have arranged everything, Feodor Alexandrovitch," the Grand Duchess said.

He bowed.

"Can she play her part, I wonder?" he queried, eyeing Jane doubtfully.

"I'll show you," said the girl suddenly. "You permit, ma'am?" she said to the Grand Duchess. The latter nodded delightedly.

Jane stood up.

"But this is splendid, Anna," she said. "I never imagined we should succeed so well. Come, let us see ourselves side by side."

And, as Pauline had done, she drew the other girl to the glass.

"You see? A perfect match!"

Words, manner and gesture, it was an excellent imitation of Pauline's greeting. The princess nodded her head and uttered a grunt of approbation.

"It is good, that," she declared. "It would deceive most people."

"You are very clever," said Pauline appreciatively. "I could not imitate anyone else to save my life."

Jane believed her. It had already struck her that Pauline was a young woman who was very much herself.

"Anna will arrange details with you," said the Grand Duchess. "Take her into my bedroom, Anna, and try some of my clothes on her."

She nodded a gracious farewell, and Jane was convoyed away by the Princess Poporensky.

"This is what Her Highness will wear to open the bazaar," explained the old lady, holding up a daring creation of white and black. "That is in three days' time. It may be necessary for you to take her place there. We do not know. We have not yet received information."

At Anna's bidding, Jane slipped off her own shabby garments and tried on the frock. It fitted her perfectly. The other nodded approvingly.

"It is almost perfect - just a shade long on you, because you are an inch or so shorter than Her Highness."

"That is easily remedied," said Jane quickly. The Grand Duchess wears low-heeled shoes, I noticed. If I wear the same kind of shoes, but with high heels, it will adjust things nicely."

Anna Michaelovna showed her the shoes that the Grand Duchess usually wore with the dress - lizard skin with a strap across. Jane memorized them, and arranged to get a pair just like them, but with different heels.

"I would be well," said Anna Michaelovna, "for you to have a dress of distinctive colour and material quite unlike Her Highness's. Then in case it becomes necessary for you to change places at a moment's notice, the substitution is less likely to be noticed."

Jane thought a minute.

"What about flame-red marocain? And I might, perhaps, have plain glass pince-nez. That alters the appearance very much."

Both suggestions were approved, and they went into further details.

Jane left the hotel with banknotes for a hundred pounds in her purse and instructions to purchase the necessary outfit and engage rooms at the Blitz Hotel as Miss Montresor of New York.

On the second day after this, Count Streptitch called upon her there.

"A transformation indeed," he said as he bowed.

Jane made him a mock bow in return. She was enjoying the new clothes and the luxury of her life very much.

"All this is very nice," she sighed. "But I suppose that your visit means I must get busy and earn my money."

"That is so. We have received information. It seems possible that an attempt will be made to kidnap Her Highness on the way home from the bazaar. That is to take place, as you know, at Orion House, which is about ten miles out of London. Her Highness will be forced to attend the bazaar in person, as the Countess of Anchester, who is promoting it, knows her personally. But the following is the plan have concocted."

Jane listened attentively as he outlined it to her.

She asked a few questions and finally declared that she understood perfectly the part that she had to play.

The next day dawned bright and clear - a perfect day for one of the great events of the London Season, the bazaar at Orion House, promoted by the Countess of Anchester in aid of Ostrovian refugees in this country.

Having regard to the uncertainty of the English climate, the bazaar itself took place within the spacious rooms of Orion House, which has been for five hundred years in the possession of the Earls of Anchester. Various collections had been loaned, and a charming idea was the gift by a hundred society women of one pearl each taken from their own necklaces, each pearl to be sold by auction on the second day. There were also numerous side shows and attractions in the grounds.

Jane was there early in the rфle of Miss Montresor. She wore a dress of flame-coloured marocain, and a small red cloche hat. On her feet were high-heeled lizard-skin shoes.

The arrival of the Grand Duchess Pauline was a great event. She was escorted to the platform and duly presented with a bouquet of roses by a small child. She made a short but charming speech and declared the bazaar open. Count Streptitch and Princess Poporensky were in attendance upon her.

She wore the dress that Jane had seen, white with a bold design of black, and her hat was a small cloche of black with a profusion of white ospreys hanging over the brim and a tiny lace veil coming halfway down the face. Jane smiled to herself.

The Grand Duchess went round the bazaar, visiting every stall, making a few purchases, and being uniformly gracious. Then she prepared to depart.

Jane was prompt to take up her cue. She requested a word with the Princess Poporensky and asked to be presented to the Grand Duchess.

"Ah, yes!" said Pauline in a clear voice. "Miss Montresor, I remember the name. She is an American journalist, I believe. She has done much for our cause. I should be glad to give her a short interview for her paper. Is there anywhere where we could be undisturbed?"

A small anteroom was immediately placed at the Grand Duchess's disposal, and Count Streptitch was despatched to bring in Miss Montresor. As soon as he had done so and withdrawn again, the Princess Poporensky remaining in attendance, a rapid exchange of garments took place.

Three minutes later, the door opened and the Grand Duchess emerged, her bouquet of roses held up to her face. Bowing graciously, and uttering a few words of farewell to Lady Anchester in French, she passed out and entered her car, which was waiting. Princess Poporensky took a place beside her, and the car drove off.

"Well," said Jane, "that's done. I wonder how Miss Montresor's getting on."

"No one will notice her. She can slip out quietly."

"That's true," said Jane. "I did it nicely, didn't I?"

"You acted your part with great discretion."

"Why isn't the Count with us?"

"He was forced to remain. Someone must watch over the safety of Her Highness."

"I hope nobody's going to throw bombs," said Jane aprehensively. "Hi! We're turning off the main road. Why that?"

Gathering speed, the car was shooting down a side road Jane jumped up and put her head out of the window remonstrating with the driver. He only laughed and increased his speed. Jane sank back into her seat again.

"Your spies were right," she said with a laugh. "We're for it, all right. I suppose the longer I keep it up, the safer it is for the Grand Duchess. At all events we must give her time to return to London safely."

At the prospect of danger, Jane's spirits rose. She has not relished the prospect of a bomb, but this type of a venture appealed to her sporting instincts.

Suddenly, with a grinding of brakes, the car pulled up in its own length. A man jumped on the step. In his hand was a revolver.

"Put your hands up," he snarled.

The Princess Poporensky's hands rose swiftly, but Jane merely looked at him disdainfully and kept her hands on her lap.

"Ask him the meaning of this outrage," she said in French to her companion.

But before the latter had time to say a word, the man broke in. He poured out a torrent of words in some foreign language.

Not understanding a single thing, Jane merely shrugged her shoulders and said nothing. The chauffeur had got down from his seat and joined the other man.

"Will the illustrious lady be pleased to descend?" he asked with a grin.

Raising the flowers to her face again, Jane stepped out of the car. The Princess Poporensky followed her.

"Will the illustrious lady come this way?"

Jane took no notice of the man's mock insolent manner, but of her own accord she walked towards a low-built rambling house which stood about a hundred yards away from where the car had stopped. The road had been a cul-de-sac ending in the gateway and drive which led to this apparently untenanted building.

The man, still brandishing his pistol, came close behind the two women. As they passed up the steps, he brushed past them and flung open a door on the left. It was an empty room, into which a table and two chairs had evidently been brought.

Jane passed in and sat down. Anna Michaelovna followed her. The man banged the door and turned the key.

Jane walked to the window and looked out.

"I could jump out, of course," she remarked. "But I shouldn't get far. No, we'll just' have to stay here for the present and make the best of it. I wonder if they'll bring us anything to eat?"

About half an hour later her question was answered.

A big bowl of steaming soup was brought in and placed on the table in front of her. Also two pieces of dry bread.

"No luxury for aristocrats evidently," remarked Jane cheerily as the door was shut and locked again. "Will you start, or shall I?"

The Princess Poporensky waved the mere idea of food aside with horror.

"How could I eat? Who knows what danger my mistress might not be in?"

"She's all right," said Jane. "It's myself I'm worrying about. You know these people won't be at all pleased when they find they have got hold of the wrong person. In fact, they may be very unpleasant. I shall keep up the haughty Grand Duchess stunt as long as I can, and do a bunk if the opportunity offers."

The Princess Poporensky offered no reply.

Jane, who was hungry, drank up all the soup. It had a curious taste, but was hot and savoury.

Afterwards she felt rather sleepy. The Princess Poporensky seemed to be weeping quietly. Jane arranged herself on her uncomfortable chair in the least uncomfortable way, and allowed her head to droop.

She slept.

Jane awoke with a start. She had an idea that she had been a very long time asleep. Her head felt heavy and uncomfortable.

And then suddenly she saw something that jerked her faculties wide awake again.

She was wearing the flame-coloured marocain frock. She sat up and looked around her. Yes, she was still in the room in the empty house. Everything was exactly as it had been when she went to sleep, except for two facts. The first fact was that the Princess Poporensky was no longer sitting on the other chair. The second was her own inexplicable change of costume.

"I can't have dreamt it," said Jane. "Because if I'd dreamt it, I shouldn't be here."

She looked across at the window and registered a second significant fact. When she had gone to sleep, the sun had been pouring through the window. Now the house threw a sharp shadow on the sunlit drive.

"The house faces west," she reflected. "It was afternoon when I went to sleep. Therefore it must be tomorrow morning now.

Therefore that soup was drugged. Therefore - oh, I don't know. It all seems mad."

She got up and went to the door. It was unlocked. She explored the house. It was silent and empty.

Jane put her hand to her aching head and tried to think.

And then she caught sight of a torn newspaper lying by the front door. It had glaring headlines which caught her eye.

"American Girl Bandit in England," she read. "The Girl in the Red Dress. Sensational Holdup at Orion House Bazaar."

Jane staggered out into the sunlight. Sitting on the steps, she read, her eyes growing bigger and bigger. The facts were short and succinct.

Just after the departure of the Grand Duchess Pauline, three men and a girl in a red dress had produced revolvers and successfully held up the crowd. They had annexed the hundred pearls and made a getaway in a fast racing car. Up to now, they had not been traced.

In the stop press (it was a late evening paper) were a few words to the effect that the "girl bandit in the red dress" had been staying at the Blitz as a Miss Montresor of New York.

"I'm dished," said Jane. "Absolutely dished. I always knew there was a catch in it."

And then she started. A strange sound had smote the air. The voice of a man, uttering one word at frequent intervals.

"Damn," it said. "Damn." And yet again, "Damn!"

Jane thrilled to the sound. It expressed so exactly her own feelings. She ran down the steps. By the corner of them lay a young man. He was endeavouring to raise his head from the ground. His face struck Jane as one of the nicest faces she had ever seen. It was freckled and slightly quizzical in expression.

"Damn my head," said the young man. "Damn it. I -"

He broke off and stared at Jane.

"I must be dreaming," he said faintly.

"That's what I said," said Jane. "But we're not. What's the matter with your head?"

"Somebody hit me on it. Fortunately it's a thick one."

He pulled himself into a sitting position, and made a wry face.

"My brain will begin to function shortly, I expect. I'm still in the same old spot, I see."

"How did you get here?" asked Jane curiously.

"That's a long story. By the way, you're not the Grand Duchess What's-her-name, are you?"

"I'm not. I'm plain Jane Cleveland."

"You're not plain, anyway," said the young man, looking at her with frank admiration.

Jane blushed.

"I ought to get you some water or something, oughtn't I?" she asked uncertainly.

"I'believe it is customary," agreed the young man. "All the same, I'd rather have whisky if you can find it."

Jane was unable to find any whisky. The young man took a deep draught of water, and announced himself better.

"Shall I relate my adventures, or will you relate yours?" he asked.

"You first."

"There's nothing much to mine. I happened to notice that the Grand Duchess went into that room with low-heeled shoes on and came out with high-heeled ones. It struck me as rather odd. I don't like things to be odd.

"I followed the car on my motor bicycle. I saw you taken into the house. About ten minutes later a big racing car came tearing up. A

girl in red got out and three men. She had low-heeled shoes on, all right. They went into the house. Presently low heels came out dressed in black and white, and went off in the first car, with an old pussy and a tall man with a fair beard. The others went off in the racing car. I thought they'd all gone, and was just trying to get in at that window and rescue you when someone hit me on the head from behind. That's all. Now for your turn."

Jane related her adventures.

"And it's awfully lucky for me that you did follow," she ended. "Do you see what an awful hole I should have been in otherwise? The Grand Duchess would have had a perfect alibi. She left the bazaar before the holdup began, and arrived in London in her car. Would anybody ever have believed my fantastic, improbable story?"

"Not on your life," said the young man with conviction. They had been so absorbed in their respective narratives, that they had been quite oblivious of their surroundings.

They looked up now with a slight start to see a tall sad-faced man leaning against the house. He nodded at them.

"Very interesting," he commented.

"Who are you?" demanded Jane.

The sad-faced man's eyes twinkled a little.

"Detective-Inspector Farrell," he said gently. "I've been very interested in hearing your story and this young lady's. We might have found a little difficulty in believing hers, but for one or two things."

"For instance?"

"Well, you see, we heard this morning that the real Grand Duchess had eloped with a chauffeur in Paris."

Jane gasped.

"And then we knew that this American 'girl bandit' had come to this country, and we expected a coup of some kind. We'll have laid hands on them very soon, I can promise you that. Excuse me a minute, will you?"

He ran up the steps into the house.

"Well!" said Jane. She put a lot of force into the expression.

"I think it was awfully clever of you to notice those shoes," she said suddenly.

"Not at all," said the young man. "I was brought up in the boot trade. My father's a sort of boot king. He wanted me to go into the trade - marry and settle down. All that sort of thing. Nobody in particular - just the principle of the thing. But I wanted to be an artist." He sighed.

"I'm so sorry," said Jane kindly.

"I've been trying for six years. There's no blinking it. I'm a rotten painter. I've a good mind to chuck it and go home like the prodigal son. There's a good billet waiting for me."

"A job is the great thing," agreed Jane wistfully. "Do you think you could get me one trying on boots somewhere?"

"I could give you a better one than that - if you'd take it."

"Oh, what?"

"Never mind now. I'll tell you later. You know, until yesterday I never saw a girl I felt I could marry."

"Yesterday?"

"At the bazaar. And then I saw her - the one and only Her!"

He looked very hard at Jane.

"How beautiful the delphiniums are," said Jane hurriedly, with very pink cheeks.

"They're lupins," said the young man.

"It doesn't matter," said Jane.

"Not a bit," he agreed. And he drew a little nearer.

A FRUITFUL SUNDAY

"Well, really, I call this too delightful," said Miss Dorothy Pratt for the fourth time. "How I wish the old cat could see me now. She and her Janes!"

The "old cat" thus scathingly alluded to was Miss Pratt's highly estimable employer, Mrs Mackenzie Jones, who had strong views upon the Christian names suitable for parlourmaids and had repudiated Dorothy in favour of Miss Pratt's despised second name of Jane.

Miss Pratt's companion did not reply at once - for the best of reasons. When you have just purchased a Baby Austin, fourth hand, for the sum of twenty pounds, and are taking it out for the second time only, your whole attention is necessarily focused on the difficult task of using both hands and feet as the emergencies of the moment dictate.

"Er - ah!" said Mr Edward Palgrove, and negotiated a crisis with a horrible grinding sound that would have set a true motorist's teeth on edge.

"Well, you don't talk to a girl much," complained Dorothy.

Mr Palgrove was saved from having to respond as at that moment he was roundly and soundly cursed by the driver of a motor omnibus.

"Well, of all the impudence," said Miss Pratt, tossing her head.

"I only wish he had this foot brake," said her swain bitterly.

"Is there anything wrong with it?"

"You can put your foot on it till kingdom comes," said Mr Palgrove. "But nothing happens."

"Oh, well, Ted, you can't expect everything for twenty pounds. After all, here we are, in a real car, on Sunday afternoon going out of town the same as everybody else."

More grinding and crashing sounds.

"Ah," said Ted, flushed with triumph. "That was a better change."

"You do drive something beautiful," said Dorothy admiringly.

Emboldened by feminine appreciation, Mr Palgrove attempted a dash across Hammersmith Broadway, and was severely spoken to by a policeman.

"Well, I never," said Dorothy as they proceeded towards Hammersmith Bridge in a chastened fashion. "I don't know what

the police are coming to. You'd think they'd be a bit more civil-spoken, seeing the way they've been shown up lately."

"Anyway, I didn't want to go along this road," said Edward sadly. "I wanted to go down the Great West Road and do a bust."

"And be caught in a trap as likely not," said Dorothy. "That's what happened to the master the other day. Five pounds and costs."

"The police aren't so dusty after all," said Edward generously. "They pitch into the rich, all right. No favour. It makes me mad to think of these swells who can walk into a place and buy a couple of Rolls-Royces without turning a hair. There's no sense in it. I'm as good as they are."

"And the jewellery," said Dorothy, sighing. "Those shops in Bond Street. Diamonds and pearls and I don't know what! And me with a string of Woolworth pearls."

She brooded sadly upon the subject. Edward was able once more to give full attention to his driving. They managed to get through Richmond without mishap. The altercation with the policeman had shaken Edward's nerve. He now took the line of least resistance, following blindly behind any car in front whenever a choice of thoroughfares presented itself.

In this way he presently found himself following a shady country lane which many an experienced motorist would have given his soul to find.

"Rather clever turning off the way I did," said Edward, taking all the credit to himself.

"Sweetly pretty, I call it," said Miss Pratt. "And I do declare, there's a man with fruit to sell."

Sure enough, at a convenient corner was a small wicker table with baskets of fruit on it, and the legend 'Eat More Fruit' displayed on a banner.

"How much?" said Edward apprehensively, when frenzied pulling of the hand brake had produced the desired result.

"Lovely strawberries," said the man in charge.

He was an unprepossessing-looking individual with a leer.

"Just the thing for the lady. Ripe fruit, fresh-picked. Cherries, too. Genuine English. Have a basket of cherries, lady?"

"They do look nice ones," said Dorothy.

"Lovely, that's what they are," said the man hoarsely. "Bring you luck, lady, that basket will." He at last condescended to reply to Edward. "Two shillings, sir, and dirt-cheap. You'd say so if you knew what was inside the basket."

"They look awfully nice," said Dorothy.

Edward sighed and paid over two shillings. His mind was obsessed by calculation. Tea later, petrol - this Sunday motoring business wasn't what you'd call cheap. That was the worst of taking girls out! They always wanted everything they saw.

"Thank you, sir," said the unprepossessing-looking one. "you've got more than your money's worth in that basket of cherries."

Edward shoved his foot savagely down and the Baby Austin leaped at the cherry vendor after the manner of an infuriated Alsatian.

"Sorry," said Edward. "I forgot she was in gear."

"You ought to be careful, dear," said Dorothy. "You might have hurt him."

Edward did not reply. Another half-mile brought them to an ideal spot by the banks of a stream. The Austin was left by the side of the road and Edward and Dorothy sat affectionately upon the river bank and munched cherries. A Sunday paper lay unheeded at their feet.

"What's the news?" said Edward at last, stretching himself flat on his back and tilting his hat to shade his eyes.

Dorothy glanced over the headlines.

"The Woeful Wife. Extraordinary Story. Twenty-eight People Drowned Last Week. Reported Death of Airman. Startling Jewel Robbery. Ruby Necklace Worth Fifty Thousand Pounds Missing.

Oh, Ted! Fifty thousand pounds. Just fancy!" She went on reading. "The necklace is composed of twenty-one stones set in platinum and was sent by registered post from Paris. On arrival, the packet was found to contain a few pebbles and the jewels were missing."

"Pinched in the post," said Edward. "The posts in France are awful, I believe."

"I'd like to see a necklace like that," said Dorothy. "All glowing like blood - pigeon's blood, that's what they call the colour. I wonder what it would feel like to have a thing like that hanging round your neck."

"Well, you're never likely to know, my gift," said Edward facetiously.

Dorothy tossed her head.

"Why not, I should like to know. It's amazing the way girls can get on in the world. I might go on the stage."

"Girls that behave themselves don't get anywhere," said Edward discouragingly.

Dorothy opened her mouth to reply, checked herself, and murmured, "Pass me the cherries."

"I've been eating more than you have," she remarked. "I'll divide up what's left and - why, whatever's this at the bottom of the basket?"

She drew it out as she spoke - a long glittering chain of blood-red stones.

They both stared at it in amazement.

"In the basket, did you say?" said Edward at last.

Dorothy nodded.

"Right at the bottom - under the fruit."

Again they stared at each other.

"How did it get there, do you think?"

"I can't imagine. It's odd, Ted, just after reading that bit in the paper - about the rubies."

Edward laughed.

"You don't imagine you're holding fifty thousand pounds in your hand, do you?"

"I just said it was odd. Rubies set in platinum. Platinum is that sort of dull silvery stuff - like this. Don't they sparkle and aren't they a lovely colour? I wonder how many of them there are?" She counted. "I say, Ted, there are twenty-one exactly."

"No!"

"Yes. The same number as the paper said. Oh, Ted, you don't think -"

"It couldn't be." But he spoke irresolutely. "There's some sort of way you can tell - scratching them on glass."

"That's diamonds. But you know, Ted, that was a very odd-looking man - the man with the fruit - a nasty-looking man. And he was funny about it - said we'd got more than our money's worth in the basket."

"Yes, but look here, Dorothy. What would he want to hand us over fifty thousand pounds for?"

Miss Pratt shook her head, discouraged.

"It doesn't seem to make sense," she admitted. "Unless the police were after him."

"The police?" Edward paled slightly.

"Yes. It goes on to say in the paper - 'the police have a clue.'"

Cold shivers ran down Edward's spine.

"I don't like this, Dorothy. Supposing the police get after us."

Dorothy stared at him with her mouth open.

"But we haven't done anything, Ted. We found it in the basket."

"And that'll sound a silly sort of story to tell! It isn't likely."

"It isn't very," admitted Dorothy. "Oh, Ted, do you really think it is it? It's like a fairy story!"

"I don't think it sounds like a fairy story," said Edward. "It sounds to me more like the kind of story where the hero goes to Dartmoor unjustly accused for fourteen years."

But Dorothy was not listening. She had clasped the necklace round her neck and was judging the effect in a small mirror taken from her handbag.

"The same as a duchess might wear," she murmured ecstatically.

"I won't believe it," said Edward violently. "They're imitation. They must be imitation."

"Yes, dear," said Dorothy, still intent on her reflection in the mirror. "Very likely."

"Anything else would be too much of a - a coincidence."

"Pigeon's blood," murmured Dorothy.

"It's absurd. That's what I say. Absurd. Look here, Dorothy, are you listening to what I say, or are you not?"

Dorothy put away the mirror. She turned to him, one hand on the rubies round her neck.

"How do I look?" she asked.

Edward stared at her, his grievance forgotten. He had never seen Dorothy quite like this. There was a triumph about her, a kind of regal beauty that was completely new to him. The belief that she had jewels round her neck worth fifty thousand pounds had made of Dorothy Pratt a new woman. She looked insolently serene a kind of Cleopatra and Semiramis and Zenobia rolled into one.

"You look - you look - stunning," said Edward humbly. Dorothy laughed, and her laugh, too, was entirely different.

"Look here," said Edward. "We've got to do something. We must take them to a police station or something."

"Nonsense," said Dorothy. "You said yourself just now that they wouldn't believe you. You'll probably be sent to prison for stealing them."

"But - but what else can we do?"

"Keep them," said the new Dorothy Pratt.

Edward stared at her.

"Keep them? You're mad."

"We found them, didn't we? Why should we think they're valuable7 We'll keep them and I shall wear them."

"And the police will pinch you."

Dorothy considered this for a minute or two.

"All right," she said. "We'll sell them. And you can buy a Rolls-Royce, or two Rolls-Royces, and I'll buy a diamond headthing and some rings."

Still Edward stared. Dorothy showed impatience.

"You've got your chance now - it's up to you to take it. We didn't steal the thing - I wouldn't hold with that. It's come to us and it's probably the only chance we'll ever have of getting all the things we want. Haven't you got any spunk at all, Edward Palgrove?"

Edward found his voice.

"Sell it, you say? That wouldn't be so jolly easy. Any jeweller would want to know where I got the blooming thing."

"You don't take it to a jeweller. Don't you ever read detective stories, Ted? You take it to a 'fence,' of course."

"And how should I know any fences? I've been brought up respectable."

"Men ought to know everything," said Dorothy. "That's what they're for."

He looked at her. She was serene and unyielding.

"I wouldn't have believed it of you," he said weakly.

"I thought you had more spirit."

There was a pause. Then Dorothy rose to her feet.

"Well," she said lightly. "We'd best be getting home."

"Wearing that thing round your neck?"

Dorothy removed the necklace, looked at it reverently and dropped it into her handbag.

"Look here," said Edward. "You give that to me."

"No."

"Yes, you do. I've been brought up honest, my girl."

"Well, you can go on being honest. You need have nothing to do with it."

"Oh, hand it over," said Edward recklessly. "I'll do it. I'll find a fence. As you say, it's the only chance we shall ever have. We came by it honest - bought it for two shillings. It's no more than

what gentlemen do in antique shops every day of their life and are proud of it."

"That's it!" said Dorothy. "Oh, Edward, you're splendid!"

She handed over the necklace and he dropped it into his pocket. He felt worked up, exalted, the very devil of a fellow! In this mood, he started the Austin. They were both too excited to remember tea. They drove back to London in silence. Once at a crossroads, a policeman stepped towards the car, and Edward's heart missed a beat. By a miracle, they reached home without mishap.

Edward's last words to Dorothy were imbued with the adventurous spirit.

"We'll go through with this. Fifty thousand pounds! It's worth it!"

He dreamt that night of broad arrows and Dartmoor, and rose early, haggard, and unrefreshed. He had to set about finding a fence - and how to do it he had not the remotest idea!

His work at the office was slovenly and brought down upon him two sharp rebukes before lunch.

How did one find a "fence"? Whitechapel, he fancied, was the correct neighbourhood - or was it Stepney?

On his return to the office a call came though for him on the telephone. Dorothy's voice spoke - tragic and tearful.

"Is that you, Ted? I'm using the telephone, but she may come in any minute, and I'll have to stop. Ted, you haven't done anything, have you?"

Edward replied in the negative.

"Well, look here, Ted, you mustn't. I've been lying awake all night. It's been awful. Thinking of how it says in the Bible you mustn't steal. I must have been mad yesterday - I really must. You won't do anything, will you, Ted, dear?"

Did a feeling of relief steal over Mr Palgrove? Possibly it did - but he wasn't going to admit any such thing.

"When I say I'm going through with a thing, I go through with it," he said in a voice such as might belong to a strong superman with eyes of steel.

"Oh, but, Ted, dear, you mustn't. Oh, Lord, she's coming. Look here, Ted, she's going out to dinner tonight. I can slip out and meet you. Don't do anything till you've seen me. Eight o'clock. Wait for me round the corner." Her voice changed to a seraphic murmur. "Yes, ma'am, I think it was a wrong number. It was Bloomsbury 0243 they wanted."

As Edward left the office at six o'clock, a huge headline caught his eyes.

JEWELL ROBBERY.

LATEST DEVELOPMENTS

Hurriedly he extended a penny. Safely ensconced in the tube, having dexterously managed to gain a seat, he eagerly perused the printed sheet. He found what he sought easily enough.

A suppressed whistle escaped him.

"Well - I'm -"

And then another adjacent paragraph caught his eye. He read it through and let the paper slip to the floor unheeded.

Precisely at eight o'clock, he was waiting at the rendezvous. A breathless Dorothy, looking pale but pretty, came hurrying along to join him.

"You haven't done anything, Ted?"

"I haven't done anything." He took the ruby chain from his pocket. "You can put it on."

"But, Ted -"

"The police have got the rubies all right - and the man who pinched them. And now read this!"

He thrust a newspaper paragraph under her nose Dorothy read:

NEW ADVERTISING STUNT

A clever new advertising dodge is being adopted by the All-English Fivepenny Fair who intend to challenge the famous Woolworths. Baskets of fruit were sold yesterday and will be on sale every Sunday. Out of every fifty baskets, one will contain an imitation necklace in different coloured stones. These necklaces are really wonderful value for the money. Great excitement and merriment was caused by them yesterday and EAT MORE FRUIT will have a great vogue next Sunday. We congratulate the Fivepenny Fair on their resource and wish them all good luck in their campaign of Buy British Goods.

"Well -" said Dorothy.

And after a pause: "Well!"

"Yes," said Edward. "I felt the same."

A passing man thrust a paper into his hand.

"Take one, brother," he said.

"The price of a virtuous woman is far above rubies."

"There!" said Edward. "I hope that cheers you up."

"I don't know," said Dorothy doubtfully. "I don't exactly want to look like a good woman."

"You don't," said Edward. "That's why the man gave me that paper. With those rubies round your neck you don't look one little bit like a good woman."

Dorothy laughed.

"You're rather a dear, Ted," she said. "Come on, let's go to the pictures."

MR EASTWOOD'S ADVENTURE

Mr Eastwood looked at the ceiling. Then he looked down at the floor. From the floor his gaze traveled slowly up the right-hand wall. Then, with a sudden stern effort, he focused his gaze once more upon the typewriter before him.

The virgin white of the sheet of paper was defaced by a title written in capital letters.

"THE MYSTERY OF THE SECOND CUCUMBER," so it ran. A pleasing title. Anthony Eastwood felt that anyone reading that title would be at once intrigued and arrested by it "The Mystery of the Second Cucumber," they would say. "What can that be about? A cucumber? The second cucumber? I must certainly read that story." And they would be thrilled and charmed by the consummate ease with which this master of detective fiction had woven an exciting plot round this simple vegetable.

That was all very well. Anthony Eastwood knew as well as anyone what the story ought to be like - the bother was that somehow or other he couldn't get on with it. The two essentials for a story were a title and a plot - the rest was mere spade-work; sometimes the title led to a plot all by itself, as it were, and then all was plain sailing - but in this case the title continued to adorn the top of the page, and not the vestige of a plot was forthcoming.

Again Anthony Eastwood's gaze sought inspiration from the ceiling, the floor, and the wallpaper, and still nothing materialized.

"I shall call the heroine Sonia," said Anthony, to urge himself on. "Sonia or possibly Dolores - she shall have a skin of ivory pallor - the kind that's not due to ill-health, and eyes like fathomless pools. The hero shall be called George, or possibly John - something short and British. Then the gardener - I suppose there will have to be a gardener, we've got to drag that beastly cucumber in

somehow or other - the gardener might be Scottish, and amusingly pessimistic about the early frosts."

This method sometimes worked, but it didn't seem to be going to this morning. Although Anthony could see Sonia and George and the comic gardener quite clearly, they didn't show any willingness to be active and do things.

"I could make it a banana, of course," thought Anthony desperately. "Or a lettuce, or a Brussels sprout - Brussels sprout, now, how about that? Really a cryptogram for Brussels - stolen bearer bonds - sinister Belgian baron."

For a moment a gleam of light seemed to show, but it died down again. The Belgian baron wouldn't materialize, and Anthony suddenly remembered that early frosts and cucumbers were incompatible, which seemed to put the lid on the amusing remarks of the Scottish gardener.

"Oh! Damn!" said Mr Eastwood.

He rose and seized the Daily Mail. It was just possible that someone or other had been done to death in such a way as to lend inspiration to a perspiring author. But the news this morning was mainly political and foreign. Mr Eastwood cast down the paper in disgust.

Next seizing a novel from the table, he closed his eyes and dabbed his finger down on one of the pages. The word thus indicated by fate was "sheep." Immediately, with startling brilliance, a whole

story unrolled itself in Mr Eastwood's brain. Lovely girl - lover killed in the war, her brain unhinged - tends sheep on the Scottish mountains - mystic meeting with dead lover, final effect of sheep and moonlight like Academy picture, with girl lying dead in the snow, and two trails of footsteps...

It was a beautiful story. Anthony came out of its conception with a sigh and a sad shake of the head. He knew only too well that the editor in question did not want that kind of story - beautiful though it might be. The kind of story he wanted, and insisted on having (and incidentally paid handsomely for getting), was all about mysterious dark women, stabbed to the heart, a young hero unjustly suspected, and the sudden unraveling of the mystery and fixing of the guilt on the least likely person, by means of wholly inadequate clues - in fact, "THE MYSTERY OF THE SECOND CUCUMBER."

"Although," reflected Anthony, "ten to one he'll alter the title and call it something rotten, like 'Murder Most Foul.' without so much as asking me! Oh, curse that telephone."

He strode angrily to it, and took down the receiver. Twice already in the last hour he had been summoned to it - once for a wrong number, and once to be roped in for dinner by a skittish society dame whom he hated bitterly, but who had been too pertinacious to defeat.

"Hallo!" he growled into the receiver.

A woman's voice answered him, a soft, caressing voice with a trace of foreign accent.

"Is that you, beloved?" it said.

"Well - er - I don't know," said Mr Eastwood cautiously. "Who's speaking?"

"It is I. Carmen. Listen, beloved. I am pursued - in danger - you must come at once. It is life or death now."

"I beg your pardon," said Mr Eastwood politely. "I'm afraid you've got the wrong -"

She broke in before he could complete the sentence.

"Madre de Dios! They are coming. If they find out what I am doing, they will kill me. Do not fail me. Come at once. It is death for me if you don't come. You know, 320 Kirk Street. The word is cucumber... Hush..."

He heard the faint click as she hung up the receiver at the other end. "Well, I'm damned," said Mr Eastwood, very much astonished. He crossed over to his tobacco jar, and filled his pipe carefully.

"I suppose," he mused, "that that was some curious effect of my subconscious self. She can't have said cucumber. The whole thing is very extraordinary. Did she say cucumber, or didn't she?"

He strolled up and down irresolutely.

"320 Kirk Street. I wonder what it's all about? She'll be expecting the other man to turn up. I wish I could have explained. 320 Kirk Street. The word is cucumber - oh, impossible, absurd - hallucination of a busy brain."

He glanced malevolently at the typewriter.

"What good are you, I should like to know? I've been looking at you all the morning, and a lot of good it's done me. An author should get his plots from life - from life, do you hear? I'm going out to get one now."

He clapped a hat on his head, gazed affectionately at his priceless collection of old enamels, and left the flat.

Kirk Street, as most Londoners know, is a long, straggling thoroughfare, chiefly devoted to antique shops, where all kinds of spurious goods are offered at fancy prices. There are also old brass shops, glass shops, decayed second-hand shops, and second-hand clothes dealers.

No. 320 was devoted to the sale of old glass. Glassware of all kinds filled it to overflowing. It was necessary for Anthony to move gingerly as he advanced up a center aisle flanked by wine glasses and with lusters and chandeliers swaying and twinkling over his head.

A very old lady was sitting at the back of the shop. She had a budding mustache that many an undergraduate might have envied, and a truculent manner.

She looked at Anthony and said, "Well?" in a forbidding voice.

Anthony was a young man somewhat easily discomposed. He immediately inquired the price of some hock glasses.

"Forty-five shillings for half a dozen."

"Oh, really," said Anthony. "Rather nice, aren't they? How much are these things?"

"Beautiful, they are, old Waterford. Let you have the pair for eighteen guineas."

Mr Eastwood felt that he was laying up trouble for himself. In another minute he would be buying something, hypnotized by this fierce old woman's eye. And yet he could not bring himself to leave the shop.

"What about that?" he asked, and pointed to a chandelier.

"Thirty-five guineas."

"Ah!" said Mr Eastwood regretfully. "That's rather more than I can afford."

"What do you want?" asked the old lady. "Something for a wedding present?"

"That's it," said Anthony, snatching at the explanation. "But they're very difficult to suit."

"Ah, well," said the lady, rising with an air of determination. "A nice piece of old glass comes amiss to nobody. I've got a couple of old decanters here - and there's a nice little liqueur set, just the thing for a bride -"

For the next ten minutes Anthony endured agonies. The lady had him firmly in hand. Every conceivable specimen of the glass maker's art was paraded before his eyes. He became desperate.

"Beautiful, beautiful," he exclaimed in a perfunctory manner, as he put down a large goblet that was being forced on his attention. Then blurted out hurriedly, "I say, are you on the telephone here?"

"No, we're not. There's a call office at the post office just opposite. Now, what do you say, the goblet - or these fine old rummers?"

Not being a woman, Anthony was quite unversed in the gentle art of getting out of a shop without buying anything.

"I'd better have the liqueur set," he said gloomily.

It seemed the smallest thing. He was terrified of being landed with the chandelier.

With bitterness in his heart he paid for his purchase. And then, as the old lady was wrapping up the parcel, courage suddenly returned to him. After all, she would only think him eccentric, and, anyway, what the devil did it matter what she thought?

"Cucumber," he said, clearly and firmly.

The old crone paused abruptly in her wrapping operations.

"Eh? What did you say?"

"Nothing," lied Anthony hastily.

"Oh! I thought you said cucumber."

"So I did," said Anthony defiantly.

"Well," said the old lady. "Why ever didn't you say that before? Wasting my time. Through that door there and upstairs. She's waiting for you."

As though in a dream, Anthony passed through the door indicated, and climbed some extremely dirty stairs. At the top of them a door stood ajar displaying a tiny sitting-room.

Sitting on a chair, her eyes fixed on the door, and an expression of eager expectancy on her face, was a girl.

Such a girl! She really had the ivory pallor that Anthony had so often written about. And her eyes! Such eyes! She was not English,

that could be seen at a glance. She had a foreign exotic quality which showed itself even in the costly simplicity of her dress.

Anthony paused in the doorway, somewhat abashed. The moment of explanations seemed to have arrived. But with a cry of delight the girl rose and flew into his arms.

"You have come," she cried. "You have come. Oh, the saints and the Holy Madonna be praised."

Anthony, never one to miss opportunities, echoed her fervently. She drew away at last, and looked up in his face with a charming shyness.

"I should never have known you," she declared. "Indeed I should not."

"Wouldn't you?" said Anthony feebly.

"No, even your eyes seem different - and you are ten times handsomer than I ever thought you would be."

"Am I?"

To himself Anthony was saying, "Keep calm, my boy, keep calm. The situation is developing very nicely, but don't lose your head."

"I may kiss you again, yes?"

"Of course you can," said Anthony heartily. "As often as you like."

There was a very pleasant interlude.

"I wonder who the devil I am?" thought Anthony. "I hope to goodness the real fellow won't turn up. What a perfect darling she is."

Suddenly the girl drew away from him, and terror showed in her face.

"You were not followed here?"

"Lord, no."

"Ah, but they are very cunning. You do not know them as I do. Boris, he is a fiend."

"I'll soon settle Boris for you."

"You are a lion - yes, but a lion. As for them, they are canaille - all of them. Listen, I have it! They would have killed me had they known. I was afraid - I did not know what to do, and then I thought of you... Hush, what was that?"

It was a sound in the shop below. Motioning to him to remain where he was, she tiptoed out on to the stairs. She returned with a white face and staring eyes.

"Madre de Dios! It is the police. They are coming up here. You have a knife? A revolver? Which?"

"My dear girl, you don't seriously expect me to murder a policeman?"

"Oh, but you are mad - mad! They will take you away and hang you by the neck until you're dead."

"They'll what?" said Mr Eastwood, with a very unpleasant feeling going up and down his spine.

Steps sounded on the stair.

"Here they come," whispered the girl. "Deny everything. It is the only hope."

"That's easy enough," muttered Mr Eastwood, sotto voce.

In another minute two men had entered the room. They were in plain clothes, but they had an official bearing that spoke of long training. The smaller of the two, a little dark man with quiet gray eyes, was the spokesman.

"I arrest you, Conrad Fleckman," he said, "for the murder of Anna Rosenberg. Anything you say will be used in evidence against you. Here is my warrant and you will do well to come quietly."

A half-strangled scream burst from the girl's lips. Anthony stepped forward with a composed smile.

"You are making a mistake, officer," he said pleasantly. "My name is Anthony Eastwood."

The two detectives seemed completely unimpressed by his statement.

"We'll see about that later," said one of them, the one who had not spoken before. "In the meantime, you come along with us."

"Conrad," wailed the girl. "Conrad, do not let them take you."

Anthony looked at the detectives.

"You will permit me, I am sure, to say good-bye to this young lady?"

With more decency of feeling than he had expected, the two men moved towards the door. Anthony drew the girl into the corner by the window, and spoke to her in a rapid undertone.

"Listen to me. What I said was true. I am not Conrad Fleckman. When you rang up this morning, they must have given you the wrong number. My name is Anthony Eastwood. I came in answer to your appeal because - well, I came."

She stared at him incredulously.

"You are not Conrad Fleckman?"

"No."

"Oh!" she cried, with a deep accent of distress. "And I kissed you!"

"That's all right," Mr Eastwood assured her. "The early Christians made a practice of that sort of thing. Jolly sensible. Now, look here. I'll tool off these people. I shall soon prove my identity. In the meantime, they won't worry you, and you can warn this precious Conrad of yours. Afterwards -"

"Yes?"

"Well - just this. My telephone number is Northwestern 1743 - and mind they don't give you the wrong one."

She gave him an enchanting glance, half-tears, half a smile.

"I shall not forget - indeed, I shall not forget."

"That's all right then. Good-bye. I say -"

"Yes?"

"Talking of the early Christians - once more wouldn't matter, would it?"

She flung her arms round his neck. Her lips just touched his.

"I do like you - yes, I do like you. You will remember that, whatever happens, won't you?"

Anthony disengaged himself reluctantly and approached his captors.

"I am ready to come with you. You don't want to detain this young lady, I suppose?"

"No, sir, that will be quite all right," said the small man civilly.

"Decent fellows, these Scotland Yard men," thought Anthony to himself, as he followed them down the narrow stairway.

There was no sign of the old woman in the shop, but Anthony caught a heavy breathing from a door at the rear, and guessed that she stood behind it, cautiously observing events.

Once out in the dinginess of Kirk Street, Anthony drew a long breath, and addressed the smaller of the two men.

"Now, then, Inspector - you are an inspector, I suppose?"

"Yes, sir. Detective-Inspector Verrall. This is Detective-Sergeant Carter."

"Well, Inspector Verrall, the time has come to talk sense - and to listen to it. too. I'm not Conrad What's-his-name. My name is Anthony Eastwood, as I told you, and I am a writer by profession. If you will accompany me to my flat. I think that I shall be able to satisfy you of my identity."

Something in the matter-of-fact way Anthony spoke seemed to impress the detectives. For the first time an expression of doubt passed over Verrall's face.

Carter, apparently, was harder to convince.

"I dare say," he sneered. "But you'll remember the young lady was calling you 'Conrad' all right."

"Ah! that's another matter. I don't mind admitting to you both that for - er - reasons of my own, I was passing myself off upon that lady as a person called Conrad. A private matter, you understand."

"Likely story, isn't it?" observed Carter. "No, sir, you come along with us. Hail that taxi, Joe."

A passing taxi was stopped, and the three men got inside. Anthony made a last attempt, addressing himself to Verrall as the more easily convinced of the two.

"Look here, my dear Inspector, what harm is it going to do you to come along to my flat and see if I'm speaking the truth? You can keep the taxi if you like - there's a generous offer! It won't make five minutes difference either way."

Verrall looked at him searchingly.

"I'll do it," he said suddenly. "Strange as it appears, I believe you're speaking the truth. We don't want to make fools of

ourselves at the station by arresting the wrong man. What's the address?"

"Forty-eight Brandenburg Mansions."

Verrall leaned out and shouted the address to the taxi driver. All three sat in silence until they arrived at their destination, when Carter sprang out, and Verrall motioned to Anthony to follow him.

"No need for any unpleasantness," he explained, as he too descended. "We'll go in friendly like, as though Mr Eastwood was bringing a couple of pals home."

Anthony felt extremely grateful for the suggestion and his opinion of the Criminal Investigation Department rose every minute.

In the hallway they were fortunate enough to meet Rogers, the porter. Anthony stopped.

"Ah! Good evening, Rogers," he remarked casually.

"Good evening, Mr Eastwood," replied the porter respectfully.

He was attached to Anthony, who set an example of liberality not always followed by his neighbors.

Anthony paused with his foot on the bottom step of the stairs.

"By the way, Rogers," he said casually, "how long have I been living here? I was just having a little discussion about it with these friends of mine."

"Let me see, sir, it must be getting on for close on four years now."

"Just what I thought."

Anthony flung a glance of triumph at the two detectives. Carter grunted, but Verrall was smiling broadly.

"Good, but not good enough, sir," he remarked. "Shall we go up?"

Anthony opened the door of the flat with his latchkey. He was thankful to remember that Seamark, his man, was out. The fewer witnesses of this catastrophe the better.

The typewriter was as he had left it. Carter strode across to the table and read the headline on the paper. "THE MYSTERY OF THE SECOND CUCUMBER?" he announced in a gloomy voice.

"A story of mine," exclaimed Anthony nonchalantly.

"That's another good point, sir," said Verrall nodding his head, his eyes twinkling. "By the way, sir, what was it about? What was the mystery of the second cucumber?"

"Ah, there you have me," said Anthony. "It's that second cucumber that's at the bottom of this trouble."

Carter was looking at him intently. Suddenly he shook his head and tapped his forehead significantly.

"Balmy, poor young fellow," he murmured in an audible aside.

"Now, gentlemen," said Mr Eastwood briskly, "to business. Here are letters addressed to me, my bank-book, communications from editors. What more do you want?"

Verrall examined the papers that Anthony thrust upon him.

"Speaking for myself, sir," he said respectfully, "I want nothing more. I'm quite convinced. But I can't take the responsibility of releasing you upon myself. You see, although it seems positive that you have been residing here as Mr Eastwood for some years, yet it is possible that Conrad Fleckman and Anthony Eastwood are one and the same person. I must make a thorough search of the flat, take your fingerprints, and telephone to headquarters."

"That seems a comprehensive program," remarked Anthony. "I can assure you that you're welcome to any guilty secrets of mine you may lay your hands on."

The inspector grinned. For a detective he was a singularly human person.

"Will you go into the little end room, sir, with Carter, while I'm getting busy?"

"All right," said Anthony unwillingly. "I suppose it couldn't be the other way about, could it?"

"Meaning?"

"That you and I and a couple of whiskies and sodas should occupy the end room while our friend, the sergeant, does the heavy searching."

"If you prefer it, sir?"

"I do prefer it."

They left Carter investigating the contents of the desk with business-like dexterity. As they passed out of the room, they heard him take down the telephone and call up Scotland Yard.

"This isn't so bad," said Anthony, settling himself with a whisky and soda by his side, having hospitably attended to the wants of Inspector Verrall. "Shall I drink first, just to show you that the whisky isn't poisoned?"

The inspector smiled.

"Very irregular, all this," he remarked. "But we know a thing or two in our profession. I realized right from the start that we'd made a mistake. But of course one had to observe all the usual forms. You can't get away from red tape, can you, sir?"

"I suppose not," said Anthony regretfully. "The sergeant doesn't seem very matey yet, though, does he?"

"Ah, he's a fine man, Detective-Sergeant Carter. You wouldn't find it easy to put anything over on him."

"I've noticed that." said Anthony. "By the way, Inspector," he added, "is there any objection to my hearing something about myself?"

"In what way, sir?"

"Come, now, don't you realize that I'm devoured by curiosity? Who was Anna Rosenberg, and why did I murder her?"

"You'll read all about it in the newspapers tomorrow, sir."

"'Tomorrow I may be Myself with Yesterday's ten thousand years,'" quoted Anthony. "I really think you might satisfy my perfectly legitimate curiosity, Inspector. Cast aside your official reticence, and tell me all."

"It's quite irregular, sir."

"My dear Inspector, when we are becoming such fast friends?"

"Well, sir, Anna Rosenberg was a German who lived at Hampstead. With no visible means of livelihood, she grew yearly richer and richer."

"I'm just the opposite," commented Anthony. "I have a visible means of livelihood and I get yearly poorer and poorer. Perhaps I should do better if I lived in Hampstead. I've always heard Hampstead is very bracing."

"At one time," continued Verrall, "she was a second-hand clothes dealer -"

"That explains it," interrupted Anthony. "I remember selling my uniform after the war - not khaki, the other stuff. The whole flat was full of red trousers and gold lace, spread out to best advantage. A fat man in a check suit arrived in a Rolls Royce with a factotum complete with bag. He bid one pound ten for the lot. In the end I threw in a hunting coat and some Zeiss glasses and at a given signal the factotum opened the bag and shoveled the goods inside, and the fat man tendered me a ten-pound note and asked me for change."

"About ten years ago," continued the inspector, "there were several Spanish political refugees in London - among them a certain Don Fernando Ferrarez with his young wife and child. They were very poor, and the wife was ill. Anna Rosenberg visited the place where they were lodging and asked if they had anything to sell. Don Fernando was out, and his wife decided to part with a very wonderful Spanish shawl, embroidered in a marvelous manner, which had been one of her husband's last presents to her before flying from Spain. When Don Fernando returned, he flew into a terrible rage on hearing the shawl had been sold, and tried vainly to recover it. When he at last succeeded in finding the second-hand clothes woman in question, she declared that she

had resold the shawl to a woman whose name she did not know. Don Fernando was in despair. Two months later he was stabbed in the street and died as a result of his wounds. From that time onward, Anna Rosenberg seemed suspiciously flush of money. In the ten years that followed, her house at Hampstead was burgled no less than eight times. Four of the attempts were frustrated and nothing was taken; on the other four occasions, an embroidered shawl of some kind was among the booty."

The inspector paused, and then went on in obedience to an urgent gesture from Anthony.

"A week ago, Carmen Ferrarez, the young daughter of Don Fernando, arrived in this country from a convent in France. Her first action was to seek out Anna Rosenberg at Hampstead. There she is reported to have had a violent scene with the old woman, and her words at leaving were overheard by one of the servants.

"'You have it still,' she cried. 'All these years you have grown rich on it - but I say to you solemnly that in the end it will bring you bad luck. You have no moral right to it, and the day will come when you will wish you had never seen the Shawl of the Thousand Flowers.'

"Three days after that, Carmen Ferrarez, disappeared mysteriously from the hotel where she was staying. In her room was found a name and address - the name of Conrad Fleckman, and also a note from a man purporting to be an antique dealer asking if she were disposed to part with a certain embroidered shawl which he believed she had in her possession. The address given on the note was a false one.

"It is clear that the shawl is the center of the whole mystery. Yesterday morning Conrad Fleckman called upon Anna Rosenberg. She was shut up with him for an hour or more, and when he left she was obliged to go to bed, so white and shaken was she by the interview. But she gave orders that if he came to see her again he was always to be admitted. Last night she got up and went out about nine o'clock, and did not return. She was found this morning in the house occupied by Conrad Fleckman, stabbed through the heart. On the floor beside her was - what do you think?"

"The shawl?" breathed Anthony. "The Shawl of a Thousand Flowers."

"Something far more gruesome than that. Something which explained the whole mysterious business of the shawl and made its hidden value clear... Excuse me, I fancy that's the chief -"

There had indeed been a ring at the bell. Anthony contained his impatience as best he could, and waited for the inspector to return. He was pretty well at ease about his own position now. As soon as they took his fingerprints they would realize their mistake.

And then, perhaps, Carmen would ring up...

The Shawl of a Thousand Flowers! What a strange story - just the kind of story to make an appropriate setting for the girl's exquisite dark beauty.

Carmen Ferrarez...

He jerked himself back from day dreaming. What a time that inspector fellow was. He rose and pulled the door open. The flat was strangely silent. Could they have gone? Surely not without a word to him.

He strode out into the next room. It was empty - so was the sitting-room. Strangely empty! It had a bare, dishevelled appearance. Good heavens! His enamels - the silver!

He rushed wildly through the flat. It was the same tale everywhere. The place had been denuded. Every single thing of value, and Anthony had a very pretty collector's taste in small things, had been taken.

With a groan Anthony staggered to a chair, his head in his hands. He was aroused by the ringing of the front door bell. He opened it to confront Rogers.

"You'll excuse me, sir," said Rogers. "But the gentlemen fancied you might be wanting something."

"The gentlemen?"

"Those two friends of yours, sir. I helped them with the packing as best I could. Very fortunately I happened to have them two good cases in the basement." His eyes dropped to the floor. "I've swept up the straw as best I could, sir."

"You packed the things in here?" groaned Anthony.

"Yes, sir. Was that not your wishes, sir? It was the tall gentlemen told me to do so, sir, and seeing as you were busy talking to the other gentleman in the little end room, I didn't like to disturb you."

"I wasn't talking to him," said Anthony. "He was talking to me - curse him."

Rogers coughed.

"I'm sure I'm very sorry for the necessity, sir," he murmured.

"Necessity?"

"Of parting with your little treasures, sir."

"Eh? Oh, yes. Ha, ha!" He gave a mirthless laugh. "They've driven off by now, I suppose. Those - those friends of mine, I mean?"

"Oh, yes, sir, some time ago. I put the cases on the taxi and the tall gentleman went upstairs again, and then they both came running down and drove off at once... Excuse me, sir, but is anything wrong, sir?"

Rogers might well ask. The hollow groan which Anthony emitted would have aroused surmise anywhere.

"Everything is wrong, thank you, Rogers. But I see clearly that you were not to blame. Leave me, I would commune a while with my telephone."

Five minutes later saw Anthony pouring his tale into the ears of Inspector Driver, who sat opposite to him, notebook in hand. An unsympathetic man, Inspector Driver, and not (Anthony reflected) nearly so like a real inspector! Distinctly stagey, in fact. Another striking example of the superiority of Art over Nature.

Anthony reached the end of his tale. The inspector shut up his notebook.

"Well?" said Anthony anxiously.

"Clear as paint," said the inspector. "It's the Patterson gang. They've done a lot of smart work lately. Big fair man, small dark man, and the girl."

"The girl?"

"Yes, dark and mighty good-looking. Acts as decoy usually."

"A - a Spanish girl?"

"She might call herself that. She was born in Hampstead."

"I said it was a bracing place," murmured Anthony.

"Yes, it's clear enough," said the inspector, rising to depart. "She got you on the phone and pitched you a tale - she guessed you'd come along all right. Then she goes along to old Mother Gibson's, who isn't above accepting a tip for the use of her room for them as finds it awkward to meet in public - lovers, you understand, nothing criminal. You fall for it all right, they get you back here, and while one of them pitches you a tale, the other gets away with the swag. It's the Pattersons all right - just their touch."

"And my things?" asked Anthony anxiously.

"We'll do what we can, sir. But the Pattersons are uncommon sharp."

"They seem to be," said Anthony bitterly.

The inspector departed, and scarcely had he gone before there came a ring at the door. Anthony opened it. A small boy stood there, holding a package.

"Parcel for you, sir."

Anthony took it with some surprise. He was not expecting a parcel of any kind. Returning to the sitting-room with it, he cut the string.

It was a liqueur set!

"Damn!" said Anthony.

Then he noticed that at the bottom of one of the glasses there was a tiny artificial rose. His mind flew back to the upper room in Kirk Street.

"I do like you - yes, I do like you. You will remember that whatever happens, won't you?"

That was what she had said. Whatever happens... Did she mean -

Anthony took hold of himself sternly.

"This won't do," he admonished himself.

His eye fell on the typewriter, and he sat down with a resolute face.

THE MYSTERY OF THE SECOND CUCUMBER

His face grew dreamy again. The Shawl of a Thousand Flowers. What was it that was found on the floor beside the dead body? The gruesome thing that explained the whole mystery?

Nothing, of course, since it was only a trumped-up tale to hold his attention, and the teller had used the old Arabian Nights' trick of breaking off at the most interesting point. But couldn't there be a gruesome thing that explained the whole mystery? Couldn't there? If one gave one's mind to it?

Anthony tore the sheet of paper from his typewriter and substituted another. He typed a headline:

THE MYSTERY OF THE SPANISH SHAWL

He surveyed it for a moment or two in silence.

Then he began to type rapidly...

THE GOLDEN BALL

George Dundas stood in the City of London meditating.

All about him toilers and moneymakers surged and flowed like an enveloping tide. But George, beautifully dressed, his trousers exquisitely creased; took no heed of them. He was busy thinking what to do next.

Something had occurred! Between George and his rich uncle (Ephraim Leadbetter of the firm of Leadbetter and Gilling) there had been what is called in a lower walk of life "words." To be

strictly accurate, the words had been almost entirely on Mr Leadbetter's side. They had flowed from his lips in a steady stream of bitter indignation, and the fact that they consisted almost entirely of repetition did not seem to have worried him. To say a thing once beautifully and then let it alone was not one of Mr Leadbetter's mottoes.

The theme was a simple one - the criminal folly and wickedness of a young man, who has his way to make, taking a day off in the middle of the week without even asking leave. Mr Leadbetter, when he had said everything he could think of and several things twice, paused for breath and asked George what he meant by it.

George replied simply that he had felt he wanted a day off. A holiday, in fact.

And what, Mr Leadbetter wanted to know, were Saturday afternoon and Sunday? To say nothing of Whitsuntide, not long past, and August Bank Holiday to come?

George said he didn't care for Saturday afternoons, Sundays or Bank Holidays. He meant a real day, when it might be possible to find some spot where half London was not assembled already.

Mr Leadbetter then said that he had done his best by his dead sister's son - nobody could say he hadn't given him a chance. But it was plain that it was no use. And in future George could have five real days with Saturday and Sunday added to do with as he liked.

"The golden ball of opportunity has been thrown up for you, my boy," said Mr Leadbetter in a last touch of poetical fancy. "And you have failed to grasp it."

George said it seemed to him that that was just what he had done, and Mr Leadbetter dropped poetry for wrath and told him to get out.

Hence George - meditating. Would his uncle relent or would he not? Had he any secret affection for George, or merely a cold distaste?

It was just at that moment that a voice - a most unlikely voice - said, "Hallo!"

A scarlet touring car with an immense long hood had drawn up to the curb beside him. At the wheel was that beautiful and popular society girl, Mary Montresor. (The description is that of the illustrated papers who produced a portrait of her at least four times a month.) She was smiling at George in an accomplished manner.

"I never knew a man could look so like an island," said Mary Montresor. "Would you like to get in?"

"I should love it above all things," said George with no hesitation, and stepped in beside her.

They proceeded slowly because the traffic forbade anything else.

"I'm tired of the city," said Mary Montresor. "I came to see what it was like. I shall go back to London."

Without presuming to correct her geography, George said it was a splendid idea. They proceeded sometimes slowly, sometimes with wild bursts of speed when Mary Montresor saw a chance of cutting in. It seemed to George that she was somewhat optimistic in the latter view, but he reflected that one could only die once. He thought it best, however, to essay no conversation. He preferred his fair driver to keep strictly to the job in hand.

It was she who reopened the conversation, choosing the moment when they were doing a wild sweep round Hyde Park Corner.

"How would you like to marry me?" she inquired casually.

George gave a gasp, but that may have been due to a large bus that seemed to spell certain destruction. He prided himself on his quickness in response.

"I should love it," he replied easily.

"Well," said Mary Montresor vaguely. "Perhaps you may someday."

They turned into the straight without accident, and at that moment George perceived large new bills at Hyde Park Corner tube station. Sandwiched between GRAVE POLITICAL SITUATION and COLONEL IN DOCK, one said SOCIETY GIRL TO MARRY DUKE, and the other DUKE OF EDGEHILL AND MISS MONTRESOR.

"What's this about the Duke of Edgehill?" demanded George sternly.

"Me and Bingo? We're engaged."

"But then - what you said just now -"

"Oh, that," said Mary Montresor. "You see, I haven't made up my mind who I shall actually marry."

"Then why did you get engaged to him?"

"Just to see if I could. Everybody seemed to think it would be frightfully difficult, and it wasn't a bit!"

"Very rough luck on - er - Bingo," said George, mastering his embarrassment at calling a real live duke by a nickname. "Not at all," said Mary Montresor. "It will be good for Bingo, if anything could do him good - which I doubt."

George made another discovery - again aided by a convenient poster.

"Why, of course, it's cup day at Ascot. I should have thought that was the one place you were simply bound to be today."

Mary Montresor sighed.

"I wanted a holiday," she said plaintively.

"Why, so did I," said George, delighted. "And as a result my uncle has kicked me out to starve."

"Then in case we marry," said Mary, "my twenty thousand a year may come in useful?"

"It will certainly provide us with a few home comforts," said George.

"Talking of homes," said Mary, "let's go in the country and find a home we would like to live in."

It seemed a simple and charming plan. They negotiated Putney Bridge, reached the Kingston by-pass and with a sigh of satisfaction Mary pressed her foot down on the accelerator. They got into the country very quickly. It was half an hour later that with a sudden exclamation Mary shot out a dramatic hand and pointed.

On the brow of a hill in front of them there nestled a house of what house agents describe (but seldom truthfully) as "old-world charm." Imagine the description of most houses in the country really come true for once, and you get an idea of this house.

Mary drew up outside a white gate.

"We'll leave the car and go up and look at it. It's our house!"

"Decidedly, it's our house," agreed George. "But just for the moment other people seem to be living in it."

Mary dismissed the other people with a wave of her hand. They walked up the winding drive together. The house appeared even more desirable at close quarters.

"We'll go and peep in at all the windows," said Mary.

George demurred.

"Do you think the other people -"

"I shan't consider them. It's our house - they're only living in it by a sort of accident. Besides, it's a lovely day and they're sure to be out. And if anyone does catch us, I shall say - I shall say - that I thought it was Mrs - Mrs Pardonstenger's house, and that I am so sorry I made a mistake."

"Well, that ought to be safe enough," said George reflectively.

They looked in through windows. The house was delightfully furnished. They had just got to the study when footsteps crunched on the gravel behind them and they turned to face a most irreproachable butler.

"Oh!" said Mary. And then putting on her most enchanting smile, she said, "Is Mrs Pardonstenger in? I was looking to see if she was in the study."

"Mrs Pardonstenger is at home, madam," said the butler. "Will you come this way, please."

They did the only thing they could. They followed him. George was calculating what the odds against this happening could possibly be. With a name like Pardonstenger he came to the conclusion it was about one in twenty thousand. His companion whispered, "Leave it to me. It will be all right."

George was only too pleased to leave it to her. The situation, he considered, called for feminine finesse.

They were shown into a drawing room. No sooner had the butler left the room than the door almost immediately reopened and a big florid lady with peroxide hair came in expectantly.

Mary Montresor made a movement towards her, then paused in well-stimulated surprise.

"Why!" she exclaimed. "It isn't Amy! What an extraordinary thing!"

"It is an extraordinary thing," said a grim voice.

A man had entered behind Mrs Pardonstenger, an enormous man with a bulldog face and a sinister frown. George thought he had never seen such an unpleasant brute. The man closed the door and stood with his back against it.

"A very extraordinary thing," he repeated sneeringly. "But I fancy we understand your little game!" He suddenly produced what seemed an outsize in revolvers. "Hands up. Hands up, I say. Frisk 'em, Bella."

George in reading detective stories had often wondered what it meant to be frisked. Now he knew. Bella (alias Mrs P.) satisfied herself that neither he nor Mary concealed any lethal weapons on their persons.

"Thought you were mighty clever, didn't you?" sneered the man. "Coming here like this and playing the innocents. You've made a mistake this time - a bad mistake. In fact, I very much doubt whether your friends and relations will ever see you again. Ah! You would, would you?" as George made a movement. "None of your games. I'd shoot you as soon as look at you."

"Be careful, George," quavered Mary.

"I shall," said George with feeling. "Very careful."

"And now march," said the man. "Open the door, Bella. Keep your hands above your heads, you two. The lady first - that's right. I'll come behind you both. Across the hall. Upstairs..."

They obeyed. What else could they do? Mary mounted the stairs, her hands held high. George followed. Behind them came the huge ruffian, revolver in hand.

Mary reached the top of the staircase and turned the corner. At the same moment, without the least warning, George lunged out a fierce backward kick. He caught the man full in the middle and he capsized backwards down the stairs. In a moment George had turned and leaped down after him, kneeling on his chest. With his

right hand, he picked up the revolver which had fallen from the other's hand as he fell.

Bella gave a scream and retreated through a baize door. Mary came running down the stairs, her face as white as paper.

"George, you haven't killed him?"

The man was lying absolutely still. George bent over him.

"I don't think I've killed him," he said regretfully. "But he's certainly taken the count all right."

"Thank God." She was breathing rapidly.

"Pretty neat," said George with permissible self-admiration. "Many a lesson to be learnt from a jolly old mule. Eh, what?"

Mary pulled at his hand.

"Come away," she cried feverishly. "Come away quick."

"If we had something to tie this fellow up with," said George, intent on his own plans. "I suppose you couldn't find a bit of rope or cord anywhere?"

"No, I couldn't," said Mary. "And come away, please - please - I'm so frightened."

"You needn't be frightened," said George with manly arrogance. "I'm here."

"Darling George, please - for my sake. I don't want to be mixed up in this. Please let's go."

The exquisite way in which she breathed the words "for my sake" shook George's resolution. He allowed himself to be led forth from the house and hurried down the drive to the waiting car. Mary said faintly: "You drive. I don't feel I can." George took command of the wheel.

"But we've got to see this thing through," he said. "Heaven knows what blackguardism that nasty-looking fellow is up to. I won't bring the police into it if you don't want me to - but I'll have a try on my own. I ought to be able to get on their track all right."

"No, George, I don't want you to."

"We have a first-class adventure like this, and you want me to back out of it? Not on my life."

"I'd no idea you were so bloodthirsty," said Mary tearfully.

"I'm not bloodthirsty. I didn't begin it. The damned cheek of the fellow - threatening us with an outsize revolver. By the way - why on earth didn't that revolver go off when I kicked him downstairs?"

He stopped the car and fished the revolver out of the side pocket of the car where he had placed it. After examining it, he whistled.

"Well, I'm damned! The thing isn't loaded. If I'd known that -" He paused, wrapped in thought. "Mary, this is a very curious business."

"I know it is. That's why I'm begging you to leave it alone."

"Never," said George firmly.

Mary uttered a heart-rending sigh.

"I see," she said, "that I shall have to tell you. And the worst of it is that I haven't the least idea how you'll take it."

"What do you mean - tell me?"

"You see, it's like this." She paused. "I feel girls should stick together nowadays - they should insist on knowing something about the men they meet."

"Well?" said George, utterly fogged.

"And the most important thing to a girl is how a man will behave in an emergency - has he got presence of mind - courage - quick-wittedness? That's the kind of thing you can hardly ever know - until it's too late. An emergency mightn't arise until you'd been married for years. All you do know about a man is how he dances and if he's good at getting taxis on a wet night."

"Both very useful accomplishments," George pointed out.

"Yes, but one wants to feel a man is a man."

"The great wide-open spaces where men are men," George quoted absently.

"Exactly. But we have no wide-open spaces in England. So one has to create a situation artificially. That's what I did."

"Do you mean -"

"I do mean. That house, as it happens, actually is my house. We came to it by design - not by chance. And the man - that man that you nearly killed -"

"Yes?"

"He's Rube Wallace - the film actor. He does prize fighters, you know. The dearest and gentlest of men. I engaged him. Bella's his wife. That's why I was so terrified that you'd killed him. Of course the revolver wasn't loaded. It's a stage property. Oh, George, are you very angry?"

"Am I the first person you have - er - tried this test on?"

"Oh, no. There have been - let me see - nine and a half!"

"Who was the half?" inquired George with curiosity.

"Bingo," replied Mary coldly.

"Did any of them think of kicking like a mule?"

"No - they didn't. Some tried to bluster and some gave in at once, but they all allowed themselves to be marched upstairs and tied up, and gagged. Then, of course, I managed to work myself loose from my bonds - like in books - and I freed them and we got away - finding the house empty."

"And nobody thought of the mule trick or anything like it?"

"No."

"In that case," said George graciously, "I forgive you."

"Thank you, George," said Mary meekly.

"In fact," said George, "the only question that arises is: Where do we go now? I'm not sure if it's Lambeth Palace or Doctor's Commons, wherever that is."

"What are you talking about?"

"The license. A special license, I think, is indicated. You're too fond of getting engaged to one man and then immediately asking another one to marry you."

"I didn't ask you to marry me!"

"You did. At Hyde Park Corner. Not a place I should choose for a proposal myself, but everyone has their idiosyncrasies in these matters."

"I did nothing of the kind. I just asked, as a joke, whether you would care to marry me? It wasn't intended seriously."

"If I were to take counsel's opinion, I am sure that he would say it constituted a genuine proposal. Besides, you know you want to marry me."

"I don't."

"Not after nine and a half failures? Fancy what a feeling of security it will give you to go through life with a man who can extricate you from any dangerous situation."

Mary appeared to weaken slightly at this telling argument. But she said firmly: "I wouldn't marry any man unless he went on his knees to me."

George looked at her. She was adorable. But George had other characteristics of the mule besides its kick. He said with equal firmness:

"To go on one's knees to any woman is degrading. I will not do it."

Mary said with enchanting wistfulness: "What a pity."

They drove back to London. George was stern and silent. Mary's face was hidden by the brim of her hat. As they passed Hyde Park Corner, she murmured softly: "Couldn't you go on your knees to me?"

George said firmly: "No."

He felt he was being a superman. She admired him for his attitude. But unluckily he suspected her of mulish tendencies herself. He drew up suddenly.

"Excuse me," he said.

He jumped out of the car, retraced his steps to a fruit barrow they had passed and returned so quickly that the policeman who was bearing down upon them to ask what they meant by it, had not had time to arrive.

George drove on, lightly tossing an apple into Mary's lap.

"Eat more fruit," he said. "Also symbolical."

"Symbolical?"

"Yes, originally Eve gave Adam an apple. Nowadays Adam gives Eve one. See?"

"Yes," said Mary rather doubtfully.

"Where shall I drive you?" inquired George formally.

"Home, please."

He drove to Grosvenor Square. His face was absolutely impassive. He jumped out and came round to help her out. She made a last appeal.

"Darling George - couldn't you? Just to please me?"

"Never," said George.

And at that moment it happened. He slipped, tried to recover his balance and failed. He was kneeling in the mud before her. Mary gave a squeal of joy and clapped her hands.

"Darling George! Now I will marry you. You can go straight to Lambeth Palace and fix up with the Archbishop of Canterbury about it."

"I didn't mean to," said George hotly. "It was a bl - er - a banana skin." He held the offender up reproachfully.

"Never mind," said Mary. "It happened. When we quarrel and you throw it in my teeth that I proposed to you, I can retort that you had to go on your knees to me before I would marry you. And all because of that blessed banana skin! It was a blessed banana skin you were going to say?"

"Something of the sort," said George.

At five-thirty that afternoon, Mr Leadbetter was informed that his nephew had called and would like to see him.

"Called to eat humble pie," said Mr Leadbetter to himself. "I dare say I was rather hard on the lad, but it was for his own good."

And he gave orders that George should be admitted. George came in airily.

"I want a few words with you, Uncle," he said. "You did me a grave injustice this morning. I should like to know whether, at my age, you could have gone out into the street, disowned by your relatives, and between the hours of eleven-fifteen and five-thirty acquire an income of twenty thousand a year. That is what I have done!"

"You're mad, boy."

"Not mad; resourceful! I am going to marry a young, rich, beautiful society girl. One, moreover, who is throwing over a duke for my sake."

"Marrying a girl for her money? I'd not have thought it of you."

"And you'd have been right. I would never have dared to ask her if she hadn't - very fortunately - asked me. She retracted afterwards, but I made her change her mind. And do you know, Uncle, how all

this was done? By a judicious expenditure of twopence and a grasping of the golden ball of opportunity."

"Why the tuppence?" asked Mr Leadbetter, financially interested.

"One banana - off a barrow. Not everyone would have thought of that banana. Where do you get a marriage license? Is it Doctor's Commons or Lambeth Palace?"

THE RAJAH'S EMERALD

With a serious effort James Bond bent his attention once more on the little yellow book in his hand. On its outside the book bore the simple but pleasing legend, "Do you want your salary increased by J300 per annum?" Its price was one shilling. James had just finished reading two pages of crisp paragraphs instructing him to look his boss in the face, to cultivate a dynamic personality, and to radiate an atmosphere of efficiency. He had now arrived at subtler matter, "There is a time for frankness, there is a time for discretion," the little yellow book informed him. "A strong man does not always blurt out all he knows." James let the little book close and, raising his head, gazed out over a blue expanse of ocean. A horrible suspicion assailed him, that he was not a strong man. A strong man would have been in command of the present situation, not a victim to it. For the sixtieth time that morning James rehearsed his wrongs.

This was his holiday. His holiday! Ha, ha! Sardonic laughter. Who had persuaded him to come to that fashionable seaside resort, Kimpton-on-Sea? Grace. Who had urged him into an expenditure of more than he could afford? Grace. And he had fallen in with the plan eagerly. She had got him here, and what was the result? While he was staying in an obscure boarding house about a mile and a half from the sea front, Grace, who should have been in a similar boarding house (not the same one - the proprieties of James's circle were very strict), had flagrantly deserted him and was staying at no less than the Esplanade Hotel upon the sea front.

It seemed that she had friends there. Friends! Again James laughed sardonically. His mind went back over the last three years of his leisurely courtship of Grace. Extremely pleased she had been when he lust singled her out for notice. That was before she had risen to heights of glory in the millinery salons at Messrs. Bartles in the High Street. In those early days it had been James who gave himself airs; now, alas! the boot was on the other leg. Grace was what is technically known as "earning good money." It had made her uppish. Yes, that was it, thoroughly uppish. A confused fragment out of a poetry book came back to James's mind, something about "thanking heaven fasting, for a good man's love." But there was nothing of that kind of thing observable about Grace. Well-fed on an Esplanade Hotel breakfast, she was ignoring the good man's love utterly. She was indeed accepting the attentions of a poisonous idiot called Claud Sopworth, a man, James felt convinced, of no moral worth whatsoever.

James ground a heel into the earth and scowled darkly at the horizon. Kimpton-on-Sea. What had possessed him to come to such a place? It was pre-eminently a resort of the rich and fashionable, it possessed two large hotels, and several miles of picturesque bungalows belonging to fashionable actresses, rich merchants and those members of the English aristocracy who had married wealthy wives. The rent, furnished, of the smallest bungalow was twenty-five guineas a week. Imagination boggled at what the rent of the large ones might amount to. There was one of these palaces immediately behind James's seat. It belonged to that famous sportsman Lord Edward Campion, and there were staying there at the moment a houseful of distinguished guests including the Rajah of Maraputna, whose wealth was fabulous. James had read all about him in the local weekly newspaper that morning: the extent of his Indian possessions, his palaces, his wonderful collection of jewels, with a special mention of one famous emerald which the papers declared enthusiastically was the size of a pigeon's egg. James, being town-bred, was somewhat hazy about the size of a pigeon's egg, but the impression left on his mind was good.

"If I had an emerald like that," said James, scowling at the horizon again, "I'd show Grace."

The sentiment was vague, but the enunciation of it made James feel better. Laughing voices hailed him from behind, and he turned abruptly to confront Grace. With her was Clara Sopworth, Alice Sopworth, Dorothy Sopworth and - alas! Claud Sopworth. The girls were arm-in-arm and giggling.

"Why, you are quite a stranger," cried Grace archly.

"Yes," said James.

He could, he felt, have found a more telling retort. You cannot convey the impression of a dynamic personality by the use of the one word "yes." He looked with intense loathing at Claud Sopworth. Claud Sopworth was almost as beautifully dressed as the hero of a musical comedy. James longed passionately for the moment when an enthusiastic beach dog should plant wet, sandy forefeet on the unsullied whiteness of Claud's flannel trousers. He himself wore a serviceable pair of dark-grey flannel trousers which had seen better days.

"Isn't the air beau-tiful?" said Clara, sniffing it appreciatively. "Quite sets you up, doesn't it?"

She giggled.

"It's ozone," said Alice Sopworth. "It's as good as a tonic, you know." And she giggled also.

James thought: "I should like to knock their silly heads together. What is the sense of laughing all the time? They are not saying anything funny."

The immaculate Claud murmured languidly: "Shall we have a bathe, or is it too much of a fag?"

The idea of bathing was accepted shrilly. James fell into line with them. He even managed, with a certain amount of cunning, to draw Grace a little behind the others.

"Look here!" he complained. "I am hardly seeing anything of you."

"Well, I am sure we are all together now," said Grace, "and you can come and lunch with us at the hotel, at least -"

She looked dubiously at James's legs.

"What is the matter?" demanded James ferociously. "Not smart enough for you, I suppose?"

"I do think, dear, you might take a little more pains," said Grace. "Everyone is so fearfully smart here. Look at Claud Sopworth!"

"I have looked at him," said James grimly. "I have never seen a man who looked a more complete ass than he does."

Grace drew herself up.

"There is no need to criticize my friends, James; it's not manners. He's dressed just like any other gentleman at the hotel is dressed."

"Bah!" said James. "Do you know what I read the other day in 'Society Snippets'? Why, that the Duke of - the Duke of, I can't remember, but one duke, anyway, was the worst-dressed man in England, there!"

"I dare say," said Grace, "but then, you see, he is a duke."

"Well?" demanded James. "What is wrong with my being a duke someday? At least, well, not perhaps a duke, but a peer."

He slapped the yellow book in his pocket and recited to her a long list of peers of the realm who had started life much more obscurely than James Bond. Grace merely giggled.

"Don't be so soft, James," she said. "Fancy you Earl of Kimpton-on-Sea!"

James gazed at her in mingled rage and despair. The air of Kimpton-on-Sea had certainly gone to Grace's head.

The beach at Kimpton is a long, straight stretch of sand. A row of bathing huts and boxes stretches evenly along it for about a mile and a half. The party had just stopped before a row of six huts all labelled imposingly, "For visitors to the Esplanade Hotel only."

"Here we are," said Grace brightly; "but I'm afraid you can't come in with us, James; you'll have to go along to the public tents over there; we'll meet you in the sea. So long!"

"So long!" said James, and he strode off in the direction indicated.

Twelve dilapidated tents stood solemnly confronting the ocean. An aged mariner guarded them, a roll of blue paper in his hand. He accepted a coin of the realm from James, tore him off a blue ticket

from his roll, threw him over a towel, and jerked one thumb over his shoulder.

"Take your turn," he said huskily.

It was then that James awoke to the fact of competition. Others besides himself had conceived the idea of entering the sea. Not only was each tent occupied, but outside each tent was a determined-looking crowd of people glaring at each other. James attached himself to the smallest group and waited. The strings of the tent parted, and a beautiful young woman, sparsely clad, emerged on the scene settling her bathing cap with the air of one who had the, whole morning to waste. She strolled down to the water's edge and sat down dreamily on the sands.

"That's no good," said James to himself, and attached himself forthwith to other group.

After waiting five minutes, sounds of activity were apparent in the second tent. With heavings and strainings, the flaps parted asunder and four children and a father and mother emerged. The tent being so small, it had something of the appearance of a conjuring trick. On the instant two women sprang forward, each grasping one flap of the tent.

"Excuse me," said the first young woman, panting a little.

"Excuse me," said the other young woman, glaring.

"I would have you know I was here quite ten minutes before you were," said the first young woman rapidly.

"I have been here a good quarter of an hour, as anyone will tell you," said the second young woman defiantly.

"Now then, now then," said the aged mariner, drawing near.

Both young women spoke to him shrilly. When they had finished he jerked his thumb at the second young woman and said briefly: "It's yours."

Then he departed, deaf to remonstrances. He neither knew nor cared which had been there first, but his decision, as they say in newspaper competitions, was final. The despairing James caught at his arm.

"Look here! I say!"

"Well, mister?'

"How long is it going to be before I get a tent?"

The aged mariner threw a dispassionate glance over the waiting throng.

"Might be an hour, might be an hour and a half; I can't say."

At that moment James espied Grace and the Sopworth girls running lightly down the sands towards the sea.

"Damn!" said James to himself. "Oh, damn!"

He plucked once more at the aged mariner.

"Can't I get a tent anywhere else? What about one of these huts along here? They all seem empty."

"The huts," said the ancient mariner with dignity, "are private."

Having uttered this rebuke, he passed on. With a bitter feeling of having been tricked, James detached himself from the waiting groups and strode savagely down the beach. It was the limit! It was the absolute, complete limit! He glared savagely at the trim bathing huts he passed. In that moment from being an Independent Liberal, he became a red-hot Socialist. Why should the rich have bathing huts and be able to bathe any minute they chose without waiting in a crowd? "This system of ours," said James vaguely, "is all wrong."

From the sea came the coquettish screams of the splashed. Grace's voice! And above her squeaks, the inane "Ha, ha, ha" of Claud Sopworth.

"Damn!" said James, grinding his teeth, a thing which he had never before attempted, only read about in works of fiction.

He came to a stop, twirling his stick savagely, and turning his back firmly on the sea. Instead, he gazed with concentrated hatred upon Eagle's Nest, Buena Vista, and Mon Desir. It was the custom

of the inhabitants of Kimpton-on-Sea to label their bathing huts with fancy names. Eagle's Nest merely struck James as being silly, and Buena Vista was beyond his linguistic accomplishments. But his knowledge of French was sufficient to make him realize the appositeness of the third name.

"Mon Desir," said James. "I should jolly well think it was."

And on that moment he saw that while the doors of the other bathing huts were tightly closed, that of Mon Desir was ajar. James looked thoughtfully up and down the beach; this particular spot was mainly occupied by mothers of large families, busily engaged in superintending their offspring. It was only ten o'clock, too early as yet for the aristocracy of Kimpton-on-Sea to have come down to bathe.

"Eating quails and mushrooms in their beds as likely as not, brought to them on trays by powdered footmen, pah! Not one of them will be down here before twelve o'clock," thought James.

He looked again towards the sea. With the obedience of a well-trained "leit motif," the shrill scream of Grace rose upon the air. It was followed by the "Ha, ha, ha" of Claud Sopworth.

"I will," said James between his teeth.

He pushed open the door of Mon Desir and entered. For the moment he had a fright, as he caught sight of sundry garments hanging from pegs, but he was quickly reassured. The hut was partitioned into two; on the right-hand side, a girl's yellow sweater,

a battered panama hat and a pair of beach shoes were depending from a peg. On the left-hand side an old pair of grey flannel trousers, a pullover, and a sou'wester proclaimed the fact that the sexes were segregated. James hastily transferred himself to the gentlemen's part of the hut, and undressed rapidly. Three minutes later, he was in the sea puffing and snorting importantly, doing extremely short bursts of professional-looking swimming - head under the water, arms lashing the sea - that style.

"Oh, there you are!" cried Grace. "I was afraid you wouldn't be in for ages with all that crowd of people waiting there."

"Really?" said James.

He thought with affectionate loyalty of the yellow book. "The strong man can on occasions be discreet." For the moment his temper was quite restored. He was able to say pleasantly but firmly to Claud Sopworth, who was teaching Grace the overarm stroke:

"No, no old man; you have got it all wrong. I'll show her."

And such was the assurance of his tone, that Claud withdrew discomfited. The only pity of it was that his triumph was short-lived. The temperature of our English waters is not such as to induce bathers to remain in them for any length of time. Grace and the Sopworth girls were already displaying blue chins and chattering teeth. They raced up the beach, and James pursued his solitary way back to Mon Desir. As he towelled himself vigorously

and slipped his shirt over his head, he was pleased with himself. He had, he felt, displayed a dynamic personality.

And then suddenly he stood still, frozen with terror. Girlish voices sounded from outside, and voices quite different from those of Grace and her friends. A moment later he had realized the truth; the rightful owners of Mon Desir were arriving. It is possible that if James had been fully dressed, he would have waited their advent in a dignified manner and attempted an explanation. As it was, he acted on panic. The windows of Mon Desir were modestly screened by dark green curtains. James flung himself on the door and held the knob in a desperate clutch. Hands tried ineffectually to turn it from outside.

"It's locked after all," said a girl's voice. "I thought Pug said it was open."

"No, Woggle said so."

"Woggle is the limit," said the other girl. "How perfectly foul; we shall have to go back for the key."

James heard their footsteps retreating. He drew a long, deep breath. In desperate haste he huddled on the rest of his garments. Two minutes later saw him strolling negligently down the beach with an almost aggressive air of innocence. Grace and the Sopworth girls joined him on the beach a quarter of an hour later. The rest of the morning passed agreeably in stone throwing, writing in the sand and light badinage. Then Claud glanced at his watch.

"Lunchtime," he observed. "We'd better be strolling back."

"I'm terribly hungry," said Alice Sopworth.

All the other girls said that they were terribly hungry too.

"Are you coming, James?" asked Grace.

Doubtless James was unduly touchy. He chose to take offence at her tone.

"Not if my clothes are not good enough for you," he said bitterly. "Perhaps, as you are so particular, I'd better not come."

That was Grace's cue for murmured protestations, but the seaside air had affected Grace unfavourably. She merely replied: "Very well. Just as you like; see you this afternoon then."

James was left dumbfounded.

"Well!" he said, staring after the retreating group. "Well, of all the - "

He strolled moodily into the town. There are two cafй́s in Kimpton-on-Sea; they are both hot, noisy and over-crowded. It was the affair of the bathing huts once more. James had to wait his turn. He had to wait longer than his turn, an unscrupulous matron who had just arrived forestalling him when a vacant seat did present itself. At last he was seated at a small table. Close to his left ear

three raggedly bobbed maidens were making a determined hash of Italian opera. Fortunately James was not musical. He studied the bill of fare dispassionately, his hands thrust deep into his pockets. He thought to himself:

"Whatever I ask for, it's sure to be 'off.' That's the kind of fellow I am."

His right hand, groping in the recesses of his pocket, touched an unfamiliar object. It felt like a pebble, a large round pebble.

"What on earth did I want to put a stone in my pocket for?" thought James.

His fingers closed round it. A waitress drifted up to him.

"Fried plaice and chipped potatoes, please," said James.

"Fried plaice is 'off,'" murmured the waitress, her fixed dreamily on the ceiling.

"Then I'll have curried beef," said James.

"Curried beef is 'off.'"

"Is there anything on this beastly menu that isn't 'off'?" demanded James.

The waitress looked pained and placed a pale-grey finger against haricot mutton. James resigned himself inevitable and ordered

haricot mutton. His mind still seething with resentment against the ways of cafйs, he drew his hand out of his pocket, the stone still in it. Unclosing fingers, he looked absent-mindedly at the object in his palm. Then with a shock all lesser matters passed from his mind, and he stared with all his eyes. The thing he held was not a pebble, it was - he could hardly doubt it - an an enormous green emerald. James stared at it horror-stricken. No, it couldn't be an emerald; it must be coloured glass. There couldn't be an emerald of that size, unless - printed words danced before James's eyes, "The Rajah of Maraputna - famous emerald the size of a pigeon's egg." Was it - could it be - that emerald at which he was looking now? The waitress returned with the haricot mutton, and James closed his fingers spasmodically. Hot and cold shivers chased themselves up and down his spine. He had the sense of being caught in a terrible dilemma. If this was the emerald - but was it? Could it be? He unclosed his fingers and peeped anxiously. James was no expert on precious stones, but the depth and the glow of the jewel convinced him this was the real thing. He put both elbows on the table and leaned forward staring with unseeing eyes at the haricot mutton slowly congealing on the dish in front of him. He had got to think this out. If this was the Rajah's emerald, what was he going to do about it? The world "police" flashed into his mind. If you found anything of value, you took it to the police station. Upon this axiom had James been brought up.

Yes, but - how on earth had the emerald got into his trouser pocket? That was doubtless the question the police would ask. It was an awkward question, and it was moreover a question to which he had at the moment no answer. How had the emerald got into his trouser pocket? He looked despairingly down at his legs,

and as he did so, a misgiving shot through him. He looked more closely. One pair of old grey flannel trousers is very much like another pair of old grey flannel trousers, but all the same, James had an instinctive feeling that these were not his trousers after all. He sat back in his chair stunned with the force of the discovery. He saw now what had happened; in the hurry of getting out of the bathing hut, he had taken the wrong trousers. He had hung his own, he remembered, on an adjacent peg to the old pair hanging there. Yes, that explained matters so far; he had taken the wrong trousers. But all the same, what on earth was an emerald worth hundreds and thousands of pounds doing there? The more he thought about it, the more curious it seemed. He could, of course, explain to the police -

It was awkward, no doubt about it, it was decidedly awkward. One would have to mention the fact that one had deliberately entered someone else's bathing hut. It was not, of course, a serious offence, but it started him off wrong.

"Can I bring you anything else, sir?"

It was the waitress again. She was looking pointedly at the untouched haricot mutton. James hastily dumped some of it on his plate and asked for his bill. Having obtained it, he paid and went out. As he stood undecidedly in the street, a poster opposite caught his eye. The adjacent town of Harchester possessed an evening paper, and it was the contents bill of this paper that James was looking at. It announced a simple, sensational fact: "THE RAJAH'S EMERALD STOLEN."

"My God," said James faintly, and leaned against a pillar. Pulling himself together, he fished out a penny and purchased a copy of the paper. He was not long in finding what he sought. Sensational items of local news were few and far between. Large headlines adorned the front page. "Sensational Burglary at Lord Edward Campion's. Theft of Famous Historical Emerald. Rajah of Maraputna's Terrible Loss." The facts were few and simple. Lord Edward Campion had entertained several friends the evening before. Wishing to show the stone to one of the ladies present, the Rajah had gone to fetch it and had found it missing. The police had been called in. So far no clue had been obtained. James let the paper fall to the ground. It was still not clear to him how the emerald had come to be reposing in the pocket of an old pair of flannel trousers in a bathing hut, but it was borne in upon him every minute that the police would certainly regard his own story as suspicious. What on earth was he to do? Here he was, standing in the principal street of Kimpton-on-Sea with stolen booty worth a king's ransom reposing idly in his pocket, while the entire police force of the district were busily searching for just that same booty. There were two courses open to him. Course number one, to go straight to the police station and tell his story - but it must be admitted that James funked that course badly. Course number two, somehow or other to get rid of the emerald. It occurred to him to do it up in a neat little parcel and post it back to the Rajah. Then he shook his head. He had read too many detective stories for that sort of thing. He knew how your super-sleuth could get busy with a magnifying glass and every kind of patent device. Any detective worth his salt would get busy on James's parcel and would in half an hour or so have discovered the sender's profession, age,

habits, and personal appearance. After that it would be a mere matter of hours before he was tracked down.

It was then that a scheme of dazzling simplicity suggested itself to James. It was the luncheon hour, the beach would be comparatively deserted. He would return to Mon Desir, hang up the trousers where he had found them, and regain his own garments. He started briskly towards the beach.

Nevertheless, his conscience pricked him slightly. The emerald ought to be returned to the Rajah. He conceived the idea that he might perhaps do a little detective work - once, that is, that he had regained his own trousers and replaced the others. In pursuance of this idea, he directed his steps towards the aged mariner, whom he rightly regarded as being an inexhaustible source of Kimpton information.

"Excuse me!" said James politely; "but I believe a friend of mine has a hut on this beach, Mr Charles Lampton. It is called Mon Desir, I fancy?"

The aged mariner was sitting very squarely in a chair, a pipe in his mouth, gazing out to sea. He shifted his pipe a little and replied without removing his gaze from the horizon:

"Mon Desir belongs to his lordship, Lord Edward Campion; everyone knows that. I never heard of Mr Charles Lampton; he must be a newcomer."

"Thank you," said James, and withdrew.

The information staggered him. Surely the Rajah could not himself have slipped the stone into the pocket and forgotten it. James shook his head. The theory did not satisfy him, but evidently some member of the house party must be the thief. The situation reminded James of some of his favourite works of fiction.

Nevertheless, his own purpose remained unaltered. All fell out easily enough. The beach was, as he hoped it would be, practically deserted. More fortunate still, the door of Mon Desir remained ajar. To slip in was the work of a moment, Edward was just lifting his own trousers from the hook, when a voice behind him made him spin round suddenly.

"So I have caught you, my man!" said the voice.

James stared open-mouthed. In the doorway of Mon Desir stood a stranger - a well-dressed man of about forty years of age, his face keen and hawklike.

"So I have caught you!" the stranger repeated.

"Who - who are you?" stammered James.

"Detective-Inspector Merrilees from the Yard," said the other crisply. "And I will trouble you to hand over that emerald."

"The - the emerald?"

James was seeking to gain time.

"That's what I said, didn't I?" said Inspector Merrilees.

He had a crisp, businesslike enunciation. James tried to pull himself together.

"I don't know what you are talking about," he said with an assumption of dignity.

"Oh, yes, my lad, I think you do."

"The whole thing," said James, "is a mistake. I can explain it quite easily -" He paused.

A look of weariness had settled on the face of the other.

"They always say that," murmured the Scotland Yard man dryly. "I suppose you picked it up as you were strolling along the beach, eh? That is the sort of explanation."

It did indeed bear a resemblance to it. James recognized the fact, but still he tried to gain time.

"How do I know you are what you say you are?" he demanded weakly.

Merrilees flapped back his coat for a moment, showing a badge. Edward stared at him with eyes that popped out of his head.

"And now," said the other almost genially, "you see what you are up against! You are a novice - I can tell that. Your first job, isn't it?"

James nodded.

"I thought as much. Now, my boy, are you going to hand over that emerald, or have I got to search you?"

James found his voice.

"I - I haven't got it on me," he declared.

He was thinking desperately.

"Left it at your lodgings?" queried Merrilees.

James nodded.

"Very well, then," said the detective, "we will go there together."

He slipped his arm through James's.

"I am taking no chances of your getting away from me," he said gently. "We will go to your lodgings, and you will hand that stone over to me."

James spoke unsteadily.

"If I do, will you let me go?" he asked tremulously.

Merrilees appeared embarrassed.

"We know just how that stone was taken," he explained, "and about the lady involved, and, of course, as far as that goes - well, the Rajah wants it hushed up. You know what these native rulers are?"

James, who knew nothing whatsoever about native rulers, except for one cause cйlиbre, nodded his head with an appearance of eager comprehension.

"It will be most irregular, of course," said the detective, "but you may get off scot-free."

Again James nodded. They had walked the length of the Esplanade, and were now turning into the town. James intimated the direction, but the other man never relinquished his sharp grip on James's arm.

Suddenly James hesitated and half spoke. Merrilees looked up sharply, and then laughed. They were just passing the police station, and he noticed James's agonized glances at it.

"I am giving you a chance first," he said good-humouredly.

It was at that moment that things began to happen. A loud bellow broke from James; he clutched the other's arm, and yelled at the top of his voice: "Help! Thief. Help! Thief."

A crowd surrounded them in less than a minute. Merrilees was trying to wrench his arm from James's grasp.

"I charge this man," cried James. "I charge this man; he picked my pocket."

"What are you talking about, you fool?" cried the other.

A constable took charge of matters. Mr Merrilees and James were escorted into the police station. James reiterated his complaint.

"This man has just picked my pocket," he declared excitedly. "He has got my notecase in his right-hand pocket, there!"

"The man is mad," grumbled the other. "You can look for yourself, inspector, and see if he is telling the truth."

At a sign from the inspector, the constable slipped his hand deferentially into Merrilees's pocket. He drew something up and held it out with a gasp of astonishment.

"My God!" said the inspector, startled out of professional decorum. "It must be the Rajah's emerald."

Merrilees looked more incredulous than anyone else.

"This is monstrous," he spluttered; "monstrous. The man must have put it into my pocket himself as we were walking along together. It's a plant."

The forceful personality of Merrilees caused the inspector to waver. His suspicions swung round to James. He whispered something to the constable, and the latter went out.

"Now then, gentlemen," said the inspector, "let me have your statements please, one at a time."

"Certainly," said James. "I was walking along the beach when I met this gentleman, and he pretended he was acquainted with me. I could not remember having met him before, but I was too polite to say so. We walked along together. I had my suspicions of him, and just when we got opposite the police station, I found his hand in my pocket. I held on to him and shouted for help."

The inspector transferred his glance to Merrilees.

"And now you, sir."

Merrilees seemed a little embarrassed.

"The story is very nearly right," he said slowly, "but not quite. It was not I who scraped acquaintance with him, but he who scraped acquaintance with me. Doubtless he was trying to get rid of the emerald, and slipped it into my pocket while we were talking."

The inspector stopped writing. "Ah!" he said impartially. "Well, there will be a gentleman here in a minute who will help us to get to the bottom of the case."

Merrilees frowned.

"It is really impossible for me to wait," he murmured, pulling out his watch. "I have an appointment. Surely, inspector, you can't be so ridiculous as to suppose I'd steal the emerald and walk along with it in my pocket?"

"It is not likely, sir, I agree," the inspector replied. "But you will have to wait just a matter of five or ten minutes till we get this thing cleared up. Ah! Here is his lordship."

A tall man of forty strode into the room. He was wearing a pair of dilapidated trousers and an old sweater.

"Now then, inspector, what is all this?" he said. "You have got hold of the emerald, you say? That's splendid; very smart work. Who are these people you have got here?"

His eye ranged over James and came to rest on Merrilees. The forceful personality of the latter seemed to dwindle and shrink.

"Why - Jones!" exclaimed Lord Edward Campion.

"You recognize this man, Lord Edward?" asked the inspector sharply.

"Certainly I do," said Lord Edward dryly. "He is my valet, came to me a month ago. The fellow they sent down from London was on to him at once, but there was not a trace of the emerald anywhere among his belongings."

"He was carrying it in his coat pocket," the inspector declared. "This gentleman put us on to him." He indicated James.

In another minute James was being warmly congratulated and shaken by the hand.

"My dear fellow," said Lord Edward Campion. "So you suspected him all along, you say?"

"Yes," said James. "I had to trump up the story about my pocket being picked to get him into the police station."

"Well, it is splendid," said Lord Edward, "absolutely splendid. You must come back and lunch with us; that is, if you haven't lunched? It is late, I know, getting on for two o'clock."

"No," said James; "I haven't lunched - but -"

"Not a word, not a word," said Lord Edward. "The Rajah, you know, will want to thank you for getting back his emerald for him. Not that I have quite got the hang of the story yet."

They were out of the police station by now, standing on the steps.

"As a matter of fact," said James, "I think I should like to tell you the true story."

He did so. His lordship was very much entertained.

"Best thing I ever heard in my life," he declared. "I see it all now. Jones must have hurried down to the bathing hut as soon as he had pinched the thing, knowing that the police would make a thorough search of the house. That old pair of trousers I sometimes put on for going out fishing; nobody was likely to touch them, and he could recover the jewel at his leisure. Must have been a shock to him when he came today to find it gone. As soon as you appeared, he realized that you were the person who had removed the stone. I still don't quite see how you managed to see through that detective pose of his, though!"

"A strong man," thought James to himself, "knows when to be frank and when to be discreet."

He smiled deprecatingly while his fingers passed gently over the inside of his coat lapel feeling the small silver badge of that little-known club, the Merton Park Super Cycling Club. An astonishing coincidence that the man Jones should also be a member, but there it was!

"Hallo, James!"

He turned. Grace and the Sopworth girls were calling to him from the other side of the road. He turned to Lord Edward.

"Excuse me a moment?"

He crossed the road to them.

"We are going to the pictures," said Grace. "Thought you might like to come."

"I am sorry," said James. "I am just going back to lunch with Lord Edward Campion. Yes, that man over there in the comfortable old clothes. He wants me to meet the Rajah of Maraputna."

He raised his hat politely and rejoined Lord Edward.

SWAN SONG

It was eleven o'clock on a May morning in London. Mr Cowan was looking out of the window; behind him was the somewhat ornate splendour of a sitting room in a suite at the Ritz Hotel. The suite in question had been reserved for Mme Paula Nazorkoff, the famous operatic star, who had just arrived in London. Mr Cowan, who was Madame's principal man of business, was awaiting an interview with the lady. He turned his head suddenly as the door opened, but it was only Miss Read, Mme Nazorkoff's secretary, a pale girl with an efficient manner.

"Oh, so it's you, my dear," said Mr Cowan. "Madame not up yet, eh?"

Miss Read shook her head.

"She told me to come round at ten o'clock," Mr Cowan said. "I have been waiting an hour."

He displayed neither resentment nor surprise. Mr Cowan was indeed accustomed to the vagaries of the artistic temperament. He was a tall man, clean-shaven, with a frame rather too well covered, and clothes that were rather too faultless. His hair was very black and shining, and his teeth were aggressively white. When he spoke, he had a way of slurring his "s's" which was not quite a lisp, but came perilously near to it. At that minute a door at the other side of the room opened, and a trim French gift hurried through.

"Madame getting up?" inquired Cowan hopefully. "Tell us the news, Elise."

Elise immediately elevated both hands to heaven.

"Madame she is like seventeen devils this morning; nothing pleases her! The beautiful yellow roses which monsieur sent to her last night, she says they are all very well for New York, but that it is imbйcile to send them to her in London. In London, she says, red roses are the only things possible, and straightaway she opens the door and precipitates the yellow roses into the passage, where they descend upon a monsieur, trиs comme il faut, a military gentleman, I think, and he is justly indignant, that one!"

Cowan raised his eyebrows, but displayed no other signs of emotion. Then he took from his pocket a small memorandum book and pencilled in it the words "red roses."

Elise hurried out through the other door, and Cowan turned once more to the window. Vera Read sat down at the desk and began opening letters and sorting them. Ten minutes passed in silence, and then the door of the bedroom burst open, and Paula Nazorkoff flamed into the from. Her immediate effect upon it was to make it seem smaller; Vera Read appeared more colourless, and Cowan retreated into a mere figure in the background.

"Ah, ha! My children," said the prima donna. "Am I not punctual?"

She was a tall woman, and for a singer not unduly fat. Her arms and legs were still slender, and her neck was a beautiful column. Her hair, which was coiled in a great roll halfway down her neck, was of a dark, glowing red. If it owed some at least of its colour to henna, the result was none the less effective. She was not a young woman, forty at least, but the lines of her face were still lovely, though the skin was loosened and wrinkled round the flashing, dark eyes. She had the laugh of a child, the digestion of an ostrich, and the temper of a fiend, and she was acknowledged to be the greatest dramatic soprano of her day. She turned directly upon Cowan.

"Have you done as I asked you? Have you taken that abominable English piano away and thrown it into the Thames?"

"I have got another for you," said Cowan, and gestured towards where it stood in the corner.

Nazorkoff rushed across to it and lifted the lid.

"An Erard," she said; "that is better. Now let us see."

The beautiful soprano voice rang out in an arpeggio, then it ran lightly up and down the scale twice, then took a soft little run up to a high note, held it, its volume, swelling louder and louder, then softened again till it died away in nothingness.

"Ah!" said Paula Nazorkoff in naïve satisfaction. "What a beautiful voice I have! Even in London I have a beautiful voice."

"That is so," agreed Cowan in hearty congratulation. "And you bet London is going to fail for you all right, just as New York did."

"You think so?" queried the singer.

There was a slight smile on her lips, and it was evident that for her the question was a mere commonplace.

"Sure thing," said Cowan.

Paula Nazorkoff closed the piano lid down and walked across to the table with that slow undulating walk that proved so effective on the stage.

"Well, well," she said, "let us get to business. You have all the arrangements there, my friend?"

Cowan took some papers out of the portfolio he had laid on a chair.

"Nothing has been altered much," he remarked. "You will sing five times at Covent Garden, three times in Tosca, twice in Aпda."

"Aпda! Pah," said the prima donna, "it will be unutterable boredom. Tosca, that is different."

"Ah, yes," said Cowan. "Tosca is your part."

Paula Nazorkoff drew herself up.

"I am the greatest Tosca in the world," she said simply.

"That is so," agreed Cowan. "No one can touch you."

"Roscari will sing 'Scarpia,' I suppose?"

Cowan nodded.

"And Emile Lippi."

"What?" shrieked Nazorkoff. "Lippi - that hideous little barking frog, croak - croak - croak. I will not sing with him. I will bite him. I will scratch his face."

"Now, now," said Cowan soothingly.

"He does not sing, I tell you, he is a mongrel dog who barks."

"Well, we'll see; we'll see," said Cowan.

He was too wise ever to argue with temperamental singers.

"The Cavaradossi?" demanded Nazorkoff.

"The American tenor, Hensdale."

The other nodded.

"He is a nice little boy; he sings prettily."

"And Barrиre is to sing it once, I believe."

"He is an artist," said Madame generously. "But to let that croaking frog Lippi be Scarpia! Bah - I'll not sing with him."

"You leave it to me," said Cowan soothingly.

He cleared his throat and took up a fresh set of papers.

"I am arranging for a special concert at the Albert Hall."

Nazorkoff made a grimace.

"I know, I know," said Cowan; "but everybody does it."

"I will be good," said Nazorkoff, "and it will be filled to the ceiling, and I shall have much money. Ecco."

Again Cowan shuffled papers.

"Now here is quite a different proposition," he said, "from Lady Rustonbury. She wants you to go down and sing."

"Rustonbury?"

The prima donna's brow contracted as if in the effort to recollect something.

"I have read the name lately, very lately. It is a town - or a village, isn't it?"

"That's right, pretty little place in Hertfordshire. As for Lord Rustonbury's place, Rustonbury Castle, it's a real dandy old feudal seat, ghosts and family pictures, and secret staircases, and a slap-up private theatre. Rolling in money they are, and always giving some private show. She suggests that we give a complete opera, preferably Butterfly."

"Butterfly?"

Cowan nodded.

"And they are prepared to pay. We'll have to square Covent Garden, of course, but even after that it will be well worth your while financially. In all probability, royalty will be present. It will be a slap-up advertisement."

Madame raised her still beautiful chin.

"Do I need advertisement?" she demanded proudly.

"You can't have too much of a good thing," said Cowan, unabashed.

"Rustonbury," murmured the singer; "where did I see -"

She sprang up suddenly and, running to the center table, began turning over the pages of an illustrated paper which lay there. There was a sudden pause as her hand stopped, hovering over one of the pages, then she let the periodical slip to the floor and returned slowly to her seat. With one of her swift changes of mood, she seemed now an entirely different personality. Her manner was very quiet, almost austere.

"Make all arrangements for Rustonbury. I would like to sing there, but there is one condition - the opera must be Tosca."

Cowan looked doubtful.

"That will be rather difficult - for a private show, you know, scenery and all that."

"Tosca or nothing."

Cowan looked at her very closely. What he saw seemed to convince him; he gave a brief nod and rose to his feet.

"I will see what I can arrange," he said quietly.

Nazorkoff rose too. She seemed more anxious than was usual, with her, to explain her decision.

"It is my greatest role, Cowan. I can sing that part as no other woman has ever sung it."

"It is a fine part," said Cowan. "Jeritza made a great hit in it last year."

"Jeritza?" cried the other, a flush mounting in her cheeks. She proceeded to give him at great length her opinion of Jeritza.

Cowan, who was used to listening to singers' opinions of other singers, abstracted his attention till the tirade was over; he then said obstinately:

"Anyway, she sings 'Vissi D'Arte' lying on her stomach."

"And why not?" demanded Nazorkoff. "What is there to prevent her? I will sing it on my back with my legs waving in the air."

Cowan shook his head with perfect seriousness.

"I don't believe that would go down any," he informed her. "All the same, that sort of thing takes on, you know."

"No one can sing 'Vissi D'Arte' as I can," said Nazorkoff confidently. "I sing it in the voice of the convent - as the good nuns taught me to sing years and years ago. In the voice of a choir boy or an angel, without feeling, without passion."

"I know," said Cowan heartily. "I have heard you; you are wonderful."

"That is art," said the prima donna, "to pay the price, to suffer, to endure, and in the end not only to have all knowledge, but also the power to go back, right back to the beginning and recapture the lost beauty of the heart of a child."

Cowan looked at her curiously. She was stating past him with a strange, blank look in her eyes, and something about that look of hers gave him a creepy feeling. Her lips just parted, and she whispered a few words softly to herself. He only just caught them.

"At last," she murmured. "At last - after all these years."

II

Lady Rustonbury was both an ambitious and an artistic woman; she ran the two qualities in harness with complete success. She had the good fortune to have a husband who cared for neither ambition nor art and who therefore did not hamper her in any way. The Earl of Rustonbury was a large, square man, with an interest in horseflesh and in nothing else. He admired his wife, and was proud of her, and was glad that his great wealth enabled her to indulge all her schemes. The private theatre had been built less

than a hundred years ago by his grandfather. It was Lady Rustonbury's chief toy - she had already given an Ibsen drama in it, and a play of the ultra new school; all divorce and drugs, also a poetical fantasy with Cubist scenery. The forthcoming performance of Tosca had created widespread interest. Lady Rustonbury was entertaining a very distinguished house party for it, and all London that counted was motoring down to attend.

Mme Nazorkoff and her company had arrived just before luncheon. The new young American tenor, Hensdale, was to sing "Cavaradossi," and Roscari, the famous Italian baritone, was to be Scarpia. The expense of the production had been enormous, but nobody cared about that. Paula Nazorkoff was in the best of humours; she was charming, gracious, her most delightful and cosmopolitan self. Cowan was agreeably surprised, and prayed that this state of things might continue.

After luncheon the company went out to the theatre and inspected the scenery and various appointments. The orchestra was under the direction of Mr Samuel Ridge, one of England's most famous conductors. Everything seemed to be going without a hitch, and strangely enough, that fact worried Mr Cowan. He was more at home in an atmosphere of trouble; this unusual peace disturbed him.

"Everything is going a darned sight too smoothly," murmured Mr Cowan to himself. "Madame is like a cat that has been fed on cream. It's too good to last; something is bound to happen."

Perhaps as the result of his long contact with the operatic world, Mr Cowan had developed the sixth sense, certainly his prognostications were justified. It was just before seven o'clock that evening when the French maid, Elise, came running to him in great distress.

"Ah, Mr Cowan, come quickly; I beg of you come quickly."

"What's the matter?" demanded Cowan anxiously. "Madame got her back up about anything - ructions, eh, is that it?"

"No, no, it is not Madame; it is Signor Roscari. He is ill; he is dying!"

"Dying? Oh, come now."

Cowan hurried after her as she led the way to the stricken Italian's bedroom. The little man was lying on his bed, or rather jerking himself all over it in a series of contortions that would have been humorous had they been less grave. Paula Nazorkoff was bending over him; she greeted Cowan imperiously.

"Ah! There you are. Our poor Roscari, he suffers horribly. Doubtless he has eaten something."

"I am dying," groaned the little man. "The pain - it is terrible. Ow!"

He contorted himself again, clasping both hands to his stomach, and rolling about on the bed.

"We must send for a doctor," said Cowan.

Paula arrested him as he was about to move to the door.

"The doctor is already on his way; he will do all that can be done for the poor suffering one, that is arranged for, but never, never will Roscari be able to sing tonight."

"I shall never sing again; I am dying," groaned the Italian.

"No, no, you are not dying," said Paula. "It is but an indigestion, but all the same, impossible that you should sing."

"I have been poisoned."

"Yes, it is the ptomaine without doubt," said Paula. "Stay with him, Elise, till the doctor comes."

The singer swept Cowan with her from the room.

"What are we to do?" she demanded.

Cowan shook his head hopelessly. The hour was so far advanced that it would not be possible to get anyone from London to take Roscari's place. Lady Rustonbury, who had just been informed of her guest's illness, came hurrying along the corridor to join them. Her principal concern, like Paula Nazorkoff's, was the success of Tosca.

"If there were only someone near at hand," groaned the prima donna.

"Ah!" Lady Rustonbury gave a sudden cry. "Of course! Brйon."

"Brйon?"

"Yes, Edouard Brйon, you know, the famous French baritone. He lives near here. There was a picture of his house in this week's Country Homes. He is the very man."

"It is an answer from heaven," cried Nazorkoff. "Brйon as Scarpia, I remember him well, it was one of his greatest rфles. But he has retired, has he not?"

"I will get him," said Lady Rustonbury. "Leave it to me."

And being a woman of decision, she straightway ordered out the Hispano Suiza. Ten minutes later, M. Edouard Brйon's country retreat was invaded by an agitated countess. Lady Rustonbury, once she had made her mind up, was a very determined woman, and doubtless M. Brйon realized that there was nothing for it but to submit. Also, it must be confessed, he had a weakness for countesses. Himself a man of very humble origin, he had climbed to the top of his profession, and had consorted on equal terms with dukes and princes, and the fact never failed to gratify him. Yet, since his retirement to this old-world English spot, he had known discontent. He missed the life of adulation and applause, and the English county had not been as prompt to recognize him as he

thought they should have been. So he was greatly flattered and charmed by Lady Rustonbury's request.

"I will do my poor best," he said, smiling. "As you know, I have not sung in public for a long time now. I do not even take pupils, only one or two as a great favour. But there - since Signor Roscari is unfortunately indisposed -"

"It was a terrible blow," said Lady Rustonbury.

"Not that he is really a singer," said Brйon.

He told her at some length why this was so. There had been, it seemed, no baritone of distinction since Edouard Brйon retired.

"Mme Nazorkoff is singing 'Tosca,'" said Lady Rustonbury. "You know her, I dare say?"

"I have never met her," said Brйon. "I heard her sing once in New York. A great artist - she has a sense of drama."

Lady Rustonbury felt relieved - one never knew with these singers - they had such queer jealousies and antipathies.

She re-entered the hall at the castle some twenty minutes later waving a triumphant hand.

"I have got him," she cried, laughing. "Dear M. Brйon has really been too kind. I shall never forget it."

Everyone crowded round the Frenchman, and their gratitude and appreciation were as incense to him. Edouard Brйon, though now close on sixty, was still a fine-looking man, big and dark, with a magnetic personality.

"Let me see," said Lady Rustonbury. "Where is Madame -? Oh! There she is."

Paula Nazorkoff had taken no part in the general welcoming of the Frenchman. She had remained quietly sitting in a high oak chair in the shadow of the fireplace. There was, of course, no fire, for the evening was a warm one and the singer was slowly fanning herself with an immense palm-leaf fan. So aloof and detached was she, that Lady Rustonbury feared she had taken offence.

"M. Brйon." She led him up to the singer. "You have never yet met Madame Nazorkoff, you say."

With a last wave, almost a flourish, of the palm leaf, Paula Nazorkoff laid it down and stretched out her hand to the Frenchman. He took it and bowed low over it, and a faint sigh escaped from the prima donna's lips.

"Madame," said Brйon, "we have never sung together. That is the penalty of my age! But Fate has been kind to me, and come to my rescue."

Paula laughed softly.

"You are too kind, M. Brйon. When I was still but a poor little unknown singer, I have sat at your feet. Your 'Rigoletto' - what art, what perfection! No one could touch you."

"Alas!" said Brйon, pretending to sigh. "My day is over. Scarpia, Rigoletto, Radams, Sharpless, how many times have I not sung them, and now - no more!"

"Yes - tonight."

"True, madame - I forgot. Tonight."

"You have sung with many 'Tosca's," said Nazorkoff arrogantly, "but never with me!"

The Frenchman bowed.

"It will be an honour," he said softly. "It is a great part, madame."

"It needs not only a singer, but an actress," put in Lady Rustonbury.

"That is true," Brйon agreed. "I remember when I was a young man in Italy, going to a little out-of-the-way theatre in Milan. My seat cost me only a couple of lira, but I heard as good singing that night as I have heard in the Metropolitan Opera House in New York. Quite a young girl sang 'Tosca'; she sang it like an angel. Never shall I forget her voice in 'Vissi D'Arte,' the clearness of it, the purity. But the dramatic force, that was lacking."

Nazorkoff nodded.

"That comes later," she said quietly.

"True. This young girl - Bianca Capelli her name was - I interested myself in her career. Through me she had the chance of big engagements, but she was foolish - regrettably foolish."

He shrugged his shoulders.

"How was she foolish?"

It was Lady Rustonbury's twenty-four-year-old daughter, Blanche Amery, who spoke - a slender girl with wide blue eyes.

The Frenchman turned to her at once politely.

"Alas! Mademoiselle, she had embroiled herself with some low fellow, a ruffian, a member of the Camorra. He got into trouble with the police, was condemned to death; she came to me begging me to do something to save her lover."

Blanche Avery was staring at him.

"And did you?" she asked breathlessly.

"Me, mademoiselle, what could I do? A stranger in the country."

"You might have had influence?" suggested Nazorkoff in her low, vibrant voice.

"If I had, I doubt whether I should have exerted it. The man was not worth it. I did what I could for the girl."

He smiled a little, and his smile suddenly struck the English girl as having something peculiarly disagreeable about it. She felt that, at that moment, his words fell far short of representing his thoughts.

"You did what you could," said Nazorkoff. "That was kind of you, and she was grateful, eh?"

The Frenchman shrugged his shoulders.

"The man was executed," he said, "and the girl entered a convent. Eh, voila! The world has lost a singer."

Nazorkoff gave a low laugh.

"We Russians are more fickle," she said lightly.

Blanche Amery happened to be watching Cowan just as the singer spoke, and she saw his quick look of astonishment, and his lips that half opened and then shut tight in obedience to some warning glance from Paula.

The butler appeared in the doorway.

"Dinner," said Lady Rustonbury, rising. "You poor things, I am so sorry for you. It must be dreadful always to have to starve yourself before singing. But there will be a very good supper afterwards."

"We shall look forward to it," said Paula Nazorkoff. She laughed softly. "Afterwards!"

III

Inside the theatre, the first act of Tosca had just drawn to a close. The audience stirred, spoke to each other. The royalties, charming and gracious, sat in the three velvet chairs in the front row. Everyone was whispering and murmuring to each other; there was a general feeling that in the first act Nazorkoff had hardly lived up to her great reputation. Most of the audience did not realize that in this the singer showed her art; in the first act she was saving her voice and herself. She made of La Tosca a light, frivolous figure, toying with love, coquettishly jealous and exacting. Brйon, though the glory of his voice was past its prime, still struck a magnificent figure as the cynical Scarpia. There was no hint of the decrepit rouй in his conception of the part. He made of Scarpia a handsome, almost benign figure, with just a hint of the subtle malevolence that underlay the outward seeming. In the last passage, with the organ and the procession, when Scarpia stands lost in thought, gloating over his plan to secure Tosca, Brйon had displayed a wonderful art. Now the curtain rose upon the second act, the scene in Scarpia's apartments.

This time, when Tosca entered, the art of Nazorkoff at once became apparent. Here was a woman in deadly terror playing her part with the assurance of a fine actress. Her easy greeting of Scarpia, her nonchalance, her smiling replies to him! In this scene, Paula Nazorkoff acted with her eyes; she carried herself with deadly quietness, with an impassive, smiling face. Only her eyes that kept darting glances at Scarpia betrayed her true feelings. And so the story went from the torture scene, the breaking down of Tosca's composure, and her utter abandonment when she fell at Scarpia's feet imploring him vainly for mercy. Old Lord Leconmere, a connoisseur of music, moved appreciatively, and a foreign ambassador sitting next to him murmured:

"She surpasses herself, Nazorkoff, tonight. There is no other woman on the stage who can let herself go as she does."

Leconmere nodded.

And now Scarpia has named his price, and Tosca, horrified, flies from him to the window. Then comes the beat of drums from afar, and Tosca flings herself wearily down on the sofa. Scarpia, standing over her, recites how his people are raising up the gallows - and then silence, and again the far-off beat of drums. Nazorkoff lay prone on the sofa, her head hanging downwards almost touching the floor, masked by her hair. Then, in exquisite contrast to the passion and stress of the last twenty minutes, her voice rang out, high and clear, the voice, as she had told Cowan, of a choir boy or an angel.

"Vissi d'arte, vissi d'amore, no feci mai male ad anima vival. Con man furtiva quante miserie conobbi, aiu-tai."

It was the voice of a wondering, puzzled child. Then she is once more kneeling and imploring, till the instant when Spoletta enters. Tosca, exhausted, gives in, and Scarpia utters his fateful words of double-edged meaning. Spoletta departs once more. Then comes the dramatic moment when Tosca, raising a glass of wine in her trembling hand, catches sight of the knife on the table and slips it behind her.

Brйon rose up, handsome, saturnine, inflamed with passion. "Tosca, finalmente mia!" The lightning stab with the knife, and Tosca's hiss of vengeance:

"Questo e il baccio di Tosca!" ("It is thus that Tosca kisses.")

Never had Nazorkoff shown such an appreciation of Tosca's act of vengeance. That last fierce whispered "Muori dannato," and then in a strange, quiet voice that filled the theatre:

"Or gli perdono!" ("Now I forgive him!")

The soft death tune began as Tosca set about her ceremonial, placing the candles each side of his head, the crucifix on his breast, her last pause in the doorway looking back, the roll of distant drums, and the curtain fell.

This time real enthusiasm broke out in the audience, but it was short-lived. Someone hurried out from behind the wings and spoke to Lord Rustonbury. He rose, and after a minute or two's consultation, turned and beckoned to Donald Calthorp, who was an eminent physician. Almost immediately the truth spread through the audience. Something had happened; an accident; someone was badly hurt. One of the singers appeared before the curtain and explained that M. Brйon had unfortunately met with an accident -the opera could not proceed. Again the rumour went round, Brйon had been stabbed, Nazorkoff had lost her head, had lived in her part so completely that she had actually stabbed the man who was acting with her. Lord Leconmere, talking to his ambassador friend, felt a touch on his arm, and turned to look into Blanche Amery's eyes.

"It was not an accident," the girl was saying. "I am sure it was not an accident. Didn't you hear, just before dinner, that story he was telling about the girl in Italy? That girl was Paula Nazorkoff. Just after, she said something about being Russian, and I saw Mr Cowan look amazed. She may have taken a Russian name, but he knows well enough that she is Italian."

"My dear Blanche," said Lord Leconmere.

"I tell you I am sure of it. She had a picture paper in bedroom opened at the page showing M. Brйon in his English country home. She knew before she came down here. I believe she gave something to that poor little Italian man to make him ill."

"But why?" cried Lord Leconmere. "Why?"

"Don't you see? It's the story of Tosca all over again. He wanted her in Italy, but she was faithful to her lover, and she went to him to try to get him to save her lover, and he pretended he would. Instead be let him die. And now at last her revenge has come. Didn't you hear the way she hissed 'I am Tosca'? And I saw Brйon's face when she said it, he knew then - he recognized her!"

In her dressing room, Paula Nazorkoff sat motionless, a white ermine cloak held round her. There was a knock at the door.

"Come in," said the prima donna.

Elise entered. She was sobbing.

"Madame, madame, he is dead! And -"

"Yes?"

"Madame, how can I tell you? There are two gentlemen of the police there; they want to speak to you."

Paula Nazorkoff rose to her full height.

"I will go to them," she said quietly.

She untwisted a collar of pearls from her neck and put them into the French girl's hands.

"Those are for you, Elise; you have been a good girl. I shall not need them now where I am going. You understand, Elise? I shall not sing 'Tosca' again."

She stood a moment by the door, her eyes sweeping over the dressing room, as though she looked back over the past thirty years of her career.

Then softly between her teeth, she murmured the last line of another opera:

"La commedia e finita!"

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Murder in the Mews

Chapter 1

I

'Penny for the guy, sir?'

A small boy with a grimy face grinned ingratiatingly.

'Certainly not!' said Chief Inspector Japp. 'And, look here, my lad - '

A short homily followed. The dismayed urchin beat a precipitate retreat, remarking briefly and succinctly to his youthful friends:

'Blimey, if it ain't a cop all togged up!'

The band took to its heels, chanting the incantation:

Remember, remember

The fifth of November
Gunpowder treason and plot
We see no reason
Why gunpowder treason
Should ever be forgot

The chief inspector's companion, a small, elderly man with an egg-shaped head and large, military-looking moustaches, was smiling to himself.

'Très bien, Japp,' he observed. 'You preach the sermon very well! I congratulate you!' 'Rank excuse for begging, that's what Guy Fawkes' Day is!' said Japp.

'An interesting survival,' mused Hercule Poirot. 'The fireworks go up - crack - crack - long after the man they commemorate and his deed are forgotten.'

The Scotland Yard man agreed.

'Don't suppose many of those kids really know who Guy Fawkes was.'

'And soon, doubtless, there will be confusion of thought. Is it in honour or in execration that on the fifth of November the feu d'artifice are sent up? To blow up an English Parliament, was it a sin or a noble deed?'

Japp chuckled.

‘Some people would say undoubtedly the latter.’

Turning off the main road, the two men passed into the comparative quiet of a mews. They had been dining together and were now taking a short cut to Hercule Poirot’s flat.

As they walked along the sound of squibs was still heard periodically. An occasional shower of golden rain illuminated the sky.

‘Good night for a murder,’ remarked Japp with professional interest. ‘Nobody would hear a shot, for instance, on a night like this.’

‘It has always seemed odd to me that more criminals do not take advantage of the fact,’ said Hercule Poirot.

‘Do you know, Poirot, I almost wish sometimes that you would commit a murder.’ ‘Mon cher!’

‘Yes, I’d like to see just how you’d set about it.’

‘My dear Japp, if I committed a murder you would not have the least chance of seeing - how I set about it! You would not even be aware, probably, that a murder had been committed.’

Japp laughed good-humouredly and affectionately. ‘Cocky little devil, aren’t you?’ he said indulgently.

II

At half-past eleven the following morning, Hercule Poirot's telephone rang. ' 'Allo? 'Allo?'

'Hallo, that you, Poirot?' 'Oui, c'est moi.'

'Japp speaking here. Remember we came home last night through Bardsley Gardens Mews?' 'Yes?'

'And that we talked about how easy it would be to shoot a person with all those squibs and crackers and the rest of it going off?'

'Certainly.'

'Well, there was a suicide in that mews. No. 14. A young widow - Mrs Allen. I'm going round there now. Like to come?'

'Excuse me, but does someone of your eminence, my dear friend, usually get sent to a case of suicide?'

'Sharp fellow. No - he doesn't. As a matter of fact our doctor seems to think there's something funny about this. Will you come? I kind of feel you ought to be in on it.'

'Certainly I will come. No. 14, you say?' 'That's right.'

III

Poirot arrived at No. 14 Bardsley Gardens Mews almost at the same moment as a car drew up containing Japp and three other men.

No. 14 was clearly marked out as the centre of interest. A big circle of people, chauffeurs, their wives, errand boys, loafers, well-dressed passers-by and innumerable children were drawn up all staring at No. 14 with open mouths and a fascinated stare.

A police constable in uniform stood on the step and did his best to keep back the curious. Alert-looking young men with cameras were busy and surged forward as Japp alighted.

'Nothing for you now,' said Japp, brushing them aside. He nodded to Poirot. 'So here you are. Let's get inside.'

They passed in quickly, the door shut behind them and they found themselves squeezed together at the foot of a ladder-like flight of stairs.

A man came to the top of the staircase, recognized Japp and said: 'Up here, sir.'

Japp and Poirot mounted the stairs.

The man at the stairhead opened a door on the left and they found themselves in a small bedroom. 'Thought you'd like me to run over the chief points, sir.'

‘Quite right, Jameson,’ said Japp. ‘What about it?’ Divisional Inspector Jameson took up the tale.

‘Deceased’s a Mrs Allen, sir. Lived here with a friend - a Miss Plenderleith. Miss Plenderleith was away staying in the country and returned this morning. She let herself in with her key, was surprised to find no one about. A woman usually comes in at nine o’clock to do for them. She went upstairs first into her own room (that’s this room) then across the landing to her friend’s room. Door was locked on the inside. She rattled the handle, knocked and called, but couldn’t get any answer. In the end getting alarmed she rang up the police station. That was at ten forty-five. We came along at once and forced the door open. Mrs Allen was lying in a heap on the ground shot through the head. There was an automatic in her hand - a Webley .25 - and it looked a clear case of suicide.’

‘Where is Miss Plenderleith now?’

‘She’s downstairs in the sitting-room, sir. A very cool, efficient young lady, I should say. Got a head on her.’

‘I’ll talk to her presently. I’d better see Brett now.’

Accompanied by Poirot he crossed the landing and entered the opposite room. A tall, elderly man looked up and nodded.

‘Hallo, Japp, glad you’ve got here. Funny business, this.’

Japp advanced towards him. Hercule Poirot sent a quick searching glance round the room.

It was much larger than the room they had just quitted. It had a built-out bay window, and whereas the other room had been a bedroom pure and simple, this was emphatically a bedroom disguised as a sitting-room.

The walls were silver and the ceiling emerald green. There were curtains of a modernistic pattern in silver and green. There was a divan covered with a shimmering emerald green silk quilt and numbers of gold and silver cushions. There was a tall antique walnut bureau, a walnut tallboy, and several modern chairs of gleaming chromium. On a low glass table there was a big ashtray full of cigarette stubs.

Delicately Hercule Poirot sniffed the air. Then he joined Japp where the latter stood looking down at the body.

In a heap on the floor, lying as she had fallen from one of the chromium chairs, was the body of a young woman of perhaps twenty-seven. She had fair hair and delicate features. There was very little make-up on the face. It was a pretty, wistful, perhaps slightly stupid face. On the left side of the head was a mass of congealed blood. The fingers of the right hand were clasped round a small pistol. The woman was dressed in a simple frock of dark green high to the neck.

'Well, Brett, what's the trouble?'

Japp was looking down also at the huddled figure.

‘Position’s all right,’ said the doctor. ‘If she shot herself she’d probably have slipped from the chair into just that position. The door was locked and the window was fastened on the inside.’

‘That’s all right, you say. Then what’s wrong?’

‘Take a look at the pistol. I haven’t handled it - waiting for the fingerprint men. But you can see quite well what I mean.’

Together Poirot and Japp knelt down and examined the pistol closely.

‘I see what you mean,’ said Japp rising. ‘It’s in the curve of her hand. It looks as though she’s holding it - but as a matter of fact she isn’t holding it. Anything else?’

‘Plenty. She’s got the pistol in her right hand. Now take a look at the wound. The pistol was held close to the head just above the left ear – the left ear, mark you.’

‘H’m,’ said Japp. ‘That does seem to settle it. She couldn’t hold a pistol and fire it in that position with her right hand?’

‘Plumb impossible, I should say. You might get your arm round but I doubt if you could fire the shot.’

‘That seems pretty obvious then. Someone else shot her and tried to make it look like suicide. What about the locked door and window, though?’

Inspector Jameson answered this.

‘Window was closed and bolted, sir, but although the door was locked we haven’t been able to find the key.’

Japp nodded.

‘Yes, that was a bad break. Whoever did it locked the door when he left and hoped the absence of the key wouldn’t be noticed.’

Poirot murmured: ‘C’est bête, ça!’

‘Oh, come now, Poirot, old man, you mustn’t judge everybody else by the light of your shining intellect! As a matter of fact that’s the sort of little detail that’s quite apt to be overlooked. Door’s locked. People break in. Woman found dead - pistol in her hand - clear case of suicide - she locked herself in to do it. They don’t go hunting about for keys. As a matter of fact, Miss Plenderleith’s sending for the police was lucky. She might have got one or two of the chauffeurs to come and burst in the door - and then the key question would have been overlooked altogether.’

‘Yes, I suppose that is true,’ said Hercule Poirot. ‘It would have been many people’s natural reaction. The police, they are the last resource, are they not?’

He was still staring down at the body. ‘Anything strike you?’ Japp asked.

The question was careless but his eyes were keen and attentive. Hercule Poirot shook his head slowly.

‘I was looking at her wrist-watch.’

He bent over and just touched it with a finger-tip. It was a dainty jewelled affair on a black moiré strap on the wrist of the hand that held the pistol.

‘Rather a swell piece that,’ observed Japp. ‘Must have cost money!’ He cocked his head inquiringly at Poirot. ‘Something in that maybe?’

‘It is possible - yes.’

Poirot strayed across to the writing-bureau. It was the kind that has a front flap that lets down. This was daintily set out to match the general colour scheme.

There was a somewhat massive silver inkstand in the centre, in front of it a handsome green lacquer blotter. To the left of the blotter was an emerald glass pen-tray containing a silver penholder - a stick of green sealing-wax, a pencil and two stamps. On the right of the blotter was a movable calendar giving the day of the week, date and month. There was also a little glass jar of shot and standing in it a flamboyant green quill pen. Poirot seemed interested in the pen. He took it out and looked at it but the quill was innocent of ink. It was

clearly a decoration - nothing more. The silver penholder with the ink-stained nib was the one in use. His eyes strayed to the calendar.

'Tuesday, November fifth,' said Japp. 'Yesterday. That's all correct.'

He turned to Brett.

'How long has she been dead?'

'She was killed at eleven thirty-three yesterday evening,' said Brett promptly. Then he grinned as he saw Japp's surprised face.

'Sorry, old boy,' he said. 'Had to do the super doctor of fiction! As a matter of fact eleven is about as near as I can put it - with a margin of about an hour either way.'

'Oh, I thought the wrist-watch might have stopped - or something.' 'It's stopped all right, but it's stopped at a quarter past four.'

'And I suppose she couldn't have been killed possibly at a quarter past four.' 'You can put that right out of your mind.'

Poirot had turned back the cover of the blotter. 'Good idea,' said Japp. 'But no luck.'

The blotter showed an innocent white sheet of blotting-paper. Poirot turned over the leaves but they were all the same.

He turned his attention to the waste-paper basket.

It contained two or three torn-up letters and circulars. They were only torn once and were easily reconstructed. An appeal for money from some society for assisting ex-service men, an invitation to a cocktail party on November 3rd, an appointment with a dressmaker. The circulars were an announcement of a furrier's sale and a catalogue from a department store.

'Nothing there,' said Japp. 'No, it is odd…' said Poirot.

'You mean they usually leave a letter when it's suicide?' 'Exactly.'

'In fact, one more proof that it isn't suicide.' He moved away.

'I'll have my men get to work now. We'd better go down and interview this Miss Plenderleith. Coming, Poirot?'

Poirot still seemed fascinated by the writing-bureau and its appointments.

He left the room, but at the door his eyes went back once more to the flaunting emerald quill pen.

Chapter 2

At the foot of the narrow flight of stairs a door gave admission to a large-sized living-room - actually the converted stable. In this room,

the walls of which were finished in a roughened plaster effect and on which hung etchings and woodcuts, two people were sitting.

One, in a chair near the fireplace, her hand stretched out to the blaze, was a dark efficient-looking young woman of twenty-seven or eight. The other, an elderly woman of ample proportions who carried a string bag, was panting and talking when the two men entered the room.

‘ - and as I said, Miss, such a turn it gave me I nearly dropped down where I stood. And to think that this morning of all mornings - ’

The other cut her short.

‘That will do, Mrs Pierce. These gentlemen are police officers, I think.’ ‘Miss Plenderleith?’ asked Japp, advancing.

The girl nodded.

‘That is my name. This is Mrs Pierce who comes in to work for us every day.’ The irrepressible Mrs Pierce broke out again.

‘And as I was saying to Miss Plenderleith, to think that this morning of all mornings, my sister’s Louisa Maud should have been took with a fit and me the only one handy and as I say flesh and blood is flesh and blood, and I didn’t think Mrs Allen would mind, though I never likes to disappoint my ladies - ’

Japp broke in with some dexterity.

‘Quite so, Mrs Pierce. Now perhaps you would take Inspector Jameson into the kitchen and give him a brief statement.’

Having then got rid of the voluble Mrs Pierce, who departed with Jameson talking thirteen to the dozen, Japp turned his attention once more to the girl.

‘I am Chief Inspector Japp. Now, Miss Plenderleith, I should like to know all you can tell me about this business.’

‘Certainly. Where shall I begin?’

Her self-possession was admirable. There were no signs of grief or shock save for an almost unnatural rigidity of manner.

‘You arrived this morning at what time?’

‘I think it was just before half-past ten. Mrs Pierce, the old liar, wasn’t here, I found - ’

‘Is that a frequent occurrence?’

Jane Plenderleith shrugged her shoulders.

‘About twice a week she turns up at twelve - or not at all. She’s supposed to come at nine. Actually, as I say, twice a week she either “comes over queer,” or else some member of her family is overtaken by sickness. All these daily women are like that - fail you now and again. She’s not bad as they go.’

‘You’ve had her long?’

‘Just over a month. Our last one pinched things.’ ‘Please go on, Miss Plenderleith.’

‘I paid off the taxi, carried in my suitcase, looked round for Mrs P., couldn’t see her and went upstairs to my room. I tidied up a bit then I went across to Barbara - Mrs Allen - and found the door locked. I rattled the handle and knocked but could get no reply. I came downstairs and rang up the police station.’

‘Pardon!’ Poirot interposed a quick, deft question. ‘It did not occur to you to try and break down the door - with the help of one of the chauffeurs in the mews, say?’

Her eyes turned to him - cool, grey-green eyes. Her glance seemed to sweep over him quickly and appraisingly.

‘No, I don’t think I thought of that. If anything was wrong, it seemed to me that the police were the people to send for.’

‘Then you thought - pardon, mademoiselle - that there was something wrong?’ ‘Naturally.’

‘Because you could not get a reply to your knocks? But possibly your friend might have taken a sleeping draught or something of that kind - ’

‘She didn’t take sleeping draughts.’ The reply came sharply.

‘Or she might have gone away and locked her door before going?’ ‘Why should she lock it? In any case she would have left a note for me.’ ‘And she did not - leave a note for you? You are quite sure of that?’ ‘Of course I am sure of it. I should have seen it at once.’

The sharpness of her tone was accentuated. Japp said:

‘You didn’t try and look through the keyhole, Miss Plenderleith?’

‘No,’ said Jane Plenderleith thoughtfully. ‘I never thought of that. But I couldn’t have seen anything, could I? Because the key would have been in it?’

Her inquiring gaze, innocent, wide-eyed, met Japp’s. Poirot smiled suddenly to himself.

‘You did quite right, of course, Miss Plenderleith,’ said Japp. ‘I suppose you’d no reason to believe that your friend was likely to commit suicide?’

‘Oh, no.’

‘She hadn’t seemed worried - or distressed in any way?’

There was a pause - an appreciable pause before the girl answered. ‘No.’

‘Did you know she had a pistol?’ Jane Plenderleith nodded.

‘Yes, she had it out in India. She always kept it in a drawer in her room.’ ‘H’m. Got a licence for it?’

‘I imagine so. I don’t know for certain.’

‘Now, Miss Plenderleith, will you tell me all you can about Mrs Allen, how long you’ve known her, where her relations are - everything in fact.’

Jane Plenderleith nodded.

‘I’ve known Barbara about five years. I met her first travelling abroad - in Egypt to be exact. She was on her way home from India. I’d been at the British School in Athens for a bit and was having a few weeks in Egypt before going home. We were on a Nile cruise together. We made friends, decided we liked each other. I was looking at the time for someone to share a flat or a tiny house with me. Barbara was alone in the world. We thought we’d get on well together.’

‘And you did get on well together?’ asked Poirot.

‘Very well. We each had our own friends - Barbara was more social in her likings - my friends were more of the artistic kind. It probably worked better that way.’

Poirot nodded. Japp went on:

‘What do you know about Mrs Allen’s family and her life before she met you?’ Jane Plenderleith shrugged her shoulders.

‘Not very much really. Her maiden name was Armitage, I believe.’

‘Her husband?’

‘I don’t fancy that he was anything to write home about. He drank, I think. I gather he died a year or two after the marriage. There was one child, a little girl, which died when it was three years old. Barbara didn’t talk much about her husband. I believe she married him in India when she was about seventeen. Then they went off to Borneo or one of the God-forsaken spots you send ne’er-do-wells to - but as it was obviously a painful subject I didn’t refer to it.’

‘Do you know if Mrs Allen was in any financial difficulties?’ ‘No, I’m sure she wasn’t.’

‘Not in debt - anything of that kind?’

‘Oh, no! I’m sure she wasn’t in that kind of a jam.’

‘Now there’s another question I must ask - and I hope you won’t be upset about it, Miss Plenderleith. Had Mrs Allen any particular man friend or men friends?’

Jane Plenderleith answered coolly:

‘Well, she was engaged to be married if that answers your question.’
‘What is the name of the man she was engaged to?’

‘Charles Laverton-West. He’s M.P. for some place in Hampshire.’ ‘Had she known him long?’

‘A little over a year.’

‘And she has been engaged to him - how long?’ ‘Two - no - nearer three months.’

‘As far as you know there has not been any quarrel?’ Miss Plenderleith shook her head.

‘No. I should have been surprised if there had been anything of that sort. Barbara wasn’t the quarrelling kind.’

‘How long is it since you last saw Mrs Allen?’

‘Friday last, just before I went away for the weekend.’ ‘Mrs Allen was remaining in town?’

‘Yes. She was going out with her fiancé on the Sunday, I believe.’

‘And you yourself, where did you spend the weekend?’ ‘At Laidells Hall, Laidells, Essex.’

‘And the name of the people with whom you were staying?’ ‘Mr and Mrs Bentinck.’

‘You only left them this morning?’ ‘Yes.’

‘You must have left very early?’

‘Mr Bentinck motored me up. He starts early because he has to get to the city by ten.’ ‘I see.’

Japp nodded comprehendingly. Miss Plenderleith’s replies had all been crisp and convincing. Poirot in his turn put a question.

‘What is your own opinion of Mr Laverton-West?’ The girl shrugged her shoulders.

‘Does that matter?’

‘No, it does not matter, perhaps, but I should like to have your opinion.’

‘I don’t know that I’ve thought about him one way or the other. He’s young - not more than thirty-one or two - ambitious - a good public speaker - means to get on in the world.’

‘That is on the credit side - and on the debit?’

‘Well,’ Miss Plenderleith considered for a moment or two. ‘In my opinion he’s commonplace - his ideas are not particularly original - and he’s slightly pompous.’

‘Those are not very serious faults, mademoiselle,’ said Poirot, smiling. ‘Don’t you think so?’

Her tone was slightly ironic. ‘They might be to you.’

He was watching her, saw her look a little disconcerted. He pursued his advantage. ‘But to Mrs Allen - no, she would not notice them.’

‘You’re perfectly right. Barbara thought he was wonderful - took him entirely at his own valuation.’

Poirot said gently:

‘You were fond of your friend?’

He saw the hand clench on her knee, the tightening of the line of the jaw, yet the answer came in a matter-of-fact voice free from emotion.

‘You are quite right. I was.’ Japp said:

‘Just one other thing, Miss Plenderleith. You and she didn’t have a quarrel? There was no upset between you?’

‘None whatever.’

‘Not over this engagement business?’

‘Certainly not. I was glad she was able to be so happy about it.’ There was a momentary pause, then Japp said:

‘As far as you know, did Mrs Allen have any enemies?’

This time there was a definite interval before Jane Plenderleith replied. When she did so, her tone had altered very slightly.

‘I don’t know quite what you mean by enemies?’ ‘Anyone, for instance, who would profit by her death?’

‘Oh, no, that would be ridiculous. She had a very small income anyway.’ ‘And who inherits that income?’

Jame Plenderleith’s voice sounded mildly surprised as she said:

‘Do you know, I really don’t know. I shouldn’t be surprised if I did. That is, if she ever made a will.’

‘And no enemies in any other sense?’ Japp slid off to another aspect quickly. ‘People with a grudge against her?’

‘I don’t think anyone had a grudge against her. She was a very gentle creature, always anxious to please. She had a really sweet, lovable nature.’

For the first time that hard, matter-of-fact voice broke a little. Poirot nodded gently. Japp said:

‘So it amounts to this - Mrs Allen has been in good spirits lately, she wasn’t in any financial difficulty,

she was engaged to be married and was happy in her engagement. There was nothing in the world to make her commit suicide. That’s right, isn’t it?’

There was a momentary silence before Jane said: ‘Yes.’

Japp rose.

'Excuse me, I must have a word with Inspector Jameson.' He left the room.

Hercule Poirot remained tête à tête with Jane Plenderleith.

Chapter 3

For a few minutes there was silence.

Jane Plenderleith shot a swift appraising glance at the little man, but after that she stared in front of her and did not speak. Yet a consciousness of his presence showed itself in a certain nervous tension. Her body was still but not relaxed. When at last Poirot did break the silence the mere sound of his voice seemed to give her a certain relief. In an agreeable everyday voice he asked a question.

'When did you light the fire, mademoiselle?'

'The fire?' Her voice sounded vague and rather absent-minded. 'Oh, as soon as I arrived this morning.' 'Before you went upstairs or afterwards?'

'Before.'

‘I see. Yes, naturally… And it was already laid - or did you have to lay it?’ ‘It was laid. I only had to put a match to it.’

There was a slight impatience in her voice. Clearly she suspected him of making conversation. Possibly that was what he was doing. At any rate he went on in quiet conversational tones.

‘But your friend - in her room I noticed there was a gas fire only?’ Jane Plenderleith answered mechanically.

‘This is the only coal fire we have - the others are all gas fires.’ ‘And you cook with gas, too?’

‘I think everyone does nowadays.’ ‘True. It is much labour saving.’

The little interchange died down. Jane Plenderleith tapped on the ground with her shoe. Then she said abruptly:

‘That man - Chief Inspector Japp - is he considered clever?’

‘He is very sound. Yes, he is well thought of. He works hard and painstakingly and very little escapes him.’

‘I wonder - ’ muttered the girl.

Poirot watched her. His eyes looked very green in the firelight. He asked quietly: ‘It was a great shock to you, your friend’s death?’

‘Terrible.’

She spoke with abrupt sincerity. ‘You did not expect it - no?’ ‘Of course not.’

‘So that it seemed to you at first, perhaps, that it was impossible - that it could not be?’

The quiet sympathy of his tone seemed to break down Jane Plenderleith’s defences. She replied eagerly, naturally, without stiffness.

‘That’s just it. Even if Barbara did kill herself, I can’t imagine her killing herself that way.’ ‘Yet she had a pistol?’

Jane Plenderleith made an impatient gesture.

‘Yes, but that pistol was a - oh! a hang over. She’d been in out-of-the-way places. She kept it out of habit - not with any other idea. I’m sure of that.’

‘Ah! and why are you sure of that?’ ‘Oh, because of the things she said.’ ‘Such as - ?’

His voice was very gentle and friendly. It led her on subtly.

‘Well, for instance, we were discussing suicide once and she said much the easiest way would be to turn the gas on and stuff up all the cracks and just go to bed. I said I thought that would be impossible - to lie there waiting. I said I’d far rather shoot myself. And she said no, she could never shoot herself. She’d be too frightened in case it didn’t come off and anyway she said she’d hate the bang.’

‘I see,’ said Poirot. ‘As you say, it is odd… Because, as you have just told me, there was a gas fire in her room.’

Jane Plenderleith looked at him, slightly startled.

‘Yes, there was… I can’t understand - no, I can’t understand why she didn’t do it that way.’ Poirot shook his head.

‘Yes, it seems - odd - not natural somehow.’

‘The whole thing doesn’t seem natural. I still can’t believe she killed herself. I suppose it must be suicide?’

‘Well, there is one other possibility.’ ‘What do you mean?’

Poirot looked straight at her. ‘It might be - murder.’

‘Oh, no?’ Jane Plenderleith shrank back. ‘Oh no! What a horrible suggestion.’ ‘Horrible, perhaps, but does it strike you as an impossible one?’

‘But the door was locked on the inside. So was the window.’

‘The door was locked - yes. But there is nothing to show if it were locked from the inside or the outside. You see, the key was missing.’

‘But then - if it is missing…’ She took a minute or two. ‘Then it must have been locked from the outside. Otherwise it would be somewhere in the room.’

‘Ah, but it may be. The room has not been thoroughly searched yet, remember. Or it may have been thrown out of the window and somebody may have picked it up.’

‘Murder!’ said Jane Plenderleith. She turned over the possibility, her dark clever face eager on the scent. ‘I believe you’re right.’

‘But if it were murder there would have been a motive. Do you know of a motive, mademoiselle?’

Slowly she shook her head. And yet, in spite of the denial, Poirot again got the impression that Jane Plenderleith was deliberately keeping something back. The door opened and Japp came in.

Poirot rose.

‘I have been suggesting to Miss Plenderleith,’ he said, ‘that her friend’s death was not suicide.’ Japp looked momentarily put out. He cast a glance of reproach at Poirot.

‘It’s a bit early to say anything definite,’ he remarked. ‘We’ve always got to take all possibilities into account, you understand. That’s all there is to it at the moment.’ Jane Plenderleith replied quietly.

‘I see.’

Japp came towards her.

‘Now then, Miss Plenderleith, have you ever seen this before?’

On the palm of his hand he held out a small oval of dark blue enamel. Jane Plenderleith shook her head.

‘No, never.’

‘It’s not yours nor Mrs Allen’s?’

‘No. It’s not the kind of thing usually worn by our sex, is it?’ ‘Oh! so you recognize it.’

‘Well, it’s pretty obvious, isn’t it? That’s half of a man’s cuff link.’

Chapter 4

‘That young woman’s too cocky by half,’ Japp complained.

The two men were once more in Mrs Allen’s bedroom. The body had been photographed and removed and the fingerprint man had done his work and departed.

‘It would be unadvisable to treat her as a fool,’ agreed Poirot. ‘She most emphatically is not a fool. She is, in fact, a particularly clever and competent young woman.’

‘Think she did it?’ asked Japp with a momentary ray of hope. ‘She might have, you know. We’ll have to get her alibi looked into. Some

quarrel over this young man - this budding M.P. She's rather too scathing about him, I think! Sounds fishy. Rather as though she were sweet on him herself and he'd turned her down. She's the kind that would bump anyone off if she felt like it, and keep her head while she was doing it, too. Yes, we'll have to look into that alibi. She had it very pat and after all Essex isn't very far away. Plenty of trains. Or a fast car. It's worth while finding out if she went to bed with a headache for instance last night.'

'You are right,' agreed Poirot.

'In any case,' continued Japp, 'she's holding out on us. Eh? Didn't you feel that too? That young woman knows something.'

Poirot nodded thoughtfully. 'Yes, that could be clearly seen.'

'That's always a difficulty in these cases,' Japp complained. 'People will hold their tongues - sometimes out of the most honourable motives.'

'For which one can hardly blame them, my friend.'

'No, but it makes it much harder for us,' Japp grumbled.

'It merely displays to its full advantage your ingenuity,' Poirot consoled him. 'What about fingerprints, by the way?'

'Well, it's murder all right. No prints whatever on the pistol. Wiped clean before being placed in her hand. Even if she managed to wind her arm round her head in some marvellous acrobatic fashion she

could hardly fire off a pistol without hanging on to it and she couldn't wipe it after she was dead.'

'No, no, an outside agency is clearly indicated.'

'Otherwise the prints are disappointing. None on the door-handle. None on the window. Suggestive, eh? Plenty of Mrs Allen's all over the place.'

'Did Jameson get anything?'

'Out of the daily woman? No. She talked a lot but she didn't really know much. Confirmed the fact that Allen and Plenderleith were on good terms. I've sent Jameson out to make inquiries in the mews. We'll have to have a word with Mr Laverton-West too. Find out where he was and what he was doing last night. In the meantime we'll have a look through her papers.'

He set to without more ado. Occasionally he grunted and tossed something over to Poirot. The search did not take long. There were not many papers in the desk and what there were were neatly arranged and docketed.

Finally Japp leant back and uttered a sigh. 'Not very much, is there?'

'As you say.'

'Most of it quite straightforward - receipted bills, a few bills as yet unpaid - nothing particularly outstanding. Social stuff - invitations.

Notes from friends. These - ' he laid his hand on a pile of seven or eight letters - 'and her cheque book and passbook. Anything strike you there?'

'Yes, she was overdrawn.' 'Anything else?'

Poirot smiled.

'Is it an examination that you put me through? But yes, I noticed what you are thinking of. Two hundred pounds drawn to self three months ago - and two hundred pounds drawn out yesterday - '

'And nothing on the counterfoil of the cheque book. No other cheques to self except small sums – fifteen pounds the highest. And I'll tell you this - there's no such sum of money in the house. Four pounds ten in a handbag and an odd shilling or two in another bag. That's pretty clear, I think.'

'Meaning that she paid that sum away yesterday.' 'Yes. Now who did she pay it to?'

The door opened and Inspector Jameson entered. 'Well, Jameson, get anything?'

'Yes, sir, several things. To begin with, nobody actually heard the shot. Two or three women say they did because they want to think they did - but that's all there is to it. With all those fireworks going off there isn't a dog's chance.'

Japp grunted.

‘Don’t suppose there is. Go on.’

‘Mrs Allen was at home most of yesterday afternoon and evening. Came in about five o’clock. Then she went out again about six but only to the post box at the end of the mews. At about nine-thirty a car drove up - Standard Swallow saloon - and a man got out. Description about forty-five, well set up military-looking gent, dark blue overcoat, bowler hat, toothbrush moustache. James Hogg, chauffeur from No. 18 says he’s seen him calling on Mrs Allen before.’

‘Forty-five,’ said Japp. ‘Can’t very well be Laverton-West.’

‘This man, whoever he was, stayed here for just under an hour. Left at about ten-twenty. Stopped in the doorway to speak to Mrs Allen. Small boy, Frederick Hogg, was hanging about quite near and heard what he said.’

‘And what did he say?’

‘ “Well, think it over and let me know.” And then she said something and he answered: “All right. So long.” After that he got in his car and drove away.’

‘That was at ten-twenty,’ said Poirot thoughtfully. Japp rubbed his nose.

‘Then at ten-twenty Mrs Allen was still alive,’ he said. ‘What next?’

‘Nothing more, sir, as far as I can learn. The chauffeur at No. 22 got in at half-past ten and he’d promised his kids to let off some fireworks for them. They’d been waiting for him - and all the other kids in the mews too. He let ’em off and everybody around about was busy watching them. After that everyone went to bed.’

‘And nobody else was seen to enter No. 14?’

‘No - but that’s not to say they didn’t. Nobody would have noticed.’

‘H’m,’ said Japp. ‘That’s true. Well, we’ll have to get hold of this “military gentleman with the toothbrush moustache.” It’s pretty clear that he was the last person to see her alive. I wonder who he was?’

‘Miss Plenderleith might tell us,’ suggested Poirot.

‘She might,’ said Japp gloomily. ‘On the other hand she might not. I’ve no doubt she could tell us a good deal if she liked. What about you, Poirot, old boy? You were alone with her for a bit. Didn’t you trot out that Father Confessor manner of yours that sometimes makes such a hit?’

Poirot spread out his hands. ‘Alas, we talked only of gas fires.’

‘Gas fires - gas fires.’ Japp sounded disgusted. ‘What’s the matter with you, old cock? Ever since you’ve been here the only things you’ve taken an interest in are quill pens and waste-paper baskets. Oh, yes, I saw you having a quiet look into the one downstairs. Anything in it?’

Poirot sighed.

'A catalogue of bulbs and an old magazine.'

'What's the idea, anyway? If anyone wants to throw away an incriminating document or whatever it is you have in mind they're not likely just to pitch it into a waste-paper basket.'

'That is very true what you say there. Only something quite unimportant would be thrown away like that.'

Poirot spoke meekly. Nevertheless Japp looked at him suspiciously. 'Well,' he said. 'I know what I'm going to do next. What about you?'

'Eh bien,' said Poirot. 'I shall complete my search for the unimportant. There is still the dustbin.' He skipped nimbly out of the room. Japp looked after him with an air of disgust.

'Potty,' he said. 'Absolutely potty.'

Inspector Jameson preserved a respectful silence. His face said with British superiority: 'Foreigners!' Aloud he said:

'So that's Mr Hercule Poirot! I've heard of him.'

'Old friend of mine,' explained Japp. 'Not half as balmy as he looks, mind you. All the same he's getting on now.'

‘Gone a bit gaga as they say, sir,’ suggested Inspector Jameson. ‘Ah well, age will tell.’ ‘All the same,’ said Japp, ‘I wish I knew what he was up to.’

He walked over to the writing-table and stared uneasily at an emerald green quill pen.

Chapter 5

Japp was just engaging his third chauffeur’s wife in conversation when Poirot, walking noiselessly as a cat, suddenly appeared at his elbow.

‘Whew, you made me jump,’ said Japp. ‘Got anything?’ ‘Not what I was looking for.’

Japp turned back to Mrs James Hogg.

‘And you say you’ve seen this gentleman before?’

‘Oh, yes sir. And my husband too. We knew him at once.’

‘Now look here, Mrs Hogg, you’re a shrewd woman, I can see. I’ve no doubt that you know all about everyone in the mews. And you’re a woman of judgment - unusually good judgment, I can tell that - ’ Unblushingly he repeated this remark for the third time. Mrs Hogg

bridled slightly and assumed an expression of superhuman intelligence. ‘Give me a line on those two young women - Mrs Allen and Miss Plenderleith. What were they like? Gay? Lots of parties? That sort of thing?’

‘Oh, no sir, nothing of the kind. They went out a good bit - Mrs Allen especially - but they’re class, if you know what I mean. Not like some as I could name down the other end. I’m sure the way that Mrs Stevens goes on - if she is a Mrs at all which I doubt - well I shouldn’t like to tell you what goes on there - I…’

‘Quite so,’ said Japp, dexterously stopping the flow. ‘Now that’s very important what you’ve told me. Mrs Allen and Miss Plenderleith were well liked, then?’

‘Oh yes, sir, very nice ladies, both of them - especially Mrs Allen. Always spoke a nice word to the children, she did. Lost her own little girl, I believe, poor dear. Ah well, I’ve buried three myself. And what I say is…’

‘Yes, yes, very sad. And Miss Plenderleith?’

‘Well, of course she was a nice lady too, but much more abrupt if you know what I mean. Just go by with a nod, she would, and not stop to pass the time of day. But I’ve nothing against her - nothing at all.’

‘She and Mrs Allen got on well together?’

‘Oh, yes sir. No quarrelling - nothing like that. Very happy and contented they were - I’m sure Mrs Pierce will bear me out.’

‘Yes, we’ve talked to her. Do you know Mrs Allen’s fiancé by sight?’

‘The gentleman she’s going to marry? Oh, yes. He’s been here quite a bit off and on. Member of Parliament, they do say.’

‘It wasn’t he who came last night?’

‘No, sir, it was not.’ Mrs Hogg drew herself up. A note of excitement disguised beneath intense primness came into her voice. ‘And if you ask me, sir, what you are thinking is all wrong. Mrs Allen wasn’t that kind of lady, I’m sure. It’s true there was no one in the house, but I do not believe anything of the kind - I said so to Hogg only this morning. “No, Hogg,” I said, “Mrs Allen was a lady - a real lady - so don’t go suggesting things” - knowing what a man’s mind is, if you’ll excuse my mentioning it. Always coarse in their ideas.’

Passing this insult by, Japp proceeded:

‘You saw him arrive and you saw him leave - that’s so, isn’t it?’ ‘That’s so, sir.’

‘And you didn’t hear anything else? Any sounds of a quarrel?’

‘No, sir, nor likely to. Not, that is to say, that such things couldn’t be heard - because the contrary to that is well known - and down the other end the way Mrs Stevens goes for that poor frightened maid of hers is common talk - and one and all we’ve advised her not to stand it, but there, the wages is good - temper of the devil she may have but pays for it - thirty shillings a week…’

Japp said quickly:

‘But you didn’t hear anything of the kind at No. 14?’

‘No, sir. Nor likely to with fireworks popping off here, there and everywhere and my Eddie with his eyebrows singed off as near as nothing.’

‘This man left at ten-twenty - that’s right, is it?’

‘It might be, sir. I couldn’t say myself. But Hogg says so and he’s a very reliable, steady man.’ ‘You actually saw him leave. Did you hear what he said?’

‘No, sir. I wasn’t near enough for that. Just saw him from my windows, standing in the doorway talking to Mrs Allen.’

‘See her too?’

‘Yes, sir, she was standing just inside the doorway.’ ‘Notice what she was wearing?’

‘Now really, sir, I couldn’t say. Not noticing particularly as it were.’ Poirot said:

‘You did not even notice if she was wearing day dress or evening dress?’ ‘No, sir, I can’t say I did.’

Poirot looked thoughtfully up at the window above and then across to No. 14. He smiled and for a moment his eye caught Japp's.

'And the gentleman?'

'He was in a dark-blue overcoat and a bowler hat. Very smart and well set up.'

Japp asked a few more questions and then proceeded to his next interview. This was with Master Frederick Hogg, an impish-faced, bright-eyed lad, considerably swollen with self-importance.

'Yes, sir. I heard them talking. "Think it over and let me know," the gent said. Pleasant like, you know. And then she said something and he answered, "All right. So long." And he got into the car - I was holding the door open but he didn't give me nothing,' said Master Hogg with a slight tinge of depression in his tone. 'And he drove away.'

'You didn't hear what Mrs Allen said?' 'No, sir, can't say I did.'

'Can you tell me what she was wearing? What colour, for instance?'

'Couldn't say, sir. You see, I didn't really see her. She must have been round behind the door.'

'Just so,' said Japp. 'Now look here, my boy, I want you to think and answer my next question very carefully. If you don't know and can't remember, say so. Is that clear?'

‘Yes, sir.’

Master Hogg looked at him eagerly.

‘Which of ’em closed the door, Mrs Allen or the gentleman?’ ‘The front door?’

‘The front door, naturally.’

The child reflected. His eyes screwed themselves up in an effort of remembrance.

‘Think the lady probably did - No, she didn’t. He did. Pulled it to with a bit of a bang and jumped into the car quick. Looked as though he had a date somewhere.’

‘Right. Well, young man, you seem a bright kind of shaver. Here’s sixpence for you.’ Dismissing Master Hogg, Japp turned to his friend. Slowly with one accord they nodded. ‘Could be!’ said Japp.

‘There are possibilities,’ agreed Poirot.

His eyes shone with a green light. They looked like a cat’s.

Chapter 6

On re-entering the sitting-room of No. 14, Japp wasted no time in beating about the bush. He came straight to the point.

'Now look here, Miss Plenderleith, don't you think it's better to spill the beans here and now. It's going to come to that in the end.'

Jane Plenderleith raised her eyebrows. She was standing by the mantelpiece, gently warming one foot at the fire.

'I really don't know what you mean.' 'Is that quite true, Miss Plenderleith?' She shrugged her shoulders.

'I've answered all your questions. I don't see what more I can do.' 'Well, it's my opinion you could do a lot more - if you chose.' 'That's only an opinion, though, isn't it, Chief Inspector?'

Japp grew rather red in the face.

'I think,' said Poirot, 'that mademoiselle would appreciate better the reason for your questions if you told her just how the case stands.'

'That's very simple. Now then, Miss Plenderleith, the facts are as follows. Your friend was found shot through the head with a pistol in her hand and the door and the window fastened. That looked like a plain case of suicide. But it wasn't suicide. The medical evidence alone proves that.'

'How?'

All her ironic coolness had disappeared. She leaned forward - intent - watching his face.

'The pistol was in her hand - but the fingers weren't grasping it. Moreover there were no fingerprints at all on the pistol. And the angle of the wound makes it impossible that the wound should have been self-inflicted. Then again, she left no letter - rather an unusual thing for a suicide. And though the door was locked the key has not been found.'

Jane Plenderleith turned slowly and sat down in a chair facing them.

'So that's it!' she said. 'All along I've felt it was impossible that she should have killed herself! I was right! She didn't kill herself. Someone else killed her.'

For a moment or two she remained lost in thought. Then she raised her head brusquely. 'Ask me any questions you like,' she said. 'I will answer them to the best of my ability.'

Japp began:

'Last night Mrs Allen had a visitor. He is described as a man of forty-five, military bearing, toothbrush moustache, smartly dressed and driving a Standard Swallow saloon car. Do you know who that is?'

'I can't be sure, of course, but it sounds like Major Eustace.' 'Who is Major Eustace? Tell me all you can about him?'

‘He was a man Barbara had known abroad - in India. He turned up about a year ago, and we’ve seen him on and off since.’

‘He was a friend of Mrs Allen’s?’

‘He behaved like one,’ said Jane dryly. ‘What was her attitude to him?’

‘I don’t think she really liked him - in fact, I’m sure she didn’t.’ ‘But she treated him with outward friendliness?’

‘Yes.’

‘Did she ever seem - think carefully, Miss Plenderleith - afraid of him?’

Jane Plenderleith considered this thoughtfully for a minute or two. Then she said: ‘Yes - I think she was. She was always nervous when he was about.’

‘Did he and Mr Laverton-West meet at all?’

‘Only once, I think. They didn’t take to each other much. That is to say, Major Eustace made himself as agreeable as he could to Charles, but Charles wasn’t having any. Charles has got a very good nose for anybody who isn’t well - quite - quite.’

‘And Major Eustace was not - what you call - quite - quite?’ asked Poirot. The girl said dryly:

‘No, he wasn’t. Bit hairy at the heel. Definitely not out of the top drawer.’

‘Alas - I do not know those two expressions. You mean to say he was not the pukka sahib?’ A fleeting smile passed across Jane Plenderleith’s face, but she replied gravely, ‘No.’

‘Would it come as a great surprise to you, Miss Plenderleith, if I suggested that this man was blackmailing Mrs Allen?’

Japp sat forward to observe the result of his suggestion.

He was well satisfied. The girl started forward, the colour rose in her cheeks, she brought down her hand sharply on the arm of her chair.

‘So that was it! What a fool I was not to have guessed. Of course!’ ‘You think the suggestion feasible, mademoiselle?’ asked Poirot.

‘I was a fool not to have thought of it! Barbara’s borrowed small sums off me several times during the last six months. And I’ve seen her sitting poring over her passbook. I knew she was living well within her income, so I didn’t bother, but, of course, if she was paying out sums of money - ’

‘And it would accord with her general demeanour - yes?’ asked Poirot.

‘Absolutely. She was nervous. Quite jumpy sometimes. Altogether different from what she used to be.’ Poirot said gently:

‘Excuse me, but that is not just what you told us before.’

‘That was different,’ Jane Plenderleith waved an impatient hand. ‘She wasn’t depressed. I mean she wasn’t feeling suicidal or anything like that. But blackmail - yes. I wish she’d told me. I’d have sent him to the devil.’

‘But he might have gone - not to the devil, but to Mr Charles Laverton-West?’ observed Poirot. ‘Yes,’ said Jane Plenderleith slowly. ‘Yes… that’s true…’

‘You’ve no idea of what this man’s hold over her may have been?’ asked Japp. The girl shook her head.

‘I haven’t the faintest idea. I can’t believe, knowing Barbara, that it could have been anything really serious. On the other hand - ’ she paused, then went on. ‘What I mean is, Barbara was a bit of a simpleton in some ways. She’d be very easily frightened. In fact, she was the kind of girl who would be a positive gift to a blackmailer! The nasty brute!’

She snapped out the last three words with real venom.

‘Unfortunately,’ said Poirot, ‘the crime seems to have taken place the wrong way round. It is the victim who should kill the blackmailer, not the blackmailer his victim.’

Jane Plenderleith frowned a little.

‘No - that is true - but I can imagine circumstances - ’ ‘Such as?’

‘Supposing Barbara got desperate. She may have threatened him with that silly little pistol of hers. He tries to wrench it away from her and in the struggle he fires it and kills her. Then he’s horrified at what he’s done and tries to pretend it was suicide.’

‘Might be,’ said Japp. ‘But there’s a difficulty.’ She looked at him inquiringly.

‘Major Eustace (if it was him) left here last night at ten-twenty and said goodbye to Mrs Allen on the doorstep.’

‘Oh,’ the girl’s face fell. ‘I see.’ She paused a minute or two. ‘But he might have come back later,’ she said slowly.

‘Yes, that is possible,’ said Poirot. Japp continued:

‘Tell me, Miss Plenderleith, where was Mrs Allen in the habit of receiving guests, here or in the room upstairs?’

‘Both. But this room was used for more communal parties or for my own special friends. You see, the arrangement was that Barbara had the big bedroom and used it as a sitting-room as well, and I had the little bedroom and used this room.’

‘If Major Eustace came by appointment last night, in which room do you think Mrs Allen would have received him?’

‘I think she would probably bring him in here.’ The girl sounded a little doubtful. ‘It would be less intimate. On the other hand, if she

wanted to write a cheque or anything of that kind, she would probably take him upstairs. There are no writing materials down here.'

Japp shook his head.

'There was no question of a cheque. Mrs Allen drew out two hundred pounds in cash yesterday. And so far we've not been able to find any trace of it in the house.'

'And she gave it to that brute? Oh, poor Barbara! Poor, poor Barbara!' Poirot coughed.

'Unless, as you suggest, it was more or less an accident, it still seems a remarkable fact that he should kill an apparently regular source of income.'

'Accident? It wasn't an accident. He lost his temper and saw red and shot her.' 'That is how you think it happened?'

'Yes.' She added vehemently, 'It was murder - murder!' Poirot said gravely:

'I will not say that you are wrong, mademoiselle.'

Japp said:

'What cigarettes did Mrs Allen smoke?' 'Gaspers. There are some in that box.'

Japp opened the box, took out a cigarette and nodded. He slipped the cigarette into his pocket. ‘And you, mademoiselle?’ asked Poirot.

‘The same.’

‘You do not smoke Turkish?’ ‘Never.’

‘Nor Mrs Allen?’

‘No. She didn’t like them.’ Poirot asked:

‘And Mr Laverton-West. What did he smoke?’ She stared hard at him.

‘Charles? What does it matter what he smoked? You’re not going to pretend thathe killed her?’ Poirot shrugged his shoulders.

‘A man has killed the woman he loved before now, mademoiselle.’ Jane shook her head impatiently.

‘Charles wouldn’t kill anybody. He’s a very careful man.’

‘All the same, mademoiselle, it is the careful men who commit the cleverest murders.’ She stared at him.

‘But not for the motive you have just advanced, M. Poirot.’ He bowed his head.

‘No, that is true.’ Japp rose.

‘Well, I don’t think that there’s much more I can do here. I’d like to have one more look round.’

‘In case that money should be tucked away somewhere? Certainly. Look anywhere you like. And in my room too - although it isn’t likely Barbara would hide it there.’

Japp’s search was quick but efficient. The living-room had given up all its secrets in a very few minutes. Then he went upstairs. Jane Plenderleith sat on the arm of a chair, smoking a cigarette and frowning at the fire. Poirot watched her.

After some minutes, he said quietly:

‘Do you know if Mr Laverton-West is in London at present?’

‘I don’t know at all. I rather fancy he’s in Hampshire with his people. I suppose I ought to have wired him. How dreadful. I forgot.’

‘It is not easy to remember everything, mademoiselle, when a catastrophe occurs. And after all, the bad news, it will keep. One hears it only too soon.’

‘Yes, that’s true,’ the girl said absently.

Japp’s footsteps were heard descending the stairs. Jane went out to meet him. ‘Well?’

Japp shook his head.

‘Nothing helpful, I’m afraid, Miss Plenderleith. I’ve been over the whole house now. Oh, I suppose I’d better just have a look in this cupboard under the stairs.’

He caught hold of the handle as he spoke, and pulled. Jane Plenderleith said:

‘It’s locked.’

Something in her voice made both men look at her sharply.

‘Yes,’ said Japp pleasantly. ‘I can see it’s locked. Perhaps you’ll get the key.’ The girl was standing as though carved in stone.

‘I - I’m not sure where it is.’

Japp shot a quick glance at her. His voice continued resolutely pleasant and off-hand.

‘Dear me, that’s too bad. Don’t want to splinter the wood, opening it by force. I’ll send Jameson out to get an assortment of keys.’

She moved forward stiffly.

‘Oh,’ she said. ‘One minute. It might be - ’

She went back into the living-room and reappeared a moment later holding a fair-sized key in her hand.

‘We keep it locked,’ she explained, ‘because one’s umbrellas and things have a habit of getting pinched.’

‘Very wise precaution,’ said Japp, cheerfully accepting the key.

He turned it in the lock and threw the door open. It was dark inside the cupboard. Japp took out his pocket flashlight and let it play round the inside.

Poirot felt the girl at his side stiffen and stop breathing for a second. His eyes followed the sweep of Japp’s torch.

There was not very much in the cupboard. Three umbrellas - one broken, four walking sticks, a set of golf clubs, two tennis racquets, a neatly-folded rug and several sofa cushions in various stages of dilapidation. On the top of these last reposed a small, smart-looking attaché-case.

As Japp stretched out a hand towards it, Jane Plenderleith said quickly:

‘That’s mine. I - it came back with me this morning. So there can’t be anything there.’ ‘Just as well to make quite sure,’ said Japp, his cheery friendliness increasing slightly.

The case was unlocked. Inside it was fitted with shagreen brushes and toilet bottles. There were two magazines in it but nothing else.

Japp examined the whole outfit with meticulous attention. When at last he shut the lid and began a cursory examination of the cushions, the girl gave an audible sigh of relief.

There was nothing else in the cupboard beyond what was plainly to be seen. Japp's examination was soon finished.

He relocked the door and handed the key to Jane Plenderleith.

'Well,' he said, 'that concludes matters. Can you give me Mr Laverton-West's address?' 'Farlescombe Hall, Little Ledbury, Hampshire.'

'Thank you, Miss Plenderleith. That's all for the present. I may be round again later. By the way, mum's the word. Leave it at suicide as far as the general public's concerned.'

'Of course, I quite understand.' She shook hands with them both.

As they walked away down the mews, Japp exploded:

'What the - the hell was there in that cupboard? There was something.' 'Yes, there was something.'

'And I'll bet ten to one it was something to do with the attaché-case! But like the double-dyed mutt I must be, I couldn't find anything. Looked in all the bottles - felt the lining - what the devil could it be?' Poirot shook his head thoughtfully.

‘That girl’s in it somehow,’ Japp went on. ‘Brought that case back this morning? Not on your life, she didn’t! Notice that there were two magazines in it?’

‘Yes.’

‘Well, one of them was for last July!’

Chapter 7

I

It was the following day when Japp walked into Poirot’s flat, flung his hat on the table in deep disgust and dropped into a chair.

‘Well,’ he growled. ‘She’s out of it!’ ‘Who is out of it?’

‘Plenderleith. Was playing bridge up to midnight. Host, hostess, naval-commander guest and two servants can all swear to that. No doubt about it, we’ve got to give up any idea of her being concerned in the business. All the same, I’d like to know why she went all hot and bothered about that little attaché-case under the stairs. That’s something in your line, Poirot. You like solving the kind of triviality that leads nowhere. The Mystery of the Small Attaché-Case. Sounds quite promising!’

‘I will give you yet another suggestion for a title. The Mystery of the Smell of Cigarette Smoke.’

‘A bit clumsy for a title. Smell - eh? Was that why you were sniffing so when we first examined the body? I saw you – and heard you! Sniff - sniff - sniff. Thought you had a cold in your head.’

‘You were entirely in error.’ Japp sighed.

‘I always thought it was the little grey cells of the brain. Don’t tell me the cells of your nose are equally superior to anyone else’s.’

‘No, no, calm yourself.’

‘I didn’t smell any cigarette smoke,’ went on Japp suspiciously. ‘No more did I, my friend.’

Japp looked at him doubtfully. Then he extracted a cigarette from his pocket.

‘That’s the kind Mrs Allen smoked - gaspers. Six of those stubs were hers. The other three were Turkish .’ ‘Exactly.’

‘Your wonderful nose knew that without looking at them, I suppose!’

‘I assure you my nose does not enter into the matter. My nose registered nothing.’ ‘But the brain cells registered a lot?’

‘Well - there were certain indications - do you not think so?’ Japp looked at him sideways.

‘Such as?’

‘Eh bien, there was very definitely something missing from the room. Also something added, I think… And then, on the writing-bureau…’

‘I knew it! We’re coming to that damned quill pen!’ ‘Du tout. The quill pen plays a purely negative rôle.’ Japp retreated to safer ground.

‘I’ve got Charles Laverton-West coming to see me at Scotland Yard in half an hour. I thought you might like to be there.’

‘I should very much.’

‘And you’ll be glad to hear we’ve tracked down Major Eustace. Got a service flat in the Cromwell Road.’

‘Excellent.’

‘And we’ve got a little to go on there. Not at all a nice person, Major Eustace. After I’ve seen Laverton-West, we’ll go and see him. That suit you?’

‘Perfectly.’

‘Well, come along then.’

II

At half-past eleven, Charles Laverton-West was ushered into Chief Inspector Japp's room. Japp rose and shook hands.

The M.P. was a man of medium height with a very definite personality. He was clean-shaven, with the mobile mouth of an actor, and the slightly prominent eyes that so often go with the gift of oratory. He was good-looking in a quiet, well-bred way.

Though looking pale and somewhat distressed, his manner was perfectly formal and composed. He took a seat, laid his gloves and hat on the table and looked towards Japp.

'I'd like to say, first of all, Mr Laverton-West, that I fully appreciate how distressing this must be to you.'

Laverton-West waved this aside.

'Do not let us discuss my feelings. Tell me, Chief Inspector, have you any idea what caused my - Mrs Allen to take her own life?'

'You yourself cannot help us in any way?' 'No, indeed.'

'There was no quarrel? No estrangement of any kind between you?' 'Nothing of the kind. It has been the greatest shock to me.'

'Perhaps it will be more understandable, sir, if I tell you that it was not suicide - but murder!' 'Murder?' Charles Laverton-West's eyes popped nearly out of his head. 'You say murder?'

‘Quite correct. Now, Mr Laverton-West, have you any idea who might be likely to make away with Mrs Allen?’

Laverton-West fairly spluttered out his answer.

‘No - no, indeed - nothing of the sort! The mere idea is – is unimaginable!’

‘She never mentioned any enemies? Anyone who might have a grudge against her?’ ‘Never.’

‘Did you know that she had a pistol?’ ‘I was not aware of the fact.’

He looked a little startled.

‘Miss Plenderleith says that Mrs Allen brought this pistol back from abroad with her some years ago.’ ‘Really?’

‘Of course, we have only Miss Plenderleith’s word for that. It is quite possible that Mrs Allen felt herself to be in danger from some source and kept the pistol handy for reasons of her own.’

Charles Laverton-West shook his head doubtfully. He seemed quite bewildered and dazed.

‘What is your opinion of Miss Plenderleith, Mr Laverton-West? I mean, does she strike you as a reliable, truthful person?’

The other pondered a minute.

‘I think so - yes, I should say so.’

‘You don’t like her?’ suggested Japp, who had been watching him closely.

‘I wouldn’t say that. She is not the type of young woman I admire. That sarcastic, independent type is not attractive to me, but I should say she was quite truthful.’

‘H’m,’ said Japp. ‘Do you know a Major Eustace?’

‘Eustace? Eustace? Ah, yes, I remember the name. I met him once at Barbara’s - Mrs Allen’s. Rather a doubtful customer in my opinion. I said as much to my - to Mrs Allen. He wasn’t the type of man I should have encouraged to come to the house after we were married.’

‘And what did Mrs Allen say?’

‘Oh! she quite agreed. She trusted my judgment implicitly. A man knows other men better than a woman can do. She explained that she couldn’t very well be rude to a man whom she had not seen for some time - I think she felt especially a horror of being snobbish! Naturally, as my wife, she would find a good many of her old associates well - unsuitable, shall we say?’

‘Meaning that in marrying you she was bettering her position?’ Japp asked bluntly. Laverton-West held up a well-manicured hand.

‘No, no, not quite that. As a matter of fact, Mrs Allen’s mother was a distant relation of my own family. She was fully my equal in birth. But

of course, in my position, I have to be especially careful in choosing my friends - and my wife in choosing hers. One is to a certain extent in the limelight.'

'Oh, quite,' said Japp dryly. He went on, 'So you can't help us in any way?' 'No indeed. I am utterly at sea. Barbara! Murdered! It seems incredible.'

'Now, Mr Laverton-West, can you tell me what your own movements were on the night of November fifth?'

'My movements? My movements?' Laverton-West's voice rose in shrill protest.

'Purely a matter of routine,' explained Japp. 'We - er - have to ask everybody.' Charles Laverton-West looked at him with dignity.

'I should hope that a man in my position might be exempt.' Japp merely waited.

'I was - now let me see... Ah, yes. I was at the House. Left at half-past ten. Went for a walk along the Embankment. Watched some of the fireworks.'

'Nice to think there aren't any plots of that kind nowadays,' said Japp cheerily. Laverton-West gave him a fish-like stare.

'Then I - er - walked home.'

‘Reaching home - your London address is Onslow Square, I think - at what time?’ ‘I hardly know exactly.’

‘Eleven? Half-past?’ ‘Somewhere about then.’ ‘Perhaps someone let you in.’ ‘No, I have my key.’

‘Meet anybody whilst you were walking?’

‘No - er - really, Chief Inspector, I resent these questions very much!’

‘I assure you, it’s just a matter of routine, Mr Laverton-West. They aren’t personal, you know.’ The reply seemed to soothe the irate M.P.

‘If that is all - ’

‘That is all for the present, Mr Laverton-West.’ ‘You will keep me informed - ’

‘Naturally, sir. By the way, let me introduce M. Hercule Poirot. You may have heard of him.’ Mr Laverton-West’s eye fastened itself interestedly on the little Belgian.

‘Yes - yes - I have heard the name.’

‘Monsieur,’ said Poirot, his manner suddenly very foreign. ‘Believe me, my heart bleeds for you. Such a loss! Such agony as you must be enduring! Ah, but I will say no more. How magnificently the English

hide their emotions.' He whipped out his cigarette case. 'Permit me - Ah, it is empty. Japp?'

Japp slapped his pockets and shook his head.

Laverton-West produced his own cigarette case, murmured, 'Er - have one of mine, M. Poirot.' 'Thank you - thank you.' The little man helped himself.

'As you say, M. Poirot,' resumed the other, 'we English do not parade our emotions. A stiff upper lip - that is our motto.'

He bowed to the two men and went out.

'Bit of a stuffed fish,' said Japp disgustedly. 'And a boiled owl! The Plenderleith girl was quite right about him. Yet he's a good-looking sort of chap - might go down well with some woman who had no sense of humour. What about that cigarette?'

Poirot handed it over, shaking his head. 'Egyptian. An expensive variety.'

'No, that's no good. A pity, for I've never heard a weaker alibi! In fact, it wasn't an alibi at all... You know, Poirot, it's a pity the boot wasn't on the other leg. If she'd been blackmailing him... He's a lovely type for blackmail - would pay out like a lamb! Anything to avoid a scandal.'

'My friend, it is very pretty to reconstruct the case as you would like it to be, but that is not strictly our affair.'

‘No, Eustace is our affair. I’ve got a few lines on him. Definitely a nasty fellow.’ ‘By the way, did you do as I suggested about Miss Plenderleith?’

‘Yes. Wait a sec, I’ll ring through and get the latest.’

He picked up the telephone receiver and spoke through it. After a brief interchange he replaced it and looked up at Poirot.

‘Pretty heartless piece of goods. Gone off to play golf. That’s a nice thing to do when your friend’s been murdered only the day before.’

Poirot uttered an exclamation. ‘What’s the matter now?’ asked Japp. But Poirot was murmuring to himself.

‘Of course... of course... but naturally... What an imbecile I am - why, it leapt to the eye!’ Japp said rudely:

‘Stop jabbering to yourself and let’s go and tackle Eustace.’

He was amazed to see the radiant smile that spread over Poirot’s face.

‘But - yes - most certainly let us tackle him. For now, see you, I know everything - but everything!’

Chapter 8

Major Eustace received the two men with the easy assurance of a man of the world.

His flat was small, a mere pied à terre, as he explained. He offered the two men a drink and when that was refused he took out his cigarette case.

Both Japp and Poirot accepted a cigarette. A quick glance passed between them. 'You smoke Turkish, I see,' said Japp as he twirled the cigarette between his fingers. 'Yes. I'm sorry, do you prefer a gasper? I've got one somewhere about.'

'No, no, this will do me very well.' Then he leaned forward - his tone changed. 'Perhaps you can guess, Major Eustace, what it was I came to see you about?'

The other shook his head. His manner was nonchalant. Major Eustace was a tall man, good-looking in a somewhat coarse fashion. There was a puffiness round the eyes - small, crafty eyes that belied the good-humoured geniality of his manner.

He said:

'No - I've no idea what brings such a big gun as a chief inspector to see me. Anything to do with my car?'

'No, it is not your car. I think you knew a Mrs Barbara Allen, Major Eustace?' The major leant back, puffed out a cloud of smoke, and

said in an enlightened voice: ‘Oh, so that’s it! Of course, I might have guessed. Very sad business.’

‘You know about it?’

‘Saw it in the paper last night. Too bad.’ ‘You knew Mrs Allen out in India, I think.’ ‘Yes, that’s some years ago now.’

‘Did you also know her husband?’

There was a pause - a mere fraction of a second - but during that fraction the little pig eyes flashed a quick look at the faces of the two men. Then he answered:

‘No, as a matter of fact, I never came across Allen.’ ‘But you know something about him?’

‘Heard he was by way of being a bad hat. Of course, that was only rumour.’

‘Mrs Allen did not say anything?’ ‘Never talked about him.’

‘You were on intimate terms with her?’ Major Eustace shrugged his shoulders.

‘We were old friends, you know, old friends. But we didn’t see each other very often.’ ‘But you did see her that last evening? The evening of November fifth?’

‘Yes, as a matter of fact, I did.’ ‘You called at her house, I think.’

Major Eustace nodded. His voice took on a gentle, regretful note.

‘Yes, she asked me to advise her about some investments. Of course, I can see what you’re driving at - her state of mind - all that sort of thing. Well, really, it’s very difficult to say. Her manner seemed normal enough and yet she was a bit jumpy, come to think of it.’

‘But she gave you no hint as to what she contemplated doing?’

‘Not the least in the world. As a matter of fact, when I said goodbye I said I’d ring her up soon and we’d do a show together.’

‘You said you’d ring her up. Those were your last words?’ ‘Yes.’

‘Curious. I have information that you said something quite different.’ Eustace changed colour.

‘Well, of course, I can’t remember the exact words.’

‘My information is that what you actually said was, “Well, think it over and let me know.”’

‘Let me see, yes I believe you’re right. Not exactly that. I think I was suggesting she should let me know when she was free.’

‘Not quite the same thing, is it?’ said Japp. Major Eustace shrugged his shoulders.

‘My dear fellow, you can’t expect a man to remember word for word what he said on any given occasion.’

‘And what did Mrs Allen reply?’

‘She said she’d give me a ring. That is, as near as I can remember.’ ‘And then you said, “All right. So long.”’

‘Probably. Something of the kind anyway.’ Japp said quietly:

‘You say that Mrs Allen asked you to advise her about her investments. Did she, by any chance, entrust you with the sum of two hundred pounds in cash to invest for her?’

Eustace’s face flushed a dark purple. He leaned forward and growled out: ‘What the devil do you mean by that?’

‘Did she or did she not?’

‘That’s my business, Mr Chief Inspector.’ Japp said quietly:

‘Mrs Allen drew out the sum of two hundred pounds in cash from her bank. Some of the money was in five-pound notes. The numbers of these can, of course, be traced.’

‘What if she did?’

‘Was the money for investment - or was it - blackmail, Major Eustace?’ ‘That’s a preposterous idea. What next will you suggest?’

Japp said in his most official manner:

'I think, Major Eustace, that at this point I must ask you if you are willing to come to Scotland Yard and make a statement. There is, of course, no compulsion and you can, if you prefer it, have your solicitor present.'

'Solicitor? What the devil should I want with a solicitor? And what are you cautioning me for?' 'I am inquiring into the circumstances of the death of Mrs Allen.'

'Good God, man, you don't suppose - Why, that's nonsense! Look here, what happened was this. I called round to see Barbara by appointment...'

'That was at what time?'

'At about half-past nine, I should say. We sat and talked...' 'And smoked?'

'Yes, and smoked. Anything damaging in that?' demanded the major belligerently.

'Where did this conversation take place?'

'In the sitting-room. Left of the door as you go in. We talked together quite amicably, as I say. I left a little before half-past ten. I stayed for a minute on the doorstep for a few last words...'

'Last words - precisely,' murmured Poirot.

‘Who are you, I’d like to know?’ Eustace turned and spat the words at him. ‘Some kind of damned dago! What are you butting in for?’

‘I am Hercule Poirot,’ said the little man with dignity.

‘I don’t care if you are the Achilles statue. As I say, Barbara and I parted quite amicably. I drove straight to the Far East Club. Got there at five and twenty to eleven and went straight up to the card-room. Stayed there playing bridge until one-thirty. Now then, put that in your pipe and smoke it.’

‘I do not smoke the pipe,’ said Poirot. ‘It is a pretty alibi you have there.’

‘It should be a pretty cast iron one anyway! Now then, sir,’ he looked at Japp. ‘Are you satisfied?’ ‘You remained in the sitting-room throughout your visit?’

‘Yes.’

‘You did not go upstairs to Mrs Allen’s own boudoir?’

‘No, I tell you. We stayed in the one room and didn’t leave it.’ Japp looked at him thoughtfully for a minute or two. Then he said: ‘How many sets of cuff links have you?’

‘Cuff links? Cuff links? What’s that got to do with it?’ ‘You are not bound to answer the question, of course.’

‘Answer it? I don’t mind answering it. I’ve got nothing to hide. And I shall demand an apology. There are these…’ he stretched out his arms.

Japp noted the gold and platinum with a nod. ‘And I’ve got these.’

He rose, opened a drawer and taking out a case, he opened it and shoved it rudely almost under Japp’s nose.

‘Very nice design,’ said the chief inspector. ‘I see one is broken - bit of enamel chipped off.’ ‘What of it?’

‘You don’t remember when that happened, I suppose?’

‘A day or two ago, not longer.’

‘Would you be surprised to hear that it happened when you were visiting Mrs Allen?’

‘Why shouldn’t it? I’ve not denied that I was there.’ The major spoke haughtily. He continued to bluster, to act the part of the justly indignant man, but his hands were trembling.

Japp leaned forward and said with emphasis:

‘Yes, but that bit of cuff link wasn’t found in the sitting-room. It was found upstairs in Mrs Allen’s boudoir - there in the room where she was killed, and where a man sat smoking the same kind of cigarettes as you smoke.’

The shot told. Eustace fell back into his chair. His eyes went from side to side. The collapse of the bully and the appearance of the craven was not a pretty sight.

'You've got nothing on me.' His voice was almost a whine. 'You're trying to frame me... But you can't do it. I've got an alibi... I never came near the house again that night...'

Poirot in his turn, spoke.

'No, you did not come near the house again... You did not need to... For perhaps Mrs Allen was already dead when you left it .'

'That's impossible - impossible - She was just inside the door - she spoke to me - People must have heard her - seen her...'

Poirot said softly:

'They heard you speaking to her... and pretending to wait for her answer and then speaking again... It is an old trick that... People may have assumed she was there, but they did not see her, because they could not even say whether she was wearing evening dress or not - not even mention what colour she was wearing...'

'My God - it isn't true - it isn't true - ' He was shaking now - collapsed...

Japp looked at him with disgust. He spoke crisply. 'I'll have to ask you, sir, to come with me.' 'You're arresting me?'

‘Detained for inquiry - we’ll put it that way.’

The silence was broken with a long, shuddering sigh. The despairing voice of the erstwhile blustering Major Eustace said:

‘I’m sunk…’

Hercule Poirot rubbed his hands together and smiled cheerfully. He seemed to be enjoying himself.

Chapter 9

‘Pretty the way he went all to pieces,’ said Japp with professional appreciation, later that day. He and Poirot were driving in a car along the Brompton Road.

‘He knew the game was up,’ said Poirot absently.

‘We’ve got plenty on him,’ said Japp. ‘Two or three different aliases, a tricky business over a cheque, and a very nice affair when he stayed at the Ritz and called himself Colonel de Bathe. Swindled half a dozen Piccadilly tradesmen. We’re holding him on that charge for the moment - until we get this affair finally squared up. What’s the idea of this rush to the country, old man?’

‘My friend, an affair must be rounded off properly. Everything must be explained. I am on the quest of the mystery you suggested. The Mystery of the Missing Attaché-Case.’

‘The Mystery of the Small Attaché-Case - that’s what I called it - It isn’t missing that I know of.’ ‘Wait, mon ami. ’

The car turned into the mews. At the door of No. 14, Jane Plenderleith was just alighting from a small Austin Seven. She was in golfing clothes.

She looked from one to the other of the two men, then produced a key and opened the door. ‘Come in, won’t you?’

She led the way. Japp followed her into the sitting-room. Poirot remained for a minute or two in the hall, muttering something about:

‘C’est embêtant - how difficult to get out of these sleeves.’

In a moment or two he also entered the sitting-room minus his overcoat but Japp’s lips twitched under his moustache. He had heard the very faint squeak of an opening cupboard door.

Japp threw Poirot an inquiring glance and the other gave a hardly perceptible nod. ‘We won’t detain you, Miss Plenderleith,’ said Japp briskly.

‘Only came to ask if you could tell us the name of Mrs Allen’s solicitor.’

‘Her solicitor?’ The girl shook her head. ‘I don’t even know that she had one.’

‘Well, when she rented this house with you, someone must have drawn up the agreement?’

‘No, I don’t think so. You see, I took the house, the lease is in my name. Barbara paid me half the rent. It was quite informal.’

‘I see. Oh! well, I suppose there’s nothing doing then.’ ‘I’m sorry I can’t help you,’ said Jane politely.

‘It doesn’t really matter very much.’ Japp turned towards the door. ‘Been playing golf?’

‘Yes.’ She flushed. ‘I suppose it seems rather heartless to you. But as a matter of fact it got me down rather, being here in this house. I felt I must go out and do something - tire myself - or I’d choke!’

She spoke with intensity. Poirot said quickly:

‘I comprehend, mademoiselle. It is most understandable - most natural. To sit in this house and think - no, it would not be pleasant.’

‘So long as you understand,’ said Jane shortly. ‘You belong to a club?’

‘Yes, I play at Wentworth.’

‘It has been a pleasant day,’ said Poirot.

‘Alas, there are few leaves left on the trees now! A week ago the woods were magnificent.’ ‘It was quite lovely today.’

‘Good afternoon, Miss Plenderleith,’ said Japp formally. ‘I’ll let you know when there’s anything definite. As a matter of fact we have got a man detained on suspicion.’

‘What man?’

She looked at them eagerly. ‘Major Eustace.’

She nodded and turned away, stooping down to put a match to the fire. ‘Well?’ said Japp as the car turned the corner of the mews.

Poirot grinned.

‘It was quite simple. The key was in the door this time.’ ‘And - ?’

Poirot smiled.

‘Eh, bien, the golf clubs had gone - ’

‘Naturally. The girl isn’t a fool, whatever else she is. Anything else gone ?’ Poirot nodded his head.

‘Yes, my friend - the little attaché-case!’ The accelerator leaped under Japp’s foot.

‘Damnation!’ he said. ‘I knew there was something. But what the devil is it? I searched that case pretty thoroughly.’

‘My poor Japp - but it is - how do you say, “obvious, my dear Watson”?’ Japp threw him an exasperated look.

‘Where are we going?’ he asked. Poirot consulted his watch.

‘It is not yet four o’clock. We could get to Wentworth, I think, before it is dark.’ ‘Do you think she really went there?’

‘I think so - yes. She would know that we might make inquiries. Oh, yes, I think we will find that she has been there.’

Japp grunted.

‘Oh well, come on.’ He threaded his way dexterously through the traffic. ‘Though what this attaché-case business has to do with the crime I can’t imagine. I can’t see that it’s got anything at all to do with it.’

‘Precisely, my friend, I agree with you - it has nothing to do with it.’

‘Then why - No, don’t tell me! Order and method and everything nicely rounded off! Oh, well, it’s a fine day.’

The car was a fast one. They arrived at Wentworth Golf Club a little after half-past four. There was no great congestion there on a week day.

Poirot went straight to the caddie-master and asked for Miss Plenderleith's clubs. She would be playing on a different course tomorrow, he explained.

The caddie-master raised his voice and a boy sorted through some golf clubs standing in a corner. He finally produced a bag bearing the initials, J.P.

'Thank you,' said Poirot. He moved away, then turned carelessly and asked, 'She did not leave with you a small attaché-case also, did she?'

'Not today, sir. May have left it in the clubhouse.'

'She was down here today?' 'Oh, yes, I saw her.'

'Which caddie did she have, do you know? She's mislaid an attaché-case and can't remember where she had it last.'

'She didn't take a caddie. She came in here and bought a couple of balls. Just took out a couple of irons. I rather fancy she had a little case in her hand then.'

Poirot turned away with a word of thanks. The two men walked round the clubhouse. Poirot stood a moment admiring the view.

'It is beautiful, is it not, the dark pine trees - and then the lake. Yes, the lake - ' Japp gave him a quick glance.

'That's the idea, is it?' Poirot smiled.

‘I think it possible that someone may have seen something. I should set the inquiries in motion if I were you.’

Chapter 10

I

Poirot stepped back, his head a little on one side as he surveyed the arrangement of the room. A chair here - another chair there. Yes, that was very nice. And now a ring at the bell - that would be Japp.

The Scotland Yard man came in alertly.

‘Quite right, old cock! Straight from the horse’s mouth. A young woman was seen to throw something into the lake at Wentworth yesterday. Description of her answers to Jane Plenderleith. We managed to fish it up without much difficulty. A lot of reeds just there.’

‘And it was?’

‘It was the attaché-case all right! But why, in heaven’s name? Well, it beats me! Nothing inside it - not even the magazines. Why a presumably sane young woman should want to fling an expensively-fitted dressing-case into a lake - d’you know, I worried all night because I couldn’t get the hang of it.’

‘Mon pauvre Japp! But you need worry no longer. Here is the answer coming. The bell has just rung.’ George, Poirot’s immaculate man-servant, opened the door and announced:

‘Miss Plenderleith.’

The girl came into the room with her usual air of complete self-assurance. She greeted the two men.

‘I asked you to come here - ’ explained Poirot. ‘Sit here, will you not, and you here, Japp - because I have certain news to give you.’

The girl sat down. She looked from one to the other, pushing aside her hat. She took it off and laid it aside impatiently.

‘Well,’ she said. ‘Major Eustace has been arrested.’ ‘You saw that, I expect, in the morning paper?’ ‘Yes.’

‘He is at the moment charged with a minor offence,’ went on Poirot. ‘In the meantime we are gathering evidence in connection with the murder.’

‘It was murder, then?’ The girl asked it eagerly. Poirot nodded his head.

‘Yes,’ he said. ‘It was murder. The wilful destruction of one human being by another human being.’ She shivered a little.

‘Don’t,’ she murmured. ‘It sounds horrible when you say it like that.’ ‘Yes - but it is horrible!’

He paused - then he said:

‘Now, Miss Plenderleith, I am going to tell you just how I arrived at the truth in this matter.’ She looked from Poirot to Japp. The latter was smiling.

‘He has his methods, Miss Plenderleith,’ he said. ‘I humour him, you know. I think we’ll listen to what he has to say.’

Poirot began:

‘As you know, mademoiselle, I arrived with my friend at the scene of the crime on the morning of November the sixth. We went into the room where the body of Mrs Allen had been found and I was struck at once by several significant details. There were things, you see, in that room that were decidedly odd.’

‘Go on,’ said the girl.

‘To begin with,’ said Poirot, ‘there was the smell of cigarette smoke.’

‘I think you’re exaggerating there, Poirot,’ said Japp. ‘I didn’t smell anything.’ Poirot turned on him in a flash.

‘Precisely. You did not smell any stale smoke. No more did I. And that was very, very strange - for the door and the window were both closed and on an ashtray there were the stubs of no fewer than ten cigarettes. It was odd, very odd, that the room should smell - as it did, perfectly fresh.’

‘So that’s what you were getting at!’ Japp sighed. ‘Always have to get at things in such a tortuous way.’

‘Your Sherlock Holmes did the same. He drew attention, remember, to the curious incident of the dog in the night-time - and the answer to that was there was no curious incident. The dog did nothing in the night-time. To proceed:

‘The next thing that attracted my attention was a wrist-watch worn by the dead woman.’ ‘What about it?’

‘Nothing particular about it, but it was worn on the right wrist. Now in my experience it is more usual for a watch to be worn on the left wrist.’

Japp shrugged his shoulders. Before he could speak, Poirot hurried on:

‘But as you say, there is nothing very definite about that. Some people prefer to wear one on the right hand. And now I come to something really interesting - I come, my friends, to the writing-bureau.’

‘Yes, I guessed that,’ said Japp.

‘That was really very odd – very remarkable! For two reasons. The first reason was that something was missing from that writing-table.’

Jane Plenderleith spoke. ‘What was missing?’ Poirot turned to her.

‘A sheet of blotting-paper, mademoiselle. The blotting-book had on top a clean, untouched piece of blotting-paper.’

Jane shrugged her shoulders.

‘Really, M. Poirot. People do occasionally tear off a very much used sheet!’

‘Yes, but what do they do with it? Throw it into the waste-paper basket, do they not? But it was not in the waste-paper basket. I looked.’

Jane Plenderleith seemed impatient.

‘Because it had probably been already thrown away the day before. The sheet was clean because Barbara hadn’t written any letters that day.’

‘That could hardly be the case, mademoiselle. For Mrs Allen was seen going to the post-box that evening. Therefore she must have been writing letters. She could not write downstairs - there were no writing materials. She would be hardly likely to go to your room to write. So, then, what had happened to the sheet of paper on which she had blotted her letters? It is true that people sometimes throw things in the fire instead of the waste-paper basket, but there was only a gas fire in the room. And the fire downstairs had not been alight the previous day, since you told me it was all laid ready when you put a match to it .’

He paused.

‘A curious little problem. I looked everywhere, in the waste-paper baskets, in the dustbin, but I could not find a sheet of used blotting-paper - and that seemed to me very important. It looked as though someone had deliberately taken that sheet of blotting paper away. Why? Because there was writing on it that could easily have been read by holding it up to a mirror.

‘But there was a second curious point about the writing-table. Perhaps, Japp, you remember roughly the arrangement of it? Blotter and inkstand in the centre, pen tray to the left, calendar and quill pen to the right. Eh bien? You do not see? The quill pen, remember, I examined, it was for show only - it had not been used. Ah! still you do not see? I will say it again. Blotter in the centre, pen tray to the left - to the left, Japp. But is it not usual to find a pen trayon the right, convenient to the right hand?

‘Ah, now it comes to you, does it not? The pen tray on the left - the wrist-watch on the right wrist - the blotting-paper removed - and something else brought into the room - the ashtray with the cigarette ends!

‘That room was fresh and pure smelling, Japp, a room in which the window had been open, not closed all night... And I made myself a picture.’

He spun round and faced Jane.

‘A picture of you, mademoiselle, driving up in your taxi, paying it off, running up the stairs, calling perhaps, “Barbara” - and you open the door and you find your friend there lying dead with the pistol clasped in her hand - the left hand, naturally, since she is left-handed and therefore, too, the bullet has entered on the left side of the head. There is a note there addressed to you. It tells you what it is that has driven her to take her own life. It was, I fancy, a very moving letter… A young, gentle, unhappy woman driven by blackmail to take her life…

‘I think that, almost at once, the idea flashed into your head. This was a certain man’s doing. Let him be punished - fully and adequately punished! You take the pistol, wipe it and place it in the right hand. You take the note and you tear off the top sheet of the blotting-paper on which the note has been blotted. You go down, light the fire and put them both on the flames. Then you carry up the ashtray - to further the illusion that two people sat there talking - and you also take up a fragment of enamel cuff link that is on the floor. That is a lucky find and you expect it to clinch matters. Then you close the window and lock the door. There must be no suspicion that you have tampered with the room. The police must see it exactly as it is - so you do not seek help in the mews but ring up the police straightaway.

‘And so it goes on. You play your chosen rôle with judgment and coolness. You refuse at first to say anything but cleverly you suggest doubts of suicide. Later you are quite ready to set us on the trail of Major Eustace…

‘Yes, mademoiselle, it was clever - a very clever murder - for that is what it is. The attempted murder of Major Eustace.’

Jane Plenderleith sprang to her feet.

‘It wasn’t murder - it was justice. That man hounded poor Barbara to her death! She was so sweet and helpless. You see, poor kid, she got involved with a man in India when she first went out. She was only seventeen and he was a married man years older than her. Then she had a baby. She could have put it in a home but she wouldn’t hear of that. She went off to some out of the way spot and came back calling herself Mrs Allen. Later the child died. She came back here and she fell in love with Charles - that pompous, stuffed owl; she adored him - and he took her adoration very complacently. If he had been a different kind of man I’d have advised her to tell him everything. But as it was, I urged her to hold her tongue. After all, nobody knew anything about that business except me.

‘And then that devil Eustace turned up! You know the rest. He began to bleed her systematically, but it wasn’t till that last evening that she realised that she was exposing Charles too, to the risk of scandal. Once married to Charles, Eustace had got her where he wanted her - married to a rich man with a horror of any scandal! When Eustace had gone with the money she had got for him she sat thinking it over. Then she came up and wrote a letter to me. She said she loved Charles and couldn’t live without him, but that for his own sake she mustn’t marry him. She was taking the best way out, she said.’

Jane flung her head back.

‘Do you wonder I did what I did? And you stand there calling it murder!’

‘Because it is murder,’ Poirot’s voice was stern. ‘Murder can sometimes seem justified, but it is murder all the same. You are truthful and clear-minded - face the truth, mademoiselle! Your friend died, in the last resort, because she had not the courage to live. We may sympathize with her. We may pity her. But the fact remains - the act was hers - not another.’

He paused.

‘And you? That man is now in prison, he will serve a long sentence for other matters. Do you really wish, of your own volition, to destroy the life – the life, mind – of any human being?’

She stared at him. Her eyes darkened. Suddenly she muttered: ‘No. You’re right. I don’t.’

Then, turning on her heel, she went swiftly from the room. The outer door banged…

II

Japp gave a long - a very prolonged - whistle. ‘Well, I’m damned!’ he said.

Poirot sat down and smiled at him amiably. It was quite a long time before the silence was broken. Then Japp said:

‘Not murder disguised as suicide, but suicide made to look like murder!’

‘Yes, and very cleverly done, too. Nothing overemphasized.’ Japp said suddenly:

‘But the attaché-case? Where did that come in?’

‘But, my dear, my very dear friend, I have already told you that it did not come in .’ ‘Then why - ’

‘The golf clubs. The golf clubs, Japp. They were the golf clubs of a left-handed person. Jane Plenderleith kept her clubs at Wentworth. Those were Barbara Allen’s clubs. No wonder the girl got, as you say, the wind up when we opened that cupboard. Her whole plan might have been ruined. But she is quick, she realized that she had, for one short moment, given herself away. She saw that we saw. So she does the best thing she can think of on the spur of the moment. She tries to focus our attention on the wrong object. She says of the attaché-case “That’s mine. I - it came back with me this morning. So there can’t be anything there.” And, as she hoped, away you go on the false trail. For the same reason, when she sets out the following day to get rid of the golf clubs, she continues to use the attaché-case as a - what is it - kippered herring?’

‘Red herring. Do you mean that her real object was - ?’

‘Consider, my friend. Where is the best place to get rid of a bag of golf clubs? One cannot burn them or put them in a dustbin. If one

leaves them somewhere they may be returned to you. Miss Plenderleith took them to a golf course. She leaves them in the clubhouse while she gets a couple of irons from her own bag, and then she goes round without a caddy. Doubtless at judicious intervals she breaks a club in half and throws it into some deep undergrowth, and ends by throwing the empty bag away. If anyone should find a broken golf club here and there it will not create surprise. People have been known to break and throw away all their clubs in a mood of intense exasperation over the game! It is, in fact, that kind of game!

'But since she realizes that her actions may still be a matter of interest, she throws that useful red herring - the attaché-case - in a somewhat spectacular manner into the lake - and that, my friend, is the truth of "The Mystery of the Attaché-Case."'

Japp looked at his friend for some moments in silence. Then he rose, clapped him on the shoulder, and burst out laughing.

'Not so bad for an old dog! Upon my word, you take the cake! Come out and have a spot of lunch?'

'With pleasure, my friend, but we will not have the cake. Indeed, an Omelette aux Champignons, Blanquette de Veau, Petits pois à la Francaise, and - to follow - a Baba au Rhum.'

'Lead me to it,' said Japp.

The Incredible Theft

Chapter 1

As the butler handed round the soufflé, Lord Mayfield leaned confidentially towards his neighbour on the right, Lady Julia Carrington. Known as a perfect host, Lord Mayfield took trouble to live up to his reputation. Although unmarried, he was always charming to women.

Lady Julia Carrington was a woman of forty, tall, dark and vivacious. She was very thin, but still beautiful. Her hands and feet in particular were exquisite. Her manner was abrupt and restless, that of a woman who lived on her nerves.

About opposite to her at the round table sat her husband, Air Marshal Sir George Carrington. His career had begun in the Navy, and he still retained the bluff breeziness of the ex-Naval man. He was laughing and chaffing the beautiful Mrs Vanderlyn, who was sitting on the other side of her host.

Mrs Vanderlyn was an extremely good-looking blonde. Her voice held a soupçon of American accent, just enough to be pleasant without undue exaggeration.

On the other side of Sir George Carrington sat Mrs Macatta, M.P. Mrs Macatta was a great authority on Housing and Infant Welfare. She barked out short sentences rather than spoke them, and was

generally of somewhat alarming aspect. It was perhaps natural that the Air Marshal would find his right hand neighbour the pleasanter to talk to.

Mrs Macatta, who always talked shop wherever she was, barked out short spates of information on her special subjects to her left-hand neighbour, young Reggie Carrington.

Reggie Carrington was twenty-one, and completely uninterested in Housing, Infant Welfare, and indeed any political subject. He said at intervals, 'How frightful!' and 'I absolutely agree with you,' and his mind was clearly elsewhere. Mr Carlile, Lord Mayfield's private secretary, sat between young Reggie and his mother. A pale young man with pince-nez and an air of intelligent reserve, he talked little, but was always ready to fling himself into any conversational breach. Noticing that Reggie Carrington was struggling with a yawn, he leaned forward and adroitly asked Mrs Macatta a question about her 'Fitness for Children' scheme.

Round the table, moving silently in the subdued amber light, a butler and two footmen offered dishes and filled up wine-glasses. Lord Mayfield paid a very high salary to his chef, and was noted as a connoisseur of wines.

The table was a round one, but there was no mistaking who was the host. Where Lord Mayfield sat was so very decidedly the head of the table. A big man, square-shouldered, with thick silvery hair, a big straight nose and a slightly prominent chin. It was a face that lent itself easily to caricature. As Sir Charles McLaughlin, Lord Mayfield had combined a political career with being the head of a big

engineering firm. He was himself a first-class engineer. His peerage had come a year ago, and at the same time he had been created first Minister of Armaments, a new ministry which had only just come into being.

The dessert had been placed on the table. The port had circulated once. Catching Mrs Vanderlyn's eye, Lady Julia rose. The three women left the room.

The port passed once more, and Lord Mayfield referred lightly to pheasants. The conversation for five minutes or so was sporting. Then Sir George said:

'Expect you'd like to join the others in the drawing-room, Reggie, my boy. Lord Mayfield won't mind.' The boy took the hint easily enough.

'Thanks, Lord Mayfield, I think I will.' Mr Carlile murmured:

'If you'll excuse me, Lord Mayfield - certain memoranda and other work to get through…'

Lord Mayfield nodded. The two young men left the room. The servants had retired some time before. The Minister for Armaments and the head of the Air Force were alone.

After a minute or two, Carrington said: 'Well - O.K.?'

'Absolutely! There's nothing to touch this new bomber in any country in Europe.' 'Make rings round 'em, eh? That's what I thought.'

‘Supremacy of the air,’ said Lord Mayfield decisively. Sir George Carrington gave a deep sigh.

‘About time! You know, Charles, we’ve been through a ticklish spell. Lots of gunpowder everywhere all over Europe. And we weren’t ready, damn it! We’ve had a narrow squeak. And we’re not out of the wood yet, however much we hurry on construction.’

Lord Mayfield murmured:

‘Nevertheless, George, there are some advantages in starting late. A lot of the European stuff is out of date already - and they’re perilously near bankruptcy.’

‘I don’t believe that means anything,’ said Sir George gloomily. ‘One’s always hearing this nation and that is bankrupt! But they carry on just the same. You know, finance is an absolute mystery to me.’

Lord Mayfield’s eyes twinkled a little. Sir George Carrington was always so very much the old fashioned ‘bluff, honest old sea dog’. There were people who said that it was a pose he deliberately adopted.

Changing the subject, Carrington said in a slightly over-casual manner: ‘Attractive woman, Mrs Vanderlyn - eh?’

Lord Mayfield said:

‘Are you wondering what she’s doing here?’ His eyes were amused.

Carrington looked a little confused. ‘Not at all - not at all.’

‘Oh, yes, you were! Don’t be an old humbug, George. You were wondering, in a slightly dismayed fashion, whether I was the latest victim!’

Carrington said slowly:

‘I’ll admit that it did seem a trifle odd to me that she should be here - well, this particular weekend.’ Lord Mayfield nodded.

‘Where the carcass is, there are the vultures gathered together. We’ve got a very definite carcass, and Mrs Vanderlyn might be described as Vulture No. 1.’

The Air Marshal said abruptly:

‘Know anything about this Vanderlyn woman?’

Lord Mayfield clipped off the end of a cigar, lit it with precision and, throwing his head back, dropped out his words with careful deliberation.

‘What do I know about Mrs Vanderlyn? I know that she’s an American subject. I know that she’s had three husbands, one Italian, one German and one Russian, and that in consequence she has made useful what I think are called “contacts” in three countries. I know that she manages to buy very expensive clothes and live in a

very luxurious manner, and that there is some slight uncertainty as to where the income comes from which permits her to do so.'

With a grin, Sir George Carrington murmured: 'Your spies have not been inactive, Charles, I see.'

'I know,' Lord Mayfield continued, 'that in addition to having a seductive type of beauty, Mrs Vanderlyn is also a very good listener, and that she can display a fascinating interest in what we call "shop". That is to say, a man can tell her all about his job and feel that he is being intensely interesting to the lady! Sundry young officers have gone a little too far in their zeal to be interesting, and their careers have suffered in consequence. They have told Mrs Vanderlyn a little more than they should have done. Nearly all the lady's friends are in the Services - but last winter she was hunting in a certain county near one of our largest armament firms, and she formed various friendships not at all sporting in character. To put it briefly, Mrs Vanderlyn is a very useful person to...' He described a circle in the air with his cigar. 'Perhaps we had better not say to whom! We will just say to a European power - and perhaps to more than one European power.'

Carrington drew a deep breath.

'You take a great load off my mind, Charles.'

'You thought I had fallen for the siren? My dear George! Mrs Vanderlyn is just a little too obvious in her methods for a wary old bird like me. Besides, she is, as they say, not quite so young as she once was. Your young squadron leaders wouldn't notice that. But I

am fifty-six, my boy. In another four years I shall probably be a nasty old man continually haunting the society of unwilling debutantes.'

'I was a fool,' said Carrington apologetically, 'but it seemed a bit odd - '

'It seemed to you odd that she should be here, in a somewhat intimate family party just at the moment when you and I were to hold an unofficial conference over a discovery that will probably revolutionize the whole problem of air defence?'

Sir George Carrington nodded. Lord Mayfield said, smiling: 'That's exactly it. That's the bait.' 'The bait?'

'You see, George, to use the language of the movies, we've nothing actually "on" the woman. And we want something! She's got away with rather more than she should in the past. But she's been careful - damnably careful. We know what she's been up to, but we've got no definite proof of it. We've got to tempt her with something big.'

'Something big being the specification of the new bomber?'

'Exactly. It's got to be something big enough to induce her to take a risk - to come out into the open. And then - we've got her!'

Sir George grunted.

'Oh, well,' he said. 'I dare say it's all right. But suppose she won't take the risk?' 'That would be a pity,' said Lord Mayfield. Then he added: 'But I think she will...' He rose.

‘Shall we join the ladies in the drawing-room? We mustn’t deprive your wife of her bridge.’ Sir George grunted:

‘Julia’s a damned sight too fond of her bridge. Drops a packet over it. She can’t afford to play as high as she does, and I’ve told her so. The trouble is, Julia’s a born gambler.’

Coming round the table to join his host, he said: ‘Well, I hope your plan comes off, Charles.’

Chapter 2

In the drawing-room conversation had flagged more than once. Mrs Vanderlyn was usually at a disadvantage when left alone with members of her own sex. That charming sympathetic manner of hers, so much appreciated by members of the male sex, did not for some reason or other commend itself to women. Lady Julia was a woman whose manners were either very good or very bad. On this occasion she disliked Mrs Vanderlyn, and was bored by Mrs Macatta, and made no secret of her feelings. Conversation languished, and might have ceased altogether but for the latter.

Mrs Macatta was a woman of great earnestness of purpose. Mrs Vanderlyn she dismissed immediately as a useless and parasitic type. Lady Julia she tried to interest in a forthcoming charity entertainment which she was organizing. Lady Julia answered

vaguely, stifled a yawn or two and retired into her own inner preoccupation. Why didn't Charles and George come? How tiresome men were. Her comments became even more perfunctory as she became absorbed in her own thoughts and worries.

The three women were sitting in silence when the men finally entered the room. Lord Mayfield thought to himself:

'Julia looks ill tonight. What a mass of nerves the woman is.' Aloud he said:

'What about a rubber - eh?'

Lady Julia brightened at once. Bridge was as the breath of life to her.

Reggie Carrington entered the room at that minute, and a four was arranged. Lady Julia, Mrs Vanderlyn, Sir George and young Reggie sat down to the card-table. Lord Mayfield devoted himself to the task of entertaining Mrs Macatta.

When two rubbers had been played, Sir George looked ostentatiously at the clock on the mantelpiece. 'Hardly worth while beginning another,' he remarked.

His wife looked annoyed.

'It's only a quarter to eleven. A short one.'

‘They never are, my dear,’ said Sir George good-temperedly. ‘Anyway, Charles and I have some work to do.’

Mrs Vanderlyn murmured:

‘How important that sounds! I suppose you clever men who are at the top of things never get a real rest.’

‘No forty-eight hour week for us,’ said Sir George. Mrs Vanderlyn murmured:

‘You know, I feel rather ashamed of myself as a raw American, but I do get so thrilled at meeting people who control the destinies of a country. I expect that seems a very crude point of view to you, Sir George.’

‘My dear Mrs Vanderlyn, I should never think of you as “crude” or “raw.”’

He smiled into her eyes. There was, perhaps, a hint of irony in the voice which she did not miss. Adroitly she turned to Reggie, smiling sweetly into his eyes.

‘I’m sorry we’re not continuing our partnership. That was a frightfully clever four no-trump call of yours.’

Flushed and pleased, Reggie mumbled: ‘Bit of a fluke that it came off.’

‘Oh, no, it was really a clever bit of deduction on your part. You’d deduced from the bidding exactly where the cards must be, and you played accordingly. I thought it was brilliant.’

Lady Julia rose abruptly.

‘The woman lays it on with a palette-knife,’ she thought disgustedly.

Then her eyes softened as they rested on her son. He believed it all. How pathetically young and pleased he looked. How incredibly naive he was. No wonder he got into scrapes. He was too trusting. The truth of it was he had too sweet a nature. George didn’t understand him in the least. Men were so unsympathetic in their judgments. They forgot that they had ever been young themselves. George was much too harsh with Reggie.

Mrs Macatta had risen. Goodnights were said.

The three women went out of the room. Lord Mayfield helped himself to a drink after giving one to Sir George, then he looked up as Mr Carlile appeared at the door.

‘Get out the files and all the papers, will you, Carlile? Including the plans and the prints. The Air Marshal and I will be along shortly. We’ll just take a turn outside first, eh, George? It’s stopped raining.’

Mr Carlile, turning to depart, murmured an apology as he almost collided with Mrs Vanderlyn. She drifted towards them, murmuring:

‘My book, I was reading it before dinner.’ Reggie sprang forward and held up a book. ‘Is this it? On the sofa?’

‘Oh, yes. Thank you so much.’

She smiled sweetly, said goodnight again and went out of the room. Sir George had opened one of the french windows.

‘Beautiful night now,’ he announced. ‘Good idea of yours to take a turn.’ Reggie said:

‘Well, goodnight, sir. I’ll be toddling off to bed.’

‘Goodnight, my boy,’ said Lord Mayfield.

Reggie picked up a detective story which he had begun earlier in the evening and left the room. Lord Mayfield and Sir George stepped out upon the terrace.

It was a beautiful night, with a clear sky studded with stars. Sir George drew a deep breath.

‘Phew, that woman uses a lot of scent,’ he remarked. Lord Mayfield laughed.

‘Anyway, it’s not cheap scent. One of the most expensive brands on the market, I should say.’ Sir George gave a grimace.

‘I suppose one should be thankful for that.’

‘You should, indeed. I think a woman smothered in cheap scent is one of the greatest abominations known to mankind.’

Sir George glanced up at the sky.

‘Extraordinary the way it’s cleared. I heard the rain beating down when we were at dinner.’ The two men strolled gently along the terrace.

The terrace ran the whole length of the house. Below it the ground sloped gently away, permitting a magnificent view over the Sussex weald.

Sir George lit a cigar.

‘About this metal alloy - ’ he began. The talk became technical.

As they approached the far end of the terrace for the fifth time, Lord Mayfield said with a sigh: ‘Oh, well, I suppose we’d better get down to it.’

‘Yes, good bit of work to get through.’

The two men turned, and Lord Mayfield uttered a surprised ejaculation. ‘Hallo! See that?’

‘See what?’ asked Sir George.

‘Thought I saw someone slip across the terrace from my study window.’

‘Nonsense, old boy. I didn’t see anything.’ ‘Well, I did - or I thought I did.’

‘Your eyes are playing tricks on you. I was looking straight down the terrace, and I’d have seen anything there was to be seen. There’s precious little I don’t see - even if I do have to hold a newspaper at arm’s length.’

Lord Mayfield chuckled.

‘I can put one over on you there, George. I read easily without glasses.’

‘But you can’t always distinguish the fellow on the other side of the House. Or is that eyeglass of yours sheer intimidation?’

Laughing, the two men entered Lord Mayfield’s study, the french window of which was open. Mr Carlile was busy arranging some papers in a file by the safe.

He looked up as they entered. ‘Ha, Carlile, everything ready?’

‘Yes, Lord Mayfield, all the papers are on your desk.’

The desk in question was a big important-looking writing-table of mahogany set across a corner by the window. Lord Mayfield went over to it, and began sorting through the various documents laid out.

‘Lovely night now,’ said Sir George. Mr Carlile agreed.

‘Yes, indeed. Remarkable the way it’s cleared up after the rain.’ Putting away his file, Mr Carlile asked:

‘Will you want me any more tonight, Lord Mayfield?’

‘No, I don’t think so, Carlile. I’ll put all these away myself. We shall probably be late. You’d better turn in.’

‘Thank you. Goodnight, Lord Mayfield. Goodnight, Sir George.’ ‘Goodnight, Carlile.’

As the secretary was about to leave the room, Lord Mayfield said sharply: ‘Just a minute, Carlile. You’ve forgotten the most important of the lot.’

‘I beg your pardon, Lord Mayfield.’

‘The actual plans of the bomber, man.’ The secretary stared.

‘They’re right on the top, sir.’ ‘They’re nothing of the sort.’ ‘But I’ve just put them there.’ ‘Look for yourself, man.’

With a bewildered expression, the young man came forward and joined Lord Mayfield at the desk.

Somewhat impatiently the Minister indicated the pile of papers. Carlile sorted through them, his expression of bewilderment growing.

‘You see, they’re not there.’ The secretary stammered:

‘But - but it’s incredible. I laid them there not three minutes ago.’ Lord Mayfield said good-humouredly:

‘You must have made a mistake, they must be still in the safe.’ ‘I don’t see how - I know I put them there!’

Lord Mayfield brushed past him to the open safe. Sir George joined them. A very few minutes sufficed to show that the plans of the bomber were not there.

Dazed and unbelieving, the three men returned to the desk and once more turned over the papers. ‘My God!’ said Mayfield. ‘They’re gone!’

Mr Carlile cried: ‘But it’s impossible!’

‘Who’s been in this room?’ snapped out the Minister. ‘No one. No one at all.’

‘Look here, Carlile, those plans haven’t vanished into thin air. Someone has taken them. Has Mrs Vanderlyn been in here?’

‘Mrs Vanderlyn? Oh, no, sir.’

‘I’ll back that,’ said Carrington. He sniffed the air! ‘You’d soon smell if she had. That scent of hers.’

‘Nobody has been in here,’ insisted Carlile. ‘I can’t understand it.’

‘Look here, Carlile,’ said Lord Mayfield. ‘Pull yourself together. We’ve got to get to the bottom of this. You’re absolutely sure the plans were in the safe?’

‘Absolutely.’

‘You actually saw them? You didn’t just assume they were among the others?’ ‘No, no, Lord Mayfield. I saw them. I put them on top of the others on the desk.’

‘And since then, you say, nobody has been in the room. Have you been out of the room?’ ‘No - at least - yes.’

‘Ah!’ cried Sir George. ‘Now we’re getting at it!’ Lord Mayfield said sharply:

‘What on earth - ’ when Carlile interrupted.

‘In the normal course of events, Lord Mayfield, I should not, of course, have dreamt of leaving the room. when important papers were lying about, but hearing a woman scream - ’

‘A woman scream?’ ejaculated Lord Mayfield in a surprised voice.

‘Yes, Lord Mayfield. It startled me more than I can say. I was just laying the papers on the desk when I heard it, and naturally I ran out into the hall.’

‘Who screamed?’

‘Mrs Vanderlyn’s French maid. She was standing half-way up the stairs, looking very white and upset and shaking all over. She said she had seen a ghost.’

‘Seen a ghost?’

‘Yes, a tall woman dressed all in white who moved without a sound and floated in the air.’ ‘What a ridiculous story!’

‘Yes, Lord Mayfield, that is what I told her. I must say she seemed rather ashamed of herself. She went off upstairs and I came back in here.’

‘How long ago was this?’

‘Just a minute or two before you and Sir George came in.’ ‘And you were out of the room - how long?’

The secretary considered.

‘Two minutes - at the most three.’

‘Long enough,’ groaned Lord Mayfield. Suddenly he clutched his friend’s arm.

‘George, that shadow I saw - slinking away from this window. That was it! As soon as Carlile left the room, he nipped in, seized the plans and made off.’

‘Dirty work,’ said Sir George. Then he seized his friend by the arm.

‘Look here, Charles, this is the devil of a business. What the hell are we going to do about it?’

Chapter 3

‘At any rate give it a trial, Charles.’

It was half an hour later. The two men were in Lord Mayfield’s study, and Sir George had been expending a considerable amount of persuasion to induce his friend to adopt a certain course.

Lord Mayfield, at first most unwilling, was gradually becoming less averse to the idea. Sir George went on:

‘Don’t be so damned pig-headed, Charles.’ Lord Mayfield said slowly:

‘Why drag in a wretched foreigner we know nothing about?’ ‘But I happen to know a lot about him. The man’s a marvel.’ ‘Humph.’

‘Look here, Charles. It’s a chance! Discretion is the essence of this business. If it leaks out - ’ ‘When it leaks out is what you mean!’

‘Not necessarily. This man, Hercule Poirot - ’

‘Will come down here and produce the plans like a conjurer taking rabbits out of his hat, I suppose?’

‘He’ll get at the truth. And the truth is what we want. Look here, Charles, I take all responsibility on myself.’

Lord Mayfield said slowly:

‘Oh, well, have it your own way, but I don’t see what the fellow can do…’

Sir George picked up the phone.

‘I’m going to get through to him - now.’ ‘He’ll be in bed.’

‘He can get up. Dash it all, Charles, you can’t let that woman get away with it.’ ‘Mrs Vanderlyn, you mean?’

‘Yes. You don’t doubt, do you, that she’s at the bottom of this?’

‘No, I don’t. She’s turned the tables on me with a vengeance. I don’t like admitting, George, that a woman’s been too clever for us. It goes against the grain. But it’s true. We shan’t be able to prove anything against her, and yet we both know that she’s been the prime mover in the affair.’

‘Women are the devil,’ said Carrington with feeling.

‘Nothing to connect her with it, damn it all! We may believe that she put the girl up to that screaming trick, and that the man lurking outside was her accomplice, but the devil of it is we can’t prove it.’

‘Perhaps Hercule Poirot can.’ Suddenly Lord Mayfield laughed.

‘By the Lord, George, I thought you were too much of an old John Bull to put your trust in a Frenchman, however clever.’

‘He’s not even a Frenchman, he’s a Belgian,’ said Sir George in a rather shamefaced manner.

‘Well, have your Belgian down. Let him try his wits on this business. I’ll bet he can’t make more of it than we can.’

Without replying, Sir George stretched a hand to the telephone.

Chapter 4

Blinking a little, Hercule Poirot turned his head from one man to the other. Very delicately he smothered a yawn.

It was half-past two in the morning. He had been roused from sleep and rushed down through the darkness in a big Rolls Royce. Now he had just finished hearing what the two men had to tell him.

‘Those are the facts, M. Poirot,’ said Lord Mayfield.

He leaned back in his chair, and slowly fixed his monocle in one eye. Through it a shrewd, pale-blue eye watched Poirot attentively. Besides being shrewd the eye was definitely sceptical. Poirot cast a swift glance at Sir George Carrington.

That gentleman was leaning forward with an expression of almost childlike hopefulness on his face.

Poirot said slowly:

'I have the facts, yes. The maid screams, the secretary goes out, the nameless watcher comes in, the plans are there on top of the desk, he snatches them up and goes. The facts - they are all very convenient.'

Something in the way he uttered the last phrase seemed to attract Lord Mayfield's attention. He sat up a little straighter, his monocle dropped. It was as though a new alertness came to him.

'I beg your pardon, M. Poirot?'

'I said, Lord Mayfield, that the facts were all very convenient - for the thief. By the way, you are sure it was a man you saw?'

Lord Mayfield shook his head.

'That I couldn't say. It was just a - shadow. In fact, I was almost doubtful if I had seen anyone.' Poirot transferred his gaze to the Air Marshal.

‘And you, Sir George? Could you say if it was a man or a woman?’ ‘I didn’t see anyone myself.’

Poirot nodded thoughtfully. Then he skipped suddenly to his feet and went over to the writing-table.

‘I can assure you that the plans are not there,’ said Lord Mayfield. ‘We have all three been through those papers half a dozen times.’

‘All three? You mean, your secretary also?’ ‘Yes, Carlile.’

Poirot turned suddenly.

‘Tell me, Lord Mayfield, which paper was on top when you went over to the desk?’ Mayfield frowned a little in the effort of remembrance.

‘Let me see - yes, it was a rough memorandum of some sort of our air defence positions.’ Deftly, Poirot nipped out a paper and brought it over.

‘Is this the one, Lord Mayfield?’

Lord Mayfield took it and glanced over it. ‘Yes, that’s the one.’

Poirot took it over to Carrington.

‘Did you notice this paper on the desk?’

Sir George took it, held it away from him, then slipped on his pince-nez.

'Yes, that's right. I looked through them too, with Carlile and Mayfield. This was on top.'

Poirot nodded thoughtfully. He replaced the paper on the desk. Mayfield looked at him in a slightly puzzled manner.

'If there are any other questions - ' he began.

'But yes, certainly there is a question. Carlile. Carlile is the question!' Lord Mayfield's colour rose a little.

'Carlile, M. Poirot, is quite above suspicion! He has been my confidential secretary for nine years. He has access to all my private papers, and I may point out to you that he could have made a copy of the plans and a tracing of the specifications quite easily without anyone being the wiser.'

'I appreciate your point,' said Poirot. 'If he had been guilty there would be no need for him to stage a clumsy robbery.'

'In any case,' said Lord Mayfield, 'I am sure of Carlile. I will guarantee him.' 'Carlile,' said Carrington gruffly, 'is all right.'

Poirot spread out his hands gracefully.

'And this Mrs Vanderlyn - she is all wrong?' 'She's a wrong 'un all right,' said Sir George. Lord Mayfield said in more measured tones:

‘I think, M. Poirot, that there can be no doubt of Mrs Vanderlyn’s - well - activities. The Foreign Office can give you more precious data as to that.’

‘And the maid, you take it, is in with her mistress?’ ‘Not a doubt of it,’ said Sir George.

‘It seems to me a plausible assumption,’ said Lord Mayfield more cautiously.

There was a pause. Poirot sighed, and absent-mindedly rearranged one or two articles on a table at his right hand. Then he said:

‘I take it that these papers represented money? That is, the stolen papers would be definitely worth a large sum in cash.’

‘If presented in a certain quarter - yes.’

‘Such as?’

Sir George mentioned the names of two European powers. Poirot nodded.

‘That fact would be known to anyone, I take it?’ ‘Mrs Vanderlyn would know it all right.’

‘I said to anyone?’ ‘I suppose so, yes.’

‘Anyone with a minimum of intelligence would appreciate the cash value of the plans?’ ‘Yes, but M. Poirot - ’ Lord Mayfield was looking rather uncomfortable.

Poirot held up a hand.

‘I do what you call explore all the avenues.’

Suddenly he rose again, stepped nimbly out of the window and with a flashlight examined the edge of the grass at the farther side of the terrace.

The two men watched him.

He came in again, sat down and said:

‘Tell me, Lord Mayfield, this malefactor, this skulker in the shadows, you do not have him pursued?’ Lord Mayfield shrugged his shoulders.

‘At the bottom of the garden he could make his way out to a main road. If he had a car waiting there, he would soon be out of reach - ’

‘But there are the police - the A.A. scouts - ’ Sir George interrupted.

‘You forget, M. Poirot. We cannot risk publicity. If it were to get out that these plans had been stolen, the result would be extremely unfavourable to the Party.’

‘Ah, yes,’ said Poirot. ‘One must remember La Politique. The great discretion must be observed. You send instead for me. Ah well, perhaps it is simpler.’

‘You are hopeful of success, M. Poirot?’ Lord Mayfield sounded a trifle incredulous. The little man shrugged his shoulders.

‘Why not? One has only to reason - to reflect.’ He paused a moment and then said:

‘I would like now to speak to Mr Carlile.’

‘Certainly.’ Lord Mayfield rose. ‘I asked him to wait up. He will be somewhere at hand.’ He went out of the room.

Poirot looked at Sir George.

‘Eh bien,’ he said. ‘What about this man on the terrace?’

‘My dear M. Poirot. Don’t ask me! I didn’t see him, and I can’t describe him.’ Poirot leaned forward.

‘So you have already said. But it is a little different from that is it not?’ ‘What d’you mean?’ asked Sir George abruptly.

‘How shall I say it? Your disbelief, it is more profound.’ Sir George started to speak, then stopped.

‘But yes,’ said Poirot encouragingly. ‘Tell me. You are both at the end of the terrace. Lord Mayfield sees a shadow slip from the window and across the grass. Why do you not see that shadow?’

Carrington stared at him.

‘You’ve hit it, M. Poirot. I’ve been worrying about that ever since. You see, I’d swear that no one did leave this window. I thought Mayfield had imagined it - branch of a tree waving - something of that kind. And then when we came in here and found there had been a robbery, it seemed as though Mayfield must have been right and I’d been wrong. And yet - ’

Poirot smiled.

‘And yet you still in your heart of hearts believe in the evidence (the negative evidence) of your own eyes?’

‘You’re right, M. Poirot, I do.’ Poirot gave a sudden smile. ‘How wise you are.’

Sir George said sharply:

‘There were no footprints on the grass edge?’

Poirot nodded.

‘Exactly. Lord Mayfield, he fancies he sees a shadow. Then there comes the robbery and he is sure - but sure! It is no longer a fancy - he actually saw the man. But that is not so. Me, I do not concern

myself much with footprints and such things but for what it is worth we have that negative evidence. There were no footprints on the grass. It had rained heavily this evening. If a man had crossed the terrace to the grass this evening his footprints would have shown.'

Sir George said, staring: 'But then - but then - '

'It brings us back to the house. To the people in the house.'

He broke off as the door opened and Lord Mayfield entered with Mr Carlile.

Though still looking very pale and worried, the secretary had regained a certain composure of manner. Adjusting his pincenez he sat down and looked at Poirot inquiringly.

'How long had you been in this room when you heard the scream, monsieur?' Carlile considered.

'Between five and ten minutes, I should say.'

'And before that there had been no disturbance of any kind?' 'No.'

'I understand that the house-party had been in one room for the greater part of the evening.' 'Yes, the drawing-room.'

Poirot consulted his notebook.

'Sir George Carrington and his wife. Mrs Macatta. Mrs Vanderlyn. Mr Reggie Carrington. Lord Mayfield and yourself. Is that right?'

‘I myself was not in the drawing-room. I was working here the greater part of the evening.’ Poirot turned to Lord Mayfield.

‘Who went up to bed first?’

‘Lady Julia Carrington, I think. As a matter of fact, the three ladies went out together.’ ‘And then?’

‘Mr Carlile came in and I told him to get out the papers as Sir George and I would be along in a minute.’ ‘It was then that you decided to take a turn on the terrace?’

‘It was.’

‘Was anything said in Mrs Vanderlyn’s hearing as to your working in the study?’ ‘The matter was mentioned, yes.’

‘But she was not in the room when you instructed Mr Carlile to get out the papers?’ ‘No.’

‘Excuse me, Lord Mayfield,’ said Carlile. ‘Just after you had said that, I collided with her in the doorway. She had come back for a book.’

‘So you think she might have overheard?’ ‘I think it quite possible, yes.’

‘She came back for a book,’ mused Poirot. ‘Did you find her her book, Lord Mayfield?’ ‘Yes, Reggie gave it to her.’

‘Ah, yes, it is what you call the old gasp - no, pardon, the old wheeze - that - to come back for a book. It is often useful!’

‘You think it was deliberate?’ Poirot shrugged his shoulders.

‘And after that, you two gentlemen go out on the terrace. And Mrs Vanderlyn?’ ‘She went off with her book.’

‘And the young M. Reggie. He went to bed also?’ ‘Yes.’

‘And Mr Carlile he comes here and sometime between five and ten minutes later he heard a scream. Continue, M. Carlile. You heard a scream and you went out into the hall. Ah, perhaps it would be simplest if you reproduced exactly your actions.’

Mr Carlile got up a little awkwardly.

‘Here I scream,’ said Poirot helpfully. He opened his mouth and emitted a shrill bleat. Lord Mayfield turned his head away to hide a smile and Mr Carlile looked extremely uncomfortable.

‘Allez! Forward! March!’ cried Poirot. ‘It is your cue that I give you there.’

Mr Carlile walked stiffly to the door, opened it and went out. Poirot followed him. The other two came behind.

‘The door, did you close it after you or leave it open?’

‘I can’t really remember. I think I must have left it open.’ ‘No matter. Proceed.’

Still with extreme stiffness, Mr Carlile walked to the bottom of the staircase and stood there looking up. Poirot said:

‘The maid, you say, was on the stairs. Whereabouts?’ ‘About half-way up.’

‘And she was looking upset.’ ‘Definitely so.’

‘Eh bien, me, I am the maid.’ Poirot ran nimbly up the stairs. ‘About here?’ ‘A step or two higher.’

‘Like this?’

Poirot struck an attitude. ‘Well - er - not quite like that.’ ‘How then?’

‘Well, she had her hands to her head.’

‘Ah, her hands to her head. That is very interesting. Like this?’ Poirot raised his arms, his hands rested on his head just above each ear.

‘Yes that’s it.’

‘Aha! And tell me, M. Carlile, she was a pretty girl - yes?’ ‘Really, I didn’t notice.’

Carlile’s voice was repressive.

‘Aha, you did not notice? But you are a young man. Does not a young man notice when a girl is pretty?’ ‘Really, M. Poirot, I can only repeat that I did not do so.’

Carlile cast an agonized glance at his employer. Sir George Carrington gave a sudden chuckle. ‘M. Poirot seems determined to make you out a gay dog, Carlile,’ he remarked.

‘Me, I always notice when a girl is pretty,’ announced Poirot as he descended the stairs.

The silence with which Mr Carlile greeted this remark was somewhat pointed. Poirot went on: ‘And it was then she told this tale of having seen a ghost?’

‘Yes.’

‘Did you believe the story?’ ‘Well, hardly, M. Poirot!’

‘I do not mean, do you believe in ghosts. I mean, did it strike you that the girl herself really thought she had seen something?’

‘Oh, as to that, I couldn’t say. She was certainly breathing fast and seemed upset.’ ‘You did not see or hear anything of her mistress?’

‘Yes, as a matter of fact I did. She came out of her room in the gallery above and called, “Leonie.”’ ‘And then?’

‘The girl ran up to her and I went back to the study.’

‘Whilst you were standing at the foot of the stairs here, could anyone have entered the study by the door you had left open?’

Carlile shook his head.

‘Not without passing me. The study door is at the end of the passage, as you see.’ Poirot nodded thoughtfully. Mr Carlile went on in his careful, precise voice.

‘I may say that I am very thankful that Lord Mayfield actually saw the thief leaving the window. Otherwise I myself should be in a very unpleasant position.’

‘Nonsense, my dear Carlile,’ broke in Lord Mayfield impatiently. ‘No suspicion could possibly attach to you.’

‘It is very kind of you to say so, Lord Mayfield, but facts are facts, and I can quite see that it looks badly for me. In any case I hope that my belongings and myself may be searched.’

‘Nonsense, my dear fellow,’ said Mayfield. Poirot murmured:

‘You are serious in wishing that?’ ‘I should infinitely prefer it.’

Poirot looked at him thoughtfully for a minute or two and murmured, ‘I see.’

Then he asked:

‘Where is Mrs Vanderlyn’s room situated in regard to the study?’ ‘It is directly over it.’

‘With a window looking out over the terrace?’ ‘Yes.’

Again Poirot nodded. Then he said: ‘Let us go to the drawing-room.’

Here he wandered round the room, examined the fastenings of the windows, glanced at the scorers on the bridge table and then finally addressed Lord Mayfield.

‘This affair,’ he said, ‘is more complicated than it appears. But one thing is quite certain. The stolen plans have not left this house.’

Lord Mayfield stared at him.

‘But, my dear M. Poirot, the man I saw leaving the study - ’ ‘There was no man.’

‘But I saw him - ’

‘With the greatest respect, Lord Mayfield, you imagined you saw him. The shadow cast by the branch of a tree deceived you. The fact that a robbery occurred naturally seemed a proof that what you had imagined was true.’

‘Really, M. Poirot, the evidence of my own eyes - ’

‘Back my eyes against yours any day, old boy,’ put in Sir George.

‘You must permit me, Lord Mayfield, to be very definite on that point. No one crossed the terrace to the grass.’

Looking very pale and speaking stiffly, Mr Carlile said:

‘In that case, if M. Poirot is correct, suspicion automatically attaches itself to me. I am the only person who could possibly have committed the robbery.’

Lord Mayfield sprang up.

‘Nonsense. Whatever M. Poirot thinks about it, I don’t agree with him. I am convinced of your innocence, my dear Carlile. In fact, I’m willing to guarantee it.’

Poirot murmured mildly:

‘But I have not said that I suspect M. Carlile.’ Carlile answered:

‘No, but you’ve made it perfectly clear that no one else had a chance to commit the robbery.’ ‘Du tout! Du tout!’

‘But I have told you nobody passed me in the hall to get to the study door.’ ‘I agree. But someone might have come in through the study window.’ ‘But that is just what you said did not happen?’

‘I said that no one from outside could have come and left without leaving marks on the grass. But it could have been managed from inside the house. Someone could have gone out from his room by

one of these windows, slipped along the terrace, in at the study window, and back again in here.'

Mr Carlile objected:

'But Lord Mayfield and Sir George Carrington were on the terrace.'

'They were on the terrace, yes, but they were en promenade. Sir George Carrington's eyes may be of the most reliable' - Poirot made a little bow - 'but he does not keep them in the back of his head! The study window is at the extreme left of the terrace, the windows of this room come next, but the terrace continues to the right past one, two, three, perhaps four rooms?'

'Dining-room, billiard-room, morning room and library,' said Lord Mayfield. 'And you walked up and down the terrace, how many times?'

'At least five or six.'

'You see, it is easy enough, the thief has only to watch for the right moment!' Carlile said slowly:

'You mean that when I was in the hall, talking to the French girl, the thief was waiting in the drawing-room?'

'That is my suggestion. It is, of course, only a suggestion.'

'It doesn't sound very probable to me,' said Lord Mayfield. 'Too risky.' The Air Marshal demurred.

‘I don’t agree with you, Charles. It’s perfectly possible. Wonder I hadn’t the wits to think of it for myself.’

‘So you see,’ said Poirot, ‘why I believe that the plans are still in the house. The problem now is to find them!’

Sir George snorted.

‘That’s simple enough. Search everybody.’

Lord Mayfield made a movement of dissent, but Poirot spoke before he could.

‘No, no, it is not so simple as that. The person who took those plans will anticipate that a search will be made and will make quite sure that they are not found amongst his or her belongings. They will have been hidden in neutral ground.’

‘Do you suggest that we’ve got to go playing hide and seek all over the bally house?’ Poirot smiled.

‘No, no, we need not be so crude as that. We can arrive at the hiding-place (or alternatively at the identity of the guilty person) by reflection. That will simplify matters. In the morning I would like an interview with every person in the house. It would, I think, be unwise to seek those interviews now.’

Lord Mayfield nodded.

‘Cause too much comment,’ he said, ‘if we dragged everybody out of their beds at three in the morning. In any case you’ll have to proceed with a good deal of camouflage, M. Poirot. This matter has got to be kept dark.’

Poirot waved an airy hand.

‘Leave it to Hercule Poirot. The lies I invent are always most delicate and most convincing. Tomorrow, then, I conduct my investigations. But tonight, I should like to begin by interviewing you, Sir George and you, Lord Mayfield.’

He bowed to them both. ‘You mean - alone?’ ‘That was my meaning.’

Lord Mayfield raised his eyes slightly, then he said:

‘Certainly. I’ll leave you alone with Sir George. When you want me, you’ll find me in my study. Come, Carlile.’

He and the secretary went out, shutting the door behind them.

Sir George sat down, reaching mechanically for a cigarette. He turned a puzzled face to Poirot. ‘You know,’ he said slowly. ‘I don’t quite get this.’

‘That is very simply explained,’ said Poirot with a smile. ‘In two words, to be accurate. Mrs Vanderlyn!’ ‘Oh,’ said Carrington. ‘I think I see. Mrs Vanderlyn?’

‘Precisely. It might be, you see, that it would not be very delicate to ask Lord Mayfield the question I want to ask. Why Mrs Vanderlyn? This lady, she is known to be a suspicious character. Why, then, should she be here? I say to myself there are three explanations. One, that Lord Mayfield has a penchant for the lady (and that is why I seek to talk to you alone. I do not wish to embarrass him). Two, that Mrs Vanderlyn is perhaps the dear friend of someone else in the house?’

‘You can count me out!’ said Sir George with a grin.

‘Then, if neither of those cases is true, the question returns in redoubled force. Why Mrs Vanderlyn? And it seems to me I perceive a shadowy answer. There was a reason. Her presence at this particular juncture was definitely desired by Lord Mayfield for a special reason. Am I right?’

Sir George nodded.

‘You’re quite right,’ he said. ‘Mayfield is too old a bird to fall for her wiles. He wanted her here for quite another reason. It was like this.’

He retailed the conversation that had taken place at the dinner-table. Poirot listened attentively.

‘Ah,’ he said. ‘I comprehend now. Nevertheless, it seems that the lady has turned the tables on you both rather neatly!’

Sir George swore freely.

Poirot watched him with some slight amusement, then he said:

‘You do not doubt that this theft is her doing - I mean, that she is responsible for it, whether or no she played an active part?’

Sir George stared.

‘Of course not! There isn’t any doubt of that. Why, who else would have any interest in stealing those plans?’

‘Ah!’ said Hercule Poirot. He leaned back and looked at the ceiling. ‘And yet, Sir George, we agreed, not a quarter of an hour ago, that these papers represented very definitely money. Not perhaps, in quite so obvious a form as banknotes, or gold, or jewellery, but nevertheless they were potential money. If there were anyone here who was hard up - ’

The other interrupted him with a snort.

‘Who isn’t these days? I suppose I can say it without incriminating myself.’ He smiled and Poirot smiled politely back at him and murmured:

‘Mais oui, you can say what you like, for you, Sir George, have the one unimpeachable alibi in this affair.’

‘But I’m damned hard up myself!’

Poirot shook his head sadly.

‘Yes, indeed, a man in your position has heavy living expenses. Then you have a young son at a most expensive age - ’

Sir George groaned.

‘Education’s bad enough, then debts on top of it. Mind you, this lad’s not a bad lad.’

Poirot listened sympathetically. He heard a lot of the Air Marshal’s accumulated grievances. The lack of grit and stamina in the younger generation, the fantastic way in which mothers spoilt their children and always took their side, the curse of gambling once it got hold of a woman, the folly of playing for higher stakes than you could afford. It was couched in general terms, Sir George did not allude directly to either his wife or his son, but his natural transparency made his generalizations very easy to see through.

He broke off suddenly.

‘Sorry, mustn’t take up your time with something that’s right off the subject, especially at this hour of the night - or rather, morning.’

He stifled a yawn.

‘I suggest, Sir George, that you should go to bed. You have been most kind and helpful.’ ‘Right, think I will turn in. You really think there is a chance of getting the plans back?’ Poirot shrugged his shoulders.

‘I mean to try. I do not see why not.’ ‘Well, I’ll be off. Goodnight.’

He left the room.

Poirot remained in his chair staring thoughtfully at the ceiling, then he took out a little notebook and turning to a clean page, he wrote:

Mrs Vanderlyn?

Lady Julia Carrington? Mrs Macatta?

Reggie Carrington? Mr Carlile? Underneath he wrote:

Mrs Vanderlyn and Mr Reggie Carrington?

Mrs Vanderlyn and Lady Julia? Mrs Vanderlyn and Mr Carlile?

He shook his head in a dissatisifed manner, murmuring: 'C'est plus simple que ça.' Then he added a few short sentences.

Did Lord Mayfield see a 'shadow'? If not, why did he say he did? Did Sir George see anything? He was positive he had seen nothing AFTER I examined flower-bed. Note: Lord Mayfield is near-sighted, can read without glasses but has to use a monocle to look across a room. Sir George is long-sighted. Therefore, from the far end of the terrace, his sight is more to be depended upon than Lord Mayfield's. Yet Lord Mayfield is very positive that he DID see something and is quite unshaken by his friend's denial.

Can anyone be quite as above suspicion as Mr Carlile appears to be? Lord Mayfield is very emphatic as to his innocence. Too much

so. Why? Because he secretly suspects him and is ashamed of his suspicions? Or because he definitely suspects some other person? That is to say, some person OTHER than Mrs Vanderlyn?

He put the notebook away.

Then, getting up, he went along to the study.

Chapter 5

Lord Mayfield was seated at his desk when Poirot entered the study. He swung round, laid down his pen, and looked up inquiringly.

'Well, M. Poirot, had your interview with Carrington?' Poirot smiled and sat down.

'Yes, Lord Mayfield. He cleared up a point that had puzzled me.' 'What was that?'

'The reason for Mrs Vanderlyn's presence here. You comprehend, I thought it possible - ' Mayfield was quick to realize the cause of Poirot's somewhat exaggerated embarrassment.

'You thought I had a weakness for the lady? Not at all. Far from it. Funnily enough, Carrington thought the same.'

‘Yes, he has told me of the conversation he held with you on the subject.’ Lord Mayfield looked rather rueful.

‘My little scheme didn’t come off. Always annoying to have to admit that a woman has got the better of you.’

‘Ah, but she has not got the better of you yet, Lord Mayfield.’

‘You think we may yet win? Well, I’m glad to hear you say so. I’d like to think it was true.’ He sighed.

‘I feel I’ve acted like a complete fool - so pleased with my stratagem for entrapping the lady.’ Hercule Poirot said, as he lit one of his tiny cigarettes:

‘What was your stratagem exactly, Lord Mayfield?’

‘Well,’ Lord Mayfield hesitated. ‘I hadn’t exactly got down to details.’
‘You didn’t discuss it with anyone?’

‘No.’

‘Not even with Mr Carlile?’ ‘No.’

Poirot smiled.

‘You prefer to play a lone hand, Lord Mayfield.’

‘I have usually found it the best way,’ said the other a little grimly.

‘Yes, you are wise. Trust no one. But you did mention the matter to Sir George Carrington?’ ‘Simply because I realized that the dear fellow was seriously perturbed about me.’

Lord Mayfield smiled at the remembrance. ‘He is an old friend of yours?’

‘Yes. I have known him for over twenty years.’ ‘And his wife?’

‘I have known his wife also, of course.’

‘But (pardon me if I am impertinent) you are not on the same terms of intimacy with her?’

‘I don’t really see what my personal relationships to people has to do with the matter in hand, M. Poirot.’

‘But I think, Lord Mayfield, that they may have a good deal to do with it. You agreed, did you not, that my theory of someone in the drawing-room was a possible one?’

‘Yes. In fact, I agree with you that that is what must have happened.’

‘We will not say “must.” That is too self-confident a word. But if that theory of mine is true, who do you think the person in the drawing-room could have been?’

‘Obviously Mrs Vanderlyn. She had been back there once for a book. She could have come back for another book, or a handbag, or a dropped handkerchief - one of a dozen feminine excuses. She

arranges with her maid to scream and get Carlile away from the study. Then she slips in and out by the windows as you said.'

'You forget it could not have been Mrs Vanderlyn. Carlile heard her call the maid from upstairs while he was talking to the girl.'

Lord Mayfield bit his lip.

'True. I forgot that.' He looked throughly annoyed.

'You see,' said Poirot gently. 'We progress. We have first the simple explanation of a thief who comes from outside and makes off with the booty. A very convenient theory as I said at the time, too convenient to be readily accepted. We have disposed of that. Then we come to the theory of the foreign agent, Mrs Vanderlyn, and that again seems to fit together beautifully up to a certain point. But now it looks as though that, too, was too easy - too convenient - to be accepted.'

'You'd wash Mrs Vanderlyn out of it altogether?'

'It was not Mrs Vanderlyn in the drawing-room. It may have been an ally of Mrs Vanderlyn's who committed the theft, but it is just possible that it was committed by another person altogether. If so, we have to consider the question of motive.'

'Isn't this rather far-fetched, M. Poirot?'

'I do not think so. Now what motives could there be? There is the motive of money. The papers may have been stolen with the object of

turning them into cash. That is the simplest motive to consider. But the motive might possibly be something quite different.'

'Such as - ' Poirot said slowly:

'It might have been done definitely with the idea of damaging someone.' 'Who?'

'Possibly Mr Carlile. He would be the obvious suspect. But there might be more to it than that. The men who control the destiny of a country, Lord Mayfield, are particularly vulnerable to displays of popular feeling.'

'Meaning that the theft was aimed at damaging me?' Poirot nodded.

'I think I am correct in saying, Lord Mayfield, that about five years ago you passed through a somewhat trying time. You were suspected of friendship with a European Power at that time bitterly unpopular with the electorate of this country.'

'Quite true, M. Poirot.'

'A statesman in these days has a difficult task. He has to pursue the policy he deems advantageous to his country, but he has at the same time to recognize the force of popular feeling. Popular feeling is very often sentimental, muddle-headed, and eminently unsound, but it cannot be disregarded for all that.'

‘How well you express it! That is exactly the curse of a politician’s life. He has to bow to the country’s feeling, however dangerous and foolhardy he knows it to be.’

‘That was your dilemma, I think. There were rumours that you had concluded an agreement with the country in question. This country and the newspapers were up in arms about it. Fortunately the Prime Minister was able categorically to deny the story, and you repudiated it, though still making no secret of the way your sympathies lay.’

‘All this is quite true, M. Poirot, but why rake up past history?’

‘Because I consider it possible that an enemy, disappointed in the way you surmounted that crisis, might endeavour to stage a further dilemma. You soon regained public confidence. Those particular circumstances have passed away, you are now, deservedly, one of the most popular figures in political life. You are spoken of freely as the next Prime Minister when Mr Hunberly retires.’

‘You think this is an attempt to discredit me? Nonsense!’

‘Tout de même, Lord Mayfield, it would not look well if it were known that the plans of Britain’s new bomber had been stolen during a weekend when a certain very charming lady had been your guest. Little hints in the newspapers as to your relationship with that lady would create a feeling of distrust in you.’

‘Such a thing could not really be taken seriously.’

‘My dear Lord Mayfield, you know perfectly well it could! It takes so little to undermine public confidence in a man.’

‘Yes, that’s true,’ said Lord Mayfield. He looked suddenly very worried. ‘God! how desperately complicated this business is becoming. Do you really think - but it’s impossible - impossible.’

‘You know of nobody who is - jealous of you?’ ‘Absurd!’

‘At any rate you will admit that my questions about your personal relationships with the members of this house-party are not totally irrelevant.’

‘Oh, perhaps - perhaps. You asked me about Julia Carrington. There’s really not very much to say. I’ve never taken to her very much, and I don’t think she cares for me. She’s one of these restless, nervy women, recklessly extravagant and mad about cards. She’s old-fashioned enough, I think, to despise me as being a self-made man.’

Poirot said:

‘I looked you up in Who’s Who before I came down. You were the head of a famous engineering firm and you are yourself a first-class engineer.’

‘There’s certainly nothing I don’t know about the practical side. I’ve worked my way up from the bottom.’

Lord Mayfield spoke rather grimly.

‘Oh la la!’ cried Poirot. ‘I have been a fool - but a fool!’ The other stared at him.

‘I beg your pardon, M. Poirot?’

‘It is that a portion of the puzzle has become clear to me. Something I did not see before... But it all fits in. Yes - it fits in with beautiful precision.’

Lord Mayfield looked at him in somewhat astonished inquiry. But with a slight smile Poirot shook his head.

‘No, no, not now. I must arrange my ideas a little more clearly.’ He rose.

‘Goodnight, Lord Mayfield. I think I know where those plans are.’ Lord Mayfield cried out:

‘You know? Then let us get hold of them at once!’ Poirot shook his head.

‘No, no, that would not do. Precipitancy would be fatal. But leave it all to Hercule Poirot.’ He went out of the room. Lord Mayfield raised his shoulders in contempt.

‘Man’s a mountebank,’ he muttered. Then, putting away his papers and turning out the lights, he, too, made his way up to bed.

Chapter 6

‘If there’s been a burglary, why the devil doesn’t old Mayfield send for the police?’ demanded Reggie Carrington.

He pushed his chair slightly back from the breakfast table.

He was the last down. His host, Mrs Macatta and Sir George had finished their breakfasts some time before. His mother and Mrs Vanderlyn were breakfasting in bed.

Sir George, repeating his statement on the lines agreed upon between Lord Mayfield and Hercule Poirot, had a feeling that he was not managing it as well as he might have done.

‘To send for a queer foreigner like this seems very odd to me,’ said Reggie. ‘What has been taken, Father?’

‘I don’t know exactly, my boy.’

Reggie got up. He looked rather nervy and on edge this morning. ‘Nothing - important? No - papers or anything like that?’

‘To tell you the truth, Reggie, I can’t tell you exactly.’ ‘Very hush-hush, is it? I see.’

Reggie ran up the stairs, paused for a moment half-way with a frown on his face, and then continued his ascent and tapped on his mother's door. Her voice bade him enter.

Lady Julia was sitting up in bed, scribbling figures on the back of an envelope. 'Good morning, darling.' She looked up, then said sharply:

'Reggie, is anything the matter?'

'Nothing much, but it seems there was a burglary last night.' 'A burglary? What was taken?'

'Oh, I don't know. It's all very hush hush. There's some odd kind of private-inquiry agent downstairs asking everybody questions.'

'How extraordinary!'

'It's rather unpleasant,' said Reggie slowly, 'staying in a house when that kind of thing happens.' 'What did happen exactly?'

'Don't know. It was some time after we all went to bed. Look out, Mother, you'll have that tray off.' He rescued the breakfast-tray and carried it to a table by the window.

'Was money taken?'

'I tell you I don't know.' Lady Julia said slowly:

'I suppose this inquiry man is asking everybody questions?'

‘I suppose so.’

‘Where they were last night? All that kind of thing?’

‘Probably. Well, I can’t tell him much. I went straight up to bed and was asleep in next to no time.’ Lady Julia did not answer.

‘I say, Mother, I suppose you couldn’t let me have a spot of cash. I’m absolutely broke.’

‘No, I couldn’t,’ his mother replied decisively. ‘I’ve got the most frightful overdraft myself. I don’t know what your father will say when he hears about it.’

There was a tap at the door and Sir George entered.

‘Ah, there you are, Reggie. Will you go down to the library? M. Hercule Poirot wants to see you.’ Poirot had just concluded an interview with the redoubtable Mrs Macatta.

A few brief questions had elicited the information that Mrs Macatta had gone up to bed just before eleven, and had heard or seen nothing helpful.

Poirot slid gently from the topic of the burglary to more personal matters. He himself had a great admiration for Lord Mayfield. As a member of the general public he felt that Lord Mayfield was a truly great man. Of course, Mrs Macatta, being in the know, would have a far better means of estimating that than himself.

‘Lord Mayfield has brains,’ allowed Mrs Macatta. ‘And he has carved his career out entirely for himself. He owes nothing to hereditary influence. He has a certain lack of vision, perhaps. In that I find all men sadly alike. They lack the breadth of a woman’s imagination. Woman, M. Poirot, is going to be the great force in government in ten years’ time.’

Poirot said that he was sure of it.

He slid to the topic of Mrs Vanderlyn. Was it true, as he had heard hinted, that she and Lord Mayfield were very close friends?

‘Not in the least. To tell you the truth I was very surprised to meet her here. Very surprised indeed.’ Poirot invited Mrs Macatta’s opinion of Mrs Vanderlyn - and got it.

‘One of those absolutely useless women, M. Poirot. Women that make one despair of one’s own sex! A parasite, first and last a parasite.’

‘Men admired her?’

‘Men!’ Mrs Macatta spoke the word with contempt. ‘Men are always taken in by those very obvious good looks. That boy, now, young Reggie Carrington, flushing up every time she spoke to him, absurdly flattered by being taken notice of by her. And the silly way she flattered him too. Praising his bridge - which actually was far from brilliant.’

‘He is not a good player?’

‘He made all sorts of mistakes last night.’ ‘Lady Julia is a good player, is she not?’

‘Much too good in my opinion,’ said Mrs Macatta. ‘It’s almost a profession with her. She plays morning, noon, and night.’

‘For high stakes?’

‘Yes, indeed, much higher than I would care to play. Indeed I shouldn’t consider it right.’ ‘She makes a good deal of money at the game?’

Mrs Macatta gave a loud and virtuous snort.

‘She reckons on paying her debts that way. But she’s been having a run of bad luck lately, so I’ve heard. She looked last night as though she had something on her mind. The evils of gambling, M. Poirot, are only slightly less than the evils caused by drink. If I had my way this country should be purified - ’

Poirot was forced to listen to a somewhat lengthy discussion on the purification of England’s morals. Then he closed the conversation adroitly and sent for Reggie Carrington.

He summed the young man up carefully as he entered the room, the weak mouth camouflaged by the rather charming smile, the indecisive chin, the eyes set far apart, the rather narrow head. He thought that he knew Reggie Carrington’s type fairly well.

‘Mr Reggie Carrington?’ ‘Yes. Anything I can do?’

‘Just tell me what you can about last night?’

‘Well, let me see, we played bridge - in the drawing-room. After that I went up to bed.’ ‘That was at what time?’

‘Just before eleven. I suppose the robbery took place after that?’ ‘Yes, after that. You did not hear or see anything?’

Reggie shook his head regretfully.

‘I’m afraid not. I went straight to bed and I sleep pretty soundly.’

‘You went straight up from the drawing-room to your bedroom and remained there until the morning?’ ‘That’s right.’

‘Curious,’ said Poirot. Reggie said sharply:

‘What do you mean, curious?’

‘You did not, for instance, hear a scream?’ ‘No, I didn’t.’

‘Ah, very curious.’

‘Look here, I don’t know what you mean.’ ‘You are, perhaps, slightly deaf?’ ‘Certainly not.’

Poirot’s lips moved. It was possible that he was repeating the word curious for the third time. Then he said:

‘Well, thank you, Mr Carrington, that is all.’ Reggie got up and stood rather irresolutely.

‘You know,’ he said, ‘now you come to mention it, I believe I did hear something of the kind.’ ‘Ah, you did hear something?’

‘Yes, but you see, I was reading a book - a detective story as a matter of fact - and I - well, I didn’t really quite take it in.’

‘Ah,’ said Poirot, ‘a most satisfying explanation.’ His face was quite impassive.

Reggie still hesitated, then he turned and walked slowly to the door. There he paused and asked: ‘I say, what was stolen?’

‘Something of great value, Mr Carrington. That is all I am at liberty to say.’ ‘Oh,’ said Reggie rather blankly.

He went out.

Poirot nodded his head.

‘It fits,’ he murmured. ‘It fits very nicely.’

He touched a bell and inquired courteously if Mrs Vanderlyn was up yet.

Chapter 7

Mrs Vanderlyn swept into the room looking very handsome. She was wearing an artfully-cut russet sports-suit that showed up the warm lights of her hair. She swept to a chair and smiled in a dazzling fashion at the little man in front of her.

For a moment something showed through the smile. It might have been triumph, it might almost have been mockery. It was gone almost immediately, but it had been there. Poirot found the suggestion of it interesting.

'Burglars? Last night? But how dreadful! Why no, I never heard a thing. What about the police? Can't they do anything?'

Again, just for a moment, the mockery showed in her eyes. Hercule Poirot thought:

'It is very clear that you are not afraid of the police, my lady. You know very well that they are not going to be called in.'

And from that followed - what? He said soberly:

'You comprehend, madame, it is an affair of the most discreet.'

'Why, naturally, M. - Poirot - isn't it? - I shouldn't dream of breathing a word. I'm much too great an admirer of dear Lord Mayfield's to do anything to cause him the least little bit of worry.'

She crossed her knees. A highly-polished slipper of brown leather dangled on the tip of her silk-shod foot.

She smiled, a warm, compelling smile of perfect health and deep satisfaction. 'Do tell me if there's anything at all I can do?'

'I thank you, madame. You played bridge in the drawing-room last night?' 'Yes.'

'I understand that then all the ladies went up to bed?' 'That is right.'

'But someone came back to fetch a book. That was you, was it not, Mrs Vanderlyn?' 'I was the first one to come back - yes.'

'What do you mean – the first one?' said Poirot sharply.

'I came back right away,' explained Mrs Vanderlyn. 'Then I went up and rang for my maid. She was a long time in coming. I rang again. Then I went out on the landing. I heard her voice and I called her. After she had brushed my hair I sent her away, she was in a nervous, upset state and tangled the brush in my hair once or twice. It was then, just as I sent her away, that I saw Lady Julia coming up the stairs. She told me she had been down again for a book, too. Curious, wasn't it?'

Mrs Vanderlyn smiled as she finished, a wide, rather feline smile. Hercule Poirot thought to himself that Mrs Vanderlyn did not like Lady Julia Carrington.

‘As you say, madame. Tell me, did you hear your maid scream?’ ‘Why, yes, I did hear something of that kind.’

‘Did you ask her about it?’

‘Yes. She told me she thought she had seen a floating figure in white - such nonsense!’ ‘What was Lady Julia wearing last night?’

‘Oh, you think perhaps - Yes, I see. She was wearing a white evening-dress. Of course, that explains it. She must have caught sight of her in the darkness just as a white figure. These girls are so superstitious.’

‘Your maid has been with you a long time, madame?’

‘Oh, no.’ Mrs Vanderlyn opened her eyes rather wide. ‘Only about five months.’ ‘I should like to see her presently, if you do not mind, madame.’

Mrs Vanderlyn raised her eyebrows. ‘Oh, certainly,’ she said rather coldly.

‘I should like, you understand, to question her.’ ‘Oh, yes.’

Again a flicker of amusement. Poirot rose and bowed.

‘Madame,’ he said. ‘You have my complete admiration.’ Mrs Vanderlyn for once seemed a trifle taken aback. ‘Oh, M. Poirot, how nice of you, but why?’

‘You are, madame, so perfectly armoured, so completely sure of yourself.’ Mrs Vanderlyn laughed a little uncertainly.

‘Now I wonder,’ she said, ‘if I am to take that as a compliment?’ Poirot said:

‘It is, perhaps, a warning - not to treat life with arrogance.’

Mrs Vanderlyn laughed with more assurance. She got up and held out a hand.

‘Dear M. Poirot, I do wish you all success. Thank you for all the charming things you have said to me.’ She went out. Poirot murmured to himself:

‘You wish me success, do you? Ah, but you are very sure I am not going to meet with success! Yes, you are very sure indeed. That, it annoys me very much.’

With a certain petulance, he pulled the bell and asked that Mademoiselle Leonie might be sent to him.

His eyes roamed over her appreciatively as she stood hesitating in the doorway, demure in her black dress with her neatly-parted black waves of hair and her modestly-dropped eyelids. He nodded slow approval.

‘Come in, Mademoiselle Leonie,’ he said. ‘Do not be afraid.’ She came in and stood demurely before him.

‘Do you know,’ said Poirot with a sudden change of tone, ‘that I find you very good to look at.’

Leonie responded promptly. She flashed him a glance out of the corner of her eyes and murmured softly: ‘Monsieur is very kind.’

‘Figure to yourself,’ said Poirot. ‘I demand of M. Carlile whether you are or not good-looking and he replies that he does not know!’

Leonie cocked her chin up contemptuously. ‘That image!’

‘That describes him very well.’

‘I do not believe he has ever looked at a girl in his life, that one.’

‘Probably not. A pity. He has missed a lot. But there are others in this house who are more appreciative, is it not so?’

‘Really, I do not know what monsieur means.’

‘Oh, yes, Mademoiselle Leonie, you know very well. A pretty history that you recount last night about a ghost that you have seen. As soon as I hear that you are standing there with your hands to your head, I know very well that there is no question of ghosts. If a girl is frightened she clasps her heart, or she raises her hands to her mouth to stifle a cry, but if her hands are on her hair it means something very different. It means that her hair has been ruffled and that she is hastily getting it into shape again! Now then, mademoiselle, let us have the truth. Why did you scream on the stairs?’

‘But monsieur it is true, I saw a tall figure all in white - ’

‘Mademoiselle, do not insult my intelligence. That story, it may have been good enough for M. Carlile, but it is not good enough for Hercule Poirot. The truth is that you had just been kissed, is it not so? And I will make a guess that it was M. Reggie Carrington who kissed you.’

Leonie twinkled an unabashed eye at him.

‘Eh bien,’ she demanded, ‘after all, what is a kiss?’ ‘What, indeed?’ said Poirot gallantly.

‘You see, the young gentleman he came up behind me and caught me round the waist - and so naturally he startled me and I screamed. If I had known - well, then naturally I would not have screamed.’

‘Naturally,’ agreed Poirot.

‘But he came upon me like a cat. Then the study door opened and out came M. le secrétaire and the young gentleman slipped away upstairs and there I was looking like a fool. Naturally I had to say something - especially to - ’ she broke into French, ‘un jeune homme comme ça, tellement comme il faut!’

‘So you invent a ghost?’

‘Indeed, monsieur, it was all I could think of. A tall figure all in white, that floated. It is ridiculous but what else could I do?’

‘Nothing. So now, all is explained. I had my suspicions from the first.’ Leonie shot him a provocative glance.

‘Monsieur is very clever, and very sympathetic.’

‘And since I am not going to make you any embarrassments over the affair you will do something for me in return?’

‘Most willingly, monsieur.’

‘How much do you know of your mistress’s affairs?’ The girl shrugged her shoulders.

‘Not very much, monsieur. I have my ideas, of course.’ ‘And those ideas?’

‘Well, it does not escape me that the friends of madame are always soldiers or sailors or airmen. And then there are other friends - foreign gentlemen who come to see her very quietly sometimes. Madame is very handsome, though I do not think she will be so much longer. The young men, they find her very attractive. Sometimes I think, they say too much. But it is only my idea, that. Madame does not confide in me.’

‘What you would have me to understand is that madame plays a lone hand?’ ‘That is right, monsieur.’

‘In other words, you cannot help me.’

‘I fear not, monsieur. I would do if I could.’

‘Tell me, your mistress is in a good mood today?’ ‘Decidedly, monsieur.’

‘Something has happened to please her?’

‘She has been in good spirits ever since she came here.’ ‘Well, Leonie, you should know.’

The girl answered confidently:

‘Yes, monsieur. I could not be mistaken there. I know all madame’s moods. She is in high spirits.’ ‘Positively triumphant?’

‘That is exactly the word, monsieur.’ Poirot nodded gloomily.

‘I find that - a little hard to bear. Yet I perceive that it is inevitable. Thank you, mademoiselle, that is all.’ Leonie threw him a coquettish glance.

‘Thank you, monsieur. If I meet monsieur on the stairs, be well assured that I shall not scream.’

‘My child,’ said Poirot with dignity. ‘I am of advanced years. What have I to do with such frivolities?’ But with a little twitter of laughter, Leonie took herself off.

Poirot paced slowly up and down the room. His face became grave and anxious. ‘And now,’ he said at last, ‘for Lady Julia. What will she say, I wonder?’

Lady Julia came into the room with a quiet air of assurance. She bent her head graciously, accepted the chair that Poirot drew forward and spoke in a low, well-bred voice.

‘Lord Mayfield says that you wish to ask me some questions.’

‘Yes, madame. It is about last night.’ ‘About last night, yes?’

‘What happened after you had finished your game of bridge?’

‘My husband thought it was too late to begin another. I went up to bed.’ ‘And then?’

‘I went to sleep.’ ‘That is all?’

‘Yes. I’m afraid I can’t tell you anything of much interest. When did this’ - she hesitated - ‘burglary occur?’

‘Very soon after you went upstairs.’ ‘I see. And what exactly was taken?’ ‘Some private papers, madame.’ ‘Important papers?’

‘Very important.’

She frowned a little and then said: ‘They were - valuable?’

‘Yes, madame, they were worth a good deal of money.’ ‘I see.’

There was a pause, and then Poirot said: ‘What about your book, madame?’

‘My book?’ She raised bewildered eyes to him.

‘Yes, I understand Mrs Vanderlyn to say that some time after you three ladies had retired you went down again to fetch a book.’

‘Yes, of course, so I did.’

‘So that, as a matter of fact, you did not go straight to bed when you went upstairs? You returned to the drawing-room?’

‘Yes, that is true. I had forgotten.’

‘While you were in the drawing-room, did you hear someone scream?’ ‘No - yes - I don’t think so.’

‘Surely, madame. You could not have failed to hear it in the drawing-room.’ Lady Julia flung her head back and said firmly:

‘I heard nothing.’

Poirot raised his eyebrows, but did not reply.

The silence grew uncomfortable. Lady Julia asked abruptly: ‘What is being done?’

‘Being done? I do not understand you, madame.’

‘I mean about the robbery. Surely the police must be doing something.’ Poirot shook his head.

‘The police have not been called in. I am in charge.’

She stared at him, her restless haggard face sharpened and tense. Her eyes, dark and searching, sought to pierce his impassivity.

They fell at last - defeated.

‘You cannot tell me what is being done?’

‘I can only assure you, madame, that I am leaving no stone unturned.’ ‘To catch the thief - or to - recover the papers?’

‘The recovery of the papers is the main thing, madame.’ Her manner changed. It became bored, listless.

‘Yes,’ she said indifferently. ‘I suppose it is.’ There was another pause.

‘Is there anything else, M. Poirot?’

‘No, madame. I will not detain you further.’ ‘Thank you.’

He opened the door for her. She passed out without glancing at him.

Poirot went back to the fireplace and carefully rearranged the ornaments on the mantelpiece. He was still at it when Lord Mayfield came in through the window.

'Well?' said the latter.

'Very well, I think. Events are shaping themselves as they should.' Lord Mayfield said, staring at him:

'You are pleased.'

'No, I am not pleased. But I am content.' 'Really, M. Poirot, I cannot make you out.' 'I am not such a charlatan as you think.'

'I never said - '

'No, but you thought! No matter. I am not offended. It is sometimes necessary for me to adopt a certain pose.'

Lord Mayfield looked at him doubtfully with a certain amount of distrust. Hercule Poirot was a man he did not understand. He wanted to despise him, but something warned him that this ridiculous little man was not so futile as he appeared. Charles McLaughlin had always been able to recognize capability when he saw it.

'Well,' he said, 'we are in your hands. What do you advise next?' 'Can you get rid of your guests?'

'I think it might be arranged... I could explain that I have to go to London over this affair. They will then probably offer to leave.'

‘Very good. Try and arrange it like that.’ Lord Mayfield hesitated.

‘You don’t think - ?’

‘I am quite sure that that would be the wise course to take.’ Lord Mayfield shrugged his shoulders.

‘Well, if you say so.’ He went out.

Chapter 8

The guests left after lunch. Mrs Vanderlyn and Mrs Macatta went by train, the Carringtons had their car. Poirot was standing in the hall as Mrs Vanderlyn bade her host a charming farewell.

‘So terribly sorry for you having this bother and anxiety. I do hope it will turn out all right for you. I shan’t breathe a word of anything.’

She pressed his hand and went out to where the Rolls was waiting to take her to the station. Mrs Macatta was already inside. Her adieu had been curt and unsympathetic.

Suddenly Leonie, who had been getting in front with the chauffeur, came running back into the hall. ‘The dressing-case of madame, it is not in the car,’ she exclaimed.

There was a hurried search. At last Lord Mayfield discovered it where it had been put down in the shadow of an old oak chest. Leonie uttered a glad little cry as she seized the elegant affair of green morocco, and hurried out with it.

Then Mrs Vanderlyn leaned out of the car.

'Lord Mayfield, Lord Mayfield.' She handed him a letter. 'Would you mind putting this in your post-bag? If I keep it meaning to post it in town, I'm sure to forget. Letters just stay in my bag for days.'

Sir George Carrington was fidgeting with his watch, opening and shutting it. He was a maniac for punctuality.

'They're cutting it fine,' he murmured. 'Very fine. Unless they're careful, they'll miss the train - ' His wife said irritably:

'Oh, don't fuss, George. After all, it's their train, not ours!' He looked at her reproachfully.

The Rolls drove off.

Reggie drew up at the front door in the Carringtons' Morris. 'All ready, Father,' he said.

The servants began bringing out the Carringtons' luggage. Reggie supervised its disposal in the dickey. Poirot moved out of the front door, watching the proceedings.

Suddenly he felt a hand on his arm. Lady Julia's voice spoke in an agitated whisper. 'M. Poirot. I must speak to you - at once.'

He yielded to her insistent hand. She drew him into a small morning-room and closed the door. She came close to him.

'Is it true what you said - that the discovery of the papers is what matters most to Lord Mayfield?'

Poirot looked at her curiously. 'It is quite true, madame.'

'If - if those papers were returned to you, would you undertake that they should be given back to Lord Mayfield, and no question asked?'

'I am not sure that I understand you.'

'You must! I am sure that you do! I am suggesting that the - the thief should remain anonymous if the papers are returned.'

Poirot asked:

'How soon would that be, madame?' 'Definitely within twelve hours.' 'You can promise that?'

'I can promise it.'

As he did not answer, she repeated urgently:

'Will you guarantee that there will be no publicity?' He answered then - very gravely:

‘Yes, madame, I will guarantee that.’ ‘Then everything can be arranged.’

She passed abruptly from the room. A moment later Poirot heard the car drive away.

He crossed the hall and went along the passage to the study. Lord Mayfield was there. He looked up as Poirot entered.

‘Well?’ he said.

Poirot spread out his hands.

‘The case is ended, Lord Mayfield.’ ‘What?’

Poirot repeated word for word the scene between himself and Lady Julia. Lord Mayfield looked at him with a stupefied expression.

‘But what does it mean? I don’t understand.’

‘It is very clear, is it not? Lady Julia knows who stole the plans.’ ‘You don’t mean she took them herself?’

‘Certainly not. Lady Julia may be a gambler. She is not a thief. But if she offers to return the plans, it means that they were taken by her husband or her son. Now Sir George Carrington was out on the terrace with you. That leaves us the son. I think I can reconstruct the happenings of last night fairly accurately. Lady Julia went to her son’s room last night and found it empty. She came downstairs to

look for him, but did not find him. This morning she hears of the theft, and she also hears that her son declares that he went straight to his room and never left it. That, she knows, is not true. And she knows something else about her son. She knows that he is weak, that he is desperately hard-up for money. She has observed his infatuation for Mrs Vanderlyn. The whole thing is clear to her. Mrs Vanderlyn has persuaded Reggie to steal the plans. But she determines to play her part also. She will tackle Reggie, get hold of the papers and return them.'

'But the whole thing is quite impossible,' cried Lord Mayfield.

'Yes, it is impossible, but Lady Julia does not know that. She does not know what I, Hercule Poirot, know, that young Reggie Carrington was not stealing papers last night, but instead was philandering with Mrs Vanderlyn's French maid.'

'The whole thing is a mare's nest!' 'Exactly.'

'And the case is not ended at all!'

'Yes, it is ended. I, Hercule Poirot, know the truth. You do not believe me? You did not believe me yesterday when I said I knew where the plans were. But I did know. They were very close at hand.'

'Where?'

'They were in your pocket, my lord.'

There was a pause, then Lord Mayfield said:

‘Do you really know what you are saying, M. Poirot?’

‘Yes, I know. I know that I am speaking to a very clever man. From the first it worried me that you, who were admittedly short-sighted, should be so positive about the figure you had seen leaving the window. You wanted that solution - the convenient solution - to be accepted. Why? Later, one by one, I eliminated everyone else. Mrs Vanderlyn was upstairs, Sir George was with you on the terrace, Reggie Carrington was with the French girl on the stairs, Mrs Macatta was blamelessly in her bedroom. (It is next to the house-keeper’s room, and Mrs Macatta snores!) Lady Julia clearly believed her son guilty. So there remained only two possibilities. Either Carlile did not put the papers on the desk but into his own pocket (and that is not reasonable, because, as you pointed out, he could have taken a tracing of them), or else - or else the plans were there when you walked over to the desk, and the only place they could have gone was into your pocket. In that case everything was clear. Your insistence on the figure you had seen, your insistence on Carlile’s innocence, your disinclination to have me summoned.

‘One thing did puzzle me - the motive. You were, I was convinced, an honest man, a man of integrity. That showed in your anxiety that no innocent person should be suspected. It was also obvious that the theft of the plans might easily affect your career unfavourably. Why, then, this wholly unreasonable theft? And at last the answer came to me. The crisis in your career, some years ago, the assurances given to the world by the Prime Minister that you had had no negotiations with the power in question. Suppose that that was not strictly true, that there remained some record - a letter, perhaps - showing that in

actual fact you had done what you had publicly denied. Such a denial was necessary in the interests of public policy. But it is doubtful if the man in the street would see it that way. It might mean that at the moment when supreme power might be given into your hands, some stupid echo from the past would undo everything.

'I suspect that that letter has been preserved in the hands of a certain government, that that government offered to trade with you - the letter in exchange for the plans of the new bomber. Some men would have refused. You - did not! You agreed. Mrs Vanderlyn was the agent in the matter. She came here by arrangement to make the exchange. You gave yourself away when you admitted that you had formed no definite stratagem for entrapping her. That admission made your reason for inviting her here incredibly weak.

'You arranged the robbery. Pretended to see the thief on the terrace - thereby clearing Carlile of suspicion. Even if he had not left the room, the desk was so near the window that a thief might have taken the plans while Carlile was busy at the safe with his back turned. You walked over to the desk, took the plans and kept them on your own person until the moment when, by prearranged plan, you slipped them into Mrs Vanderlyn's dressing-case. In return she handed you the fatal letter disguised as an unposted letter of her own.'

Poirot stopped. Lord Mayfield said:

'Your knowledge is very complete, M. Poirot. You must think me an unutterable skunk.' Poirot made a quick gesture.

‘No, no, Lord Mayfield. I think, as I said, that you are a very clever man. It came to me suddenly as we talked here last night. You are a first-class engineer. There will be, I think, some subtle alterations in the specifications of that bomber, alterations done so skilfully that it will be difficult to grasp why the machine is not the success it ought to be. A certain foreign power will find the type a failure… It will be a disappointment to them, I am sure…’

Again there was a silence - then Lord Mayfield said:

‘You are much too clever, M. Poirot. I will only ask you to believe one thing. I have faith in myself. I believe that I am the man to guide England through the days of crisis that I see coming. If I did not honestly believe that I am needed by my country to steer the ship of state, I would not have done what I have done - made the best of both worlds - saved myself from disaster by a clever trick.’

‘My lord,’ said Poirot, ‘if you could not make the best of both worlds, you could not be a politician!’

Dead Man’s Mirror

Chapter 1

I

The flat was a modern one. The furnishings of the room were modern, too. The armchairs were squarely built, the upright chairs were angular. A modern writing-table was set squarely in front of the window, and at it sat a small, elderly man. His head was practically the only thing in the room that was not square. It was egg-shaped.

M. Hercule Poirot was reading a letter:

Station: Whimperley. Hamborough Close,

Telegrams: Hamborough St Mary

Hamborough St. John. Westshire.

M. Hercule Poirot.

September 24th, 1936.

Dear Sir, - A matter has arisen which requires handling with great delicacy and discretion. I have heard good accounts of you, and have decided to entrust the matter to you. I have reason to believe that I am the victim of fraud, but for family reasons I do not wish to call in the police. I am taking certain measures of my own to deal with the business, but you must be prepared to come down here immediately on receipt of a telegram. I should be obliged if you will not answer this letter.

Yours faithfully,

Gervase Chevenix-Gore.

The eyebrows of M. Hercule Poirot climbed slowly up his forehead until they nearly disappeared into his hair.

'And who, then,' he demanded of space, 'is this Gervase Chevenix-Gore?' He crossed to a bookcase and took out a large, fat book.

He found what he wanted easily enough.

Chevenix-Gore, Sir Gervase Francis Xavier, 10th Bt. cr. 1694; formerly Captain 17th Lancers; b. 18th May, 1878; e.s. of Sir Guy Chevenix-Gore, 9th Bt., and Lady Claudia Bretherton, 2nd. d. of 8th Earl of Wallingford. S. father, 1911; m. 1912, Vanda Elizabeth, e.d. of Colonel Frederick Arbuthnot, q.v.; educ. Eton. Served European War, 1914–18. Recreations: travelling, big-game hunting. Address: Hamborough St Mary, Westshire, and 218 Lowndes Square, S.W.1. Clubs: Cavalry. Travellers.

Poirot shook his head in a slightly dissatisfied manner. For a moment or two he remained lost in thought, then he went to the desk, pulled open a drawer and took out a little pile of invitation cards.

His face brightened.

'A la bonne heure! Exactly my affair! He will certainly be there.'

II

A duchess greeted M. Hercule Poirot in fulsome tones.

'So you could manage to come after all, M. Poirot! Why, that's splendid.' 'The pleasure is mine, madame,' murmured Poirot, bowing.

He escaped from several important and splendid beings - a famous diplomat, an equally famous actress and a well-known sporting peer - and found at last the person he had come to seek, that invariably 'also present' guest, Mr Satterthwaite.

Mr Satterthwaite twittered amiably.

'The dear duchess - I always enjoy her parties... Such a personality, if you know what I mean. I saw a lot of her in Corsica some years ago...'

Mr Satterthwaite's conversation was apt to be unduly burdened by mentions of his titled acquaintances. It is possible that he may sometimes have found pleasure in the company of Messrs. Jones, Brown or Robinson, but, if so, he did not mention the fact. And yet, to describe Mr Satterthwaite as a mere snob and leave it at that would have been to do him an injustice. He was a keen observer of human nature, and if it is true that the looker-on knows most of the game, Mr Satterthwaite knew a good deal.

'You know, my dear fellow, it is really ages since I saw you. I always feel myself privileged to have seen you work at close quarters in the Crow's Nest business. I feel since then that I am in the know, so to

speak. I saw Lady Mary only last week, by the way. A charming creature - pot-pourri and lavender!'

After passing lightly on one or two scandals of the moment - the indiscretions of an earl's daughter, and the lamentable conduct of a viscount - Poirot succeeded in introducing the name of Gervase Chevenix-Gore.

Mr Satterthwaite responded immediately.

'Ah, now, there is a character, if you like! The Last of the Baronets - that's his nickname.' 'Pardon, I do not quite comprehend.'

Mr Satterthwaite unbent indulgently to the lower comprehension of a foreigner.

'It's a joke, you know – a joke. Naturally, he's not really the last baronet in England - but he does represent the end of an era. The Bold Bad Baronet - the mad harum-scarum baronet so popular in the novels of the last century - the kind of fellow who laid impossible wagers and won 'em.'

He went on to expound what he meant in more detail. In younger years, Gervase Chevenix-Gore had sailed round the world in a windjammer. He had been on an expedition to the Pole. He had challenged a racing peer to a duel. For a wager he had ridden his favourite mare up the staircase of a ducal house. He had once leapt from a box to the stage and carried off a well-known actress in the middle of her rôle.

The anecdotes of him were innumerable.

'It's an old family,' went on Mr Satterthwaite. 'Sir Guy de Chevenix went on the first crusade. Now, alas, the line looks like coming to an end. Old Gervase is the last Chevenix-Gore.'

'The estate, it is impoverished?'

'Not a bit of it. Gervase is fabulously wealthy. Owns valuable house property - coalfields - and in addition he staked out a claim to some mine in Peru or somewhere in South America, when he was a young man, which has yielded him a fortune. An amazing man. Always lucky in everything he's undertaken.'

'He is now an elderly man, of course?'

'Yes, poor old Gervase.' Mr Satterthwaite sighed, shook his head. 'Most people would describe him to you as mad as a hatter. It's true, in a way. He is mad - not in the sense of being certifiable or having delusions - but mad in the sense of being abnormal. He's always been a man of great originality of character.'

'And originality becomes eccentricity as the years go by?' suggested Poirot. 'Very true. That's exactly what's happened to poor old Gervase.'

'He has perhaps, a swollen idea of his own importance?'

‘Absolutely. I should imagine that, in Gervase’s mind, the world has always been divided into two parts - there are the Chevenix-Gores, and the other people!’

‘An exaggerated sense of family!’

‘Yes. The Chevenix-Gores are all arrogant as the devil - a law unto themselves. Gervase, being the last of them, has got it badly. He is - well, really, you know, to hear him talk, you might imagine him to be - er, the Almighty!’

Poirot nodded his head slowly and thoughtfully.

‘Yes, I imagined that. I have had, you see, a letter from him. It was an unusual letter. It did not demand. It summoned!’

‘A royal command,’ said Mr Satterthwaite, tittering a little.

‘Precisely. It did not seem to occur to this Sir Gervase that I, Hercule Poirot, am a man of importance, a man of infinite affairs! That it was extremely unlikely that I should be able to fling everything aside and come hastening like an obedient dog - like a mere nobody, gratified to receive a commission!’

Mr Satterthwaite bit his lip in an effort to suppress a smile. It may have occurred to him that where egoism was concerned, there was not much to choose between Hercule Poirot and Gervase Chevenix-Gore.

He murmured:

‘Of course, if the cause of the summons was urgent - ?’

‘It was not!’ Poirot’s hands rose in the air in an emphatic gesture. ‘I was to hold myself at his disposition, that was all, in case he should require me! Enfin, je vous demande! ’

Again the hands rose eloquently, expressing better than words could do M. Hercule Poirot’s sense of utter outrage.

‘I take it,’ said Mr Satterthwaite, ‘that you refused?’

‘I have not yet had the opportunity,’ said Poirot slowly. ‘But you will refuse?’

A new expression passed over the little man’s face. His brow furrowed itself perplexedly. He said:

‘How can I express myself? To refuse - yes, that was my first instinct. But I do not know… One has, sometimes, a feeling. Faintly, I seem to smell the fish…’

Mr Satterthwaite received this last statement without any sign of amusement. ‘Oh?’ he said. ‘That is interesting…’

‘It seems to me,’ went on Hercule Poirot, ‘that a man such as you have described might be very vulnerable - ’

‘Vulnerable?’ queried Mr Satterthwaite. For the moment he was surprised. The word was not one that he would naturally have

associated with Gervase Chevenix-Gore. But he was a man of perception, quick in observation. He said slowly:

‘I think I see what you mean.’

‘Such a one is encased, is he not, in an armour - such an armour! The armour of the crusaders was nothing to it - an armour of arrogance, of pride, of complete self-esteem. This armour, it is in some ways a protection, the arrows, the everyday arrows of life glance off it. But there is this danger: sometimes a man in armour might not even know he was being attacked. He will be slow to see, slow to hear - slower still to feel.’

He paused, then asked with a change of manner:

‘Of what does the family of this Sir Gervase consist?’

‘There’s Vanda - his wife. She was an Arbuthnot - very handsome girl. She’s still quite a handsome woman. Frightfully vague, though. Devoted to Gervase. She’s got a leaning towards the occult, I believe. Wears amulets and scarabs and gives out that she’s the reincarnation of an Egyptian Queen... Then there’s Ruth - she’s their adopted daughter. They’ve no children of their own. Very attractive girl in the modern style. That’s all the family. Except, of course, for Hugo Trent. He’s Gervase’s nephew. Pamela Chevenix-Gore married Reggie Trent and Hugo was their only child. He’s an orphan. He can’t inherit the title, of course, but I imagine he’ll come in for most of Gervase’s money in the end. Good-looking lad, he’s in the Blues.’

Poirot nodded his head thoughtfully. Then he asked:

‘It is a grief to Sir Gervase, yes, that he has no son to inherit his name?’ ‘I should imagine that it cuts pretty deep.’

‘The family name, it is a passion with him?’ ‘Yes.’

Mr Satterthwaite was silent a moment or two. He was very intrigued. Finally he ventured: ‘You see a definite reason for going down to Hamborough Close?’

Slowly, Poirot shook his head.

‘No,’ he said. ‘As far as I can see, there is no reason at all. But, all the same, I fancy I shall go.’

Chapter 2

Hercule Poirot sat in the corner of a first-class carriage speeding through the English countryside. Meditatively he took from his pocket a neatly-folded telegram, which he opened and re-read: Take four-thirty from St Pancras instruct guard have express stopped at Whimperley. Chevenix-Gore.

He folded up the telegram again and put it back in his pocket.

The guard on the train had been obsequious. The gentleman was going to Hamborough Close? Oh, yes, Sir Gervase Chevenix-Gore’s

guests always had the express stopped at Whimperley. ‘A special kind of prerogative, I think it is, sir.’

Since then the guard had paid two visits to the carriage - the first in order to assure the traveller that everything would be done to keep the carriage for himself, the second to announce that the express was running ten minutes late.

The train was due to arrive at 7.50, but it was exactly two minutes past eight when Hercule Poirot descended on to the platform of the little country station and pressed the expected half-crown into the attentive guard’s hand.

There was a whistle from the engine, and the Northern Express began to move once more. A tall chauffeur in dark green uniform stepped up to Poirot.

‘Mr Poirot? For Hamborough Close?’

He picked up the detective’s neat valise and led the way out of the station. A big Rolls was waiting. The chauffeur held the door open for Poirot to get in, arranged a sumptuous fur rug over his knees, and they drove off.

After some ten minutes of cross-country driving, round sharp corners and down country lanes, the car turned in at a wide gateway flanked with huge stone griffons.

They drove through a park and up to the house. The door of it was opened as they drew up, and a butler of imposing proportions showed himself upon the front step.

'Mr Poirot? This way, sir.'

He led the way along the hall and threw open a door half-way along it on the right. 'Mr Hercule Poirot,' he announced.

The room contained a number of people in evening dress, and as Poirot walked in his quick eyes perceived at once that his appearance was not expected. The eyes of all present rested on him in unfeigned surprise.

Then a tall woman, whose dark hair was threaded with grey, made an uncertain advance towards him. Poirot bowed over her hand.

'My apologies, madame,' he said. 'I fear that my train was late.'

'Not at all,' said Lady Chevenix-Gore vaguely. Her eyes still stared at him in a puzzled fashion. 'Not at all, Mr - er - I didn't quite hear - '

'Hercule Poirot.'

He said the name clearly and distinctly.

Somewhere behind him he heard a sudden sharp intake of breath.

At the same time he realized that clearly his host could not be in the room. He murmured gently: 'You knew I was coming, madame?'

‘Oh - oh, yes…’ Her manner was not convincing. ‘I think - I mean I suppose so, but I am so terribly impractical, M. Poirot. I forget everything.’ Her tone held a melancholy pleasure in the fact. ‘I am told things. I appear to take them in - but they just pass through my brain and are gone! Vanished! As though they had never been.’

Then, with a slight air of performing a duty long overdue, she glanced round her vaguely and murmured: ‘I expect you know everybody.’

Though this was patently not the case, the phrase was clearly a well-worn formula by means of which Lady Chevenix-Gore spared herself the trouble of introduction and the strain of remembering people’s right names.

Making a supreme effort to meet the difficulties of this particular case, she added: ‘My daughter - Ruth.’

The girl who stood before him was also tall and dark, but she was of a very different type. Instead of the flattish, indeterminate features of Lady Chevenix-Gore, she had a well-chiselled nose, slightly aquiline, and a clear, sharp line of jaw. Her black hair swept back from her face into a mass of little tight curls. Her colouring was of carnation clearness and brilliance, and owed little to make-up. She was, so Hercule Poirot thought, one of the loveliest girls he had seen.

He recognized, too, that she had brains as well as beauty, and guessed at certain qualities of pride and temper. Her voice, when

she spoke, came with a slight drawl that struck him as deliberately put on.

'How exciting,' she said, 'to entertain M. Hercule Poirot! The old man arranged a little surprise for us, I suppose.'

'So you did not know I was coming, mademoiselle?' he said quickly.

'I hadn't an idea of it. As it is, I must postpone getting my autograph book until after dinner.' The notes of a gong sounded from the hall, then the butler opened the door and announced: 'Dinner is served.'

And then, almost before the last word, 'served', had been uttered, something very curious happened. The pontificial domestic figure became, just for one moment, a highly-astonished human being...

The metamorphosis was so quick and the mask of the well-trained servant was back again so soon, that anyone who had not happened to be looking would not have noticed the change. Poirot, however, had happened to be looking. He wondered.

The butler hesitated in the doorway. Though his face was again correctly expressionless, an air of tension hung about his figure.

Lady Chevenix-Gore said uncertainly:

'Oh, dear - this is most extraordinary. Really, I - one hardly knows what to do.' Ruth said to Poirot:

‘This singular consternation, M. Poirot, is occasioned by the fact that my father, for the first time for at least twenty years, is late for dinner.’

‘It is most extraordinary - ’ wailed Lady Chevenix-Gore. ‘Gervase never - ’

An elderly man of upright soldierly carriage came to her side. He laughed genially.

‘Good old Gervase! Late at last! Upon my word, we’ll rag him over this. Elusive collar-stud, d’you think? Or is Gervase immune from our common weaknesses?’

Lady Chevenix-Gore said in a low, puzzled voice: ‘But Gervase is never late.’

It was almost ludicrous, the consternation caused by this simple contretemps. And yet, to Hercule Poirot, it was not ludicrous... Behind the consternation he felt uneasiness - perhaps even apprehension. And he, too, found it strange that Gervase Chevenix-Gore should not appear to greet the guest he had summoned in such a mysterious manner.

In the meantime, it was clear that nobody knew quite what to do. An unprecedented situation had arisen with which nobody knew how to deal.

Lady Chevenix-Gore at last took the initiative, if initiative it can be called. Certainly her manner was vague in the extreme.

‘Snell,’ she said, ‘is your master - ?’

She did not finish the sentence, merely looked at the butler expectantly.

Snell, who was clearly used to his mistress’s methods of seeking information, replied promptly to the unspecified question:

‘Sir Gervase came downstairs at five minutes to eight, m’lady, and went straight to the study.’

‘Oh, I see - ’ Her mouth remained open, her eyes seemed far away. ‘You don’t think - I mean - he heard the gong?’

‘I think he must have done so, m’lady, the gong being immediately outside the study door. I did not, of course, know that Sir Gervase was still in the study, otherwise I should have announced to him that dinner was ready. Shall I do so now, m’lady?’

Lady Chevenix-Gore seized on the suggestion with manifest relief. ‘Oh, thank you, Snell. Yes, please do. Yes, certainly.’

She said, as the butler left the room:

‘Snell is such a treasure. I rely on him absolutely. I really don’t know what I should do without Snell.’

Somebody murmured a sympathetic assent, but nobody spoke. Hercule Poirot, watching that room full of people with suddenly

sharpened attention, had an idea that one and all were in a state of tension. His eyes ran quickly over them, tabulating them roughly. Two elderly men, the soldierly one who had spoken just now, and a thin, spare, grey-haired man with closely pinched legal lips. Two youngish men - very different in type from each other. One with a moustache and an air of modest arrogance, he guessed to be possibly Sir Gervase's nephew, the one in the Blues. The other, with sleek brushed-back hair and a rather obvious style of good looks, he put down as of a definitely inferior social class. There was a small middle-aged woman with pince-nez and intelligent eyes, and there was a girl with flaming red hair.

Snell appeared at the door. His manner was perfect, but once again the veneer of the impersonal butler showed signs of the perturbed human being beneath the surface.

'Excuse me, m'lady, the study door is locked.' 'Locked?'

It was a man's voice - young, alert, with a ring of excitement in it. It was the good-looking young man with the slicked-back hair who had spoken. He went on, hurrying forward: 'Shall I go and see - ?'

But very quietly Hercule Poirot took command. He did it so naturally that no one thought it odd that this stranger, who had just arrived, should suddenly assume charge of the situation.

'Come,' he said. 'Let us go to the study.' He continued, speaking to Snell:

'Lead the way, if you please.'

Snell obeyed. Poirot followed close behind him, and, like a flock of sheep, everyone else followed.

Snell led the way through the big hall, past the great branching curve of the staircase, past an enormous grandfather clock and a recess in which stood a gong, along a narrow passage which ended in a door.

Here Poirot passed Snell and gently tried the handle. It turned, but the door did not open. Poirot rapped gently with his knuckles on the panel of the door. He rapped louder and louder. Then, suddenly desisting, he dropped to his knees and applied his eye to the keyhole.

Slowly he rose to his feet and looked round. His face was stern. ‘Gentlemen!’ he said. ‘This door must be broken open immediately!’

Under his direction the two young men, who were both tall and powerfully built, attacked the door. It was no easy matter. The doors of Hamborough Close were solidly built.

At last, however, the lock gave, and the door swung inwards with a noise of splintering, rending wood.

And then, for a moment, everyone stood still, huddled in the doorway looking at the scene inside. The lights were on. Along the left-hand wall was a big writing-table, a massive affair of solid mahogany. Sitting, not at the table, but sideways to it, so that his back was directly towards them, was a big man slouched down in a

chair. His head and the upper part of his body hung down over the right side of the chair, and his right hand and arm hung limply down. Just below it on the carpet was a small, gleaming pistol…

There was no need of speculation. The picture was clear. Sir Gervase Chevenix-Gore had shot himself.

Chapter 3

For a moment or two the group in the doorway stood motionless, staring at the scene. Then Poirot strode forward.

At the same moment Hugo Trent said crisply: ‘My God, the Old Man’s shot himself!’

And there was a long, shuddering moan from Lady Chevenix-Gore. ‘Oh, Gervase - Gervase!’

Over his shoulder Poirot said sharply:

‘Take Lady Chevenix-Gore away. She can do nothing here.’ The elderly soldierly man obeyed. He said:

‘Come, Vanda. Come, my dear. You can do nothing. It’s all over. Ruth, come and look after your mother.’

But Ruth Chevenix-Gore had pressed into the room and stood close by Poirot's side as he bent over the dreadful sprawled figure in the chair - the figure of a man of Herculean build with a Viking beard.

She said in a low, tense voice, curiously restrained and muffled: 'You're quite sure he's - dead?'

Poirot looked up.

The girl's face was alive with some emotion - an emotion sternly checked and repressed - that he did not quite understand. It was not grief - it seemed more like a kind of half-fearful excitement.

The little woman in the pince-nez murmured: 'Your mother, my dear - don't you think - ?'

In a high, hysterical voice the girl with the red hair cried out:

'Then it wasn't a car or a champagne cork! It was a shot we heard…'
Poirot turned and faced them all.

'Somebody must communicate with the police - ' Ruth Chevenix-Gore cried out violently:

'No!'

The elderly man with the legal face said:

'Unavoidable, I am afraid. Will you see to that, Burrows? Hugo - '
Poirot said:

‘You are Mr Hugo Trent?’ to the tall young man with the moustache. ‘It would be well, I think, if everyone except you and I were to leave this room.’

Again his authority was not questioned. The lawyer shepherded the others away. Poirot and Hugo Trent were left alone.

The latter said, staring:

‘Look here – who are you? I mean, I haven’t the foggiest idea. What are you doing here?’ Poirot took a card-case from his pocket and selected a card.

Hugo Trent said, staring at it:

‘Private detective - eh? Of course, I’ve heard of you... But I still don’t see what you are doing here.’ ‘You did not know that your uncle - he was your uncle, was he not - ?’

Hugo’s eyes dropped for a fleeting moment to the dead man. ‘The Old Man? Yes, he was my uncle all right.’

‘You did not know that he had sent for me?’

Hugo shook his head. He said slowly: ‘I’d no idea of it.’

There was an emotion in his voice that was rather hard to classify. His face looked wooden and stupid - the kind of expression, Poirot thought, that made a useful mask in times of stress.

Poirot said quietly:

‘We are in Westshire, are we not? I know your Chief Constable, Major Riddle, very well.’ Hugo said:

‘Riddle lives about half a mile away. He’ll probably come over himself.’ ‘That,’ said Poirot, ‘will be very convenient.’

He began prowling gently round the room. He twitched aside the window curtain and examined the french windows, trying them gently. They were closed.

On the wall behind the desk there hung a round mirror. The mirror was shivered. Poirot bent down and picked up a small object.

‘What’s that?’ asked Hugo Trent. ‘The bullet.’

‘It passed straight through his head and struck the mirror?’ ‘It seems so.’

Poirot replaced the bullet meticulously where he had found it. He came up to the desk. Some papers were arranged neatly stacked in heaps. On the blotting-pad itself there was a loose sheet of paper with the word SORRY printed across it in large, shaky handwriting.

Hugo said: ‘He must have written that just before he - did it.’ Poirot nodded thoughtfully.

He looked again at the smashed mirror, then at the dead man. His brow creased itself a little as though in perplexity. He went over to the door, where it hung crookedly with its splintered lock. There was no key in the door, as he knew - otherwise he would not have been able to see through the keyhole. There was no sign of it on the floor. Poirot leaned over the dead man and ran his fingers over him.

'Yes,' he said. 'The key is in his pocket.'

Hugo drew out a cigarette-case and lighted a cigarette. He spoke rather hoarsely.

'It seems all quite clear,' he said. 'My uncle shut himself up in here, scrawled that message on a piece of paper, and then shot himself.'

Poirot nodded meditatively. Hugo went on:

'But I don't understand why he sent for you. What was it all about?'

'That is rather more difficult to explain. While we are waiting, Mr Trent, for the authorities to take charge, perhaps you will tell me exactly who all the people are whom I saw tonight when I arrived?'

'Who they are?' Hugo spoke almost absently. 'Oh, yes, of course. Sorry. Shall we sit down?' He indicated a settee in the farthest corner of the room from the body. He went on, speaking jerkily: 'Well, there's Vanda - my aunt, you know. And Ruth, my cousin. But you know them. Then the other girl is Susan Cardwell. She's just staying here. And there's Colonel Bury. He's an old friend of the family. And Mr Forbes. He's an old friend, too, beside being the

family lawyer and all that. Both the old boys had a passion for Vanda when she was young, and they still hang round in a faithful, devoted sort of way. Ridiculous, but rather touching. Then there's Godfrey Burrows, the Old Man's - I mean my uncle's - secretary, and Miss Lingard, who's here to help him write a history of the Chevenix-Gores. She mugs up historical stuff for writers. That's the lot, I think.'

Poirot nodded. Then he said:

'And I understand you actually heard the shot that killed your uncle?'

'Yes, we did. Thought it was a champagne cork - at least, I did. Susan and Miss Lingard thought it was a car backfiring outside - the road runs quite near, you know.'

'When was this?'

'Oh, about ten past eight. Snell had just sounded the first gong.'
'And where were you when you heard it?'

'In the hall. We - we were laughing about it - arguing, you know, as to where the sound came from. I said it came from the dining-room, and Susan said it came from the direction of the drawing-room, and Miss Lingard said it sounded like upstairs, and Snell said it came from the road outside, only it came through the upstairs windows. And Susan said, 'Any more theories?' And I laughed and said there was always murder! Seems pretty rotten to think of it now.'

His face twitched nervously.

‘It did not occur to anyone that Sir Gervase might have shot himself?’ ‘No, of course not.’

‘You have, in fact, no idea why he should have shot himself?’ Hugo said slowly:

‘Oh, well, I shouldn’t say that - ’ ‘You have an idea?’

‘Yes - well - it’s difficult to explain. Naturally I didn’t expect him to commit suicide, but all the same I’m not frightfully surprised. The truth of it is that my uncle was as mad as a hatter, M. Poirot. Everyone knew that.’

‘That strikes you as a sufficient explanation?’

‘Well, people do shoot themselves when they’re a bit barmy.’ ‘An explanation of an admirable simplicity.’

Hugo stared.

Poirot got up again and wandered aimlessly round the room. It was comfortably furnished, mainly in a rather heavy Victorian style. There were massive bookcases, huge arm-chairs, and some upright chairs of genuine Chippendale. There were not many ornaments, but some bronzes on the mantel-piece attracted Poirot’s attention and apparently stirred his admiration. He picked them up one by one, carefully examining them before replacing them with care. From the one on the extreme left he detached something with a fingernail.

‘What’s that?’ asked Hugo without much interest. ‘Nothing very much. A tiny sliver of looking-glass.’ Hugo said:

‘Funny the way that mirror was smashed by the shot. A broken mirror means bad luck. Poor old Gervase… I suppose his luck had held a bit too long.’

‘Your uncle was a lucky man?’ Hugo gave a short laugh.

‘Why, his luck was proverbial! Everything he touched turned to gold! If he backed an outsider, it romped home! If he invested in a doubtful mine, they struck a vein of ore at once! He’s had the most amazing escapes from the tightest of tight places. His life’s been saved by a kind of miracle more than once. He was rather a fine old boy, in his way, you know. He’d certainly “been places and seen things” - more than most of his generation.’

Poirot murmured in a conversational tone:

‘You were attached to your uncle, Mr Trent?’ Hugo Trent seemed a little startled by the question.

‘Oh - er - yes, of course,’ he said rather vaguely. ‘You know, he was a bit difficult at times. Frightful strain to live with, and all that. Fortunately I didn’t have to see much of him.’

‘He was fond of you?’

‘Not so that you’d notice it! As a matter of fact, he rather resented my existence, so to speak.’

‘How was that, Mr Trent?’

‘Well, you see, he had no son of his own - and he was pretty sore about it. He was mad about family and all that sort of thing. I believe it cut him to the quick to know that when he died the Chevenix-Gores would cease to exist. They’ve been going ever since the Norman Conquest, you know. The Old Man was the last of them. I suppose it was rather rotten from his point of view.’

‘You yourself do not share that sentiment?’ Hugo shrugged his shoulders.

‘All that sort of thing seems to me rather out of date.’ ‘What will happen to the estate?’

‘Don’t really know. I might get it. Or he may have left it to Ruth. Probably Vanda has it for her lifetime.’ ‘Your uncle did not definitely declare his intentions?’

‘Well, he had his pet idea.’ ‘And what was that?’

‘His idea was that Ruth and I should make a match of it.’ ‘That would doubtless have been very suitable.’

‘Eminently suitable. But Ruth - well, Ruth has very decided views of her own about life. Mind you, she’s an extremely attractive young woman, and she knows it. She’s in no hurry to marry and settle down.’

Poirot leaned forward.

‘But you yourself would have been willing, M. Trent?’ Hugo said in a bored tone of voice:

‘I really can’t see it makes a ha’p’orth of difference who you marry nowadays. Divorce is so easy. If you’re not hitting it off, nothing is easier than to cut the tangle and start again.’

The door opened and Forbes entered with a tall, spruce-looking man. The latter nodded to Trent.

‘Hallo, Hugo. I’m extremely sorry about this. Very rough on all of you.’ Hercule Poirot came forward.

‘How do you do, Major Riddle? You remember me?’

‘Yes, indeed.’ The chief constable shook hands. ‘So you’re down here?’

There was a meditative note in his voice. He glanced curiously at Hercule Poirot.

Chapter 4

‘Well?’ said Major Riddle.

It was twenty minutes later. The chief constable's interrogative 'Well?' was addressed to the police surgeon, a lank elderly man with grizzled hair.

The latter shrugged his shoulders.

'He's been dead over half an hour - but not more than an hour. You don't want technicalities, I know, so I'll spare you them. The man was shot through the head, the pistol being held a few inches from the right temple. Bullet passed right through the brain and out again.'

'Perfectly compatible with suicide?'

'Oh, perfectly. The body then slumped down in the chair, and the pistol dropped from his hand.' 'You've got the bullet?'

'Yes.' The doctor held it up.

'Good,' said Major Riddle. 'We'll keep it for comparison with the pistol. Glad it's a clear case and no difficulties.'

Hercule Poirot asked gently:

'You are sure there are no difficulties, Doctor?' The doctor replied slowly:

'Well, I suppose you might call one thing a little odd. When he shot himself he must have been leaning slightly over to the right. Otherwise the bullet would have hit the wall below the mirror, instead of plumb in the middle.'

‘An uncomfortable position in which to commit suicide,’ said Poirot. The doctor shrugged his shoulders.

‘Oh, well - comfort - if you’re going to end it all - ’ He left the sentence unfinished. Major Riddle said:

‘The body can be moved now?’

‘Oh, yes. I’ve done with it until the P.-M.’

‘What about you, Inspector?’ Major Riddle spoke to a tall impassive-faced man in plain clothes.

‘O.K., sir. We’ve got all we want. Only the deceased’s fingerprints on the pistol.’ ‘Then you can get on with it.’

The mortal remains of Gervase Chevenix-Gore were removed. The chief constable and Poirot were left together.

‘Well,’ said Riddle, ‘everything seems quite clear and aboveboard. Door locked, window fastened, key of door in dead man’s pocket. Everything according to Cocker - but for one circumstance.’

‘And what is that, my friend?’ inquired Poirot.

‘You!’ said Riddle bluntly. ‘What are you doing down here?’

By way of reply, Poirot handed to him the letter he had received from the dead man a week ago, and the telegram which had finally brought him there.

'Humph,' said the chief constable. 'Interesting. We'll have to get to the bottom of this. I should say it had a direct bearing upon his suicide.'

'I agree.'

'We must check up on who is in the house.'

'I can tell you their names. I have just been making inquiries of Mr Trent.' He repeated the list of names.

'Perhaps you, Major Riddle, know something about these people?'

'I know something of them, naturally. Lady Chevenix-Gore is quite as mad in her own way as old Sir Gervase. They were devoted to each other - and both quite mad. She's the vaguest creature that ever lived, with an occasional uncanny shrewdness that strikes the nail on the head in the most surprising fashion. People laugh at her a good deal. I think she knows it, but she doesn't care. She's absolutely no sense of humour.'

'Miss Chevenix-Gore is only their adopted daughter, I understand?'
'Yes.'

'A very handsome young lady.'

‘She’s a devilishly attractive girl. Has played havoc with most of the young fellows round here. Leads them all on and then turns round and laughs at them. Good seat on a horse, and wonderful hands.’

‘That, for the moment, does not concern us.’

‘Er - no, perhaps not… Well, about the other people. I know old Bury, of course. He’s here most of the time. Almost a tame cat about the house. Kind of A.D.C. to Lady Chevenix-Gore. He’s a very old friend. They’ve known him all their lives. I think he and Sir Gervase were both interested in some company of which Bury was a director.’

‘Oswald Forbes, do you know anything of him?’ ‘I rather believe I’ve met him once.’

‘Miss Lingard?’

‘Never heard of her.’ ‘Miss Susan Cardwell?’

‘Rather a good-looking girl with red hair? I’ve seen her about with Ruth Chevenix-Gore the last few days.’

‘Mr Burrows?’

‘Yes, I know him. Chevenix-Gore’s secretary. Between you and me, I don’t take to him much. He’s good-looking, and knows it. Not quite out of the top drawer.’

‘Had he been with Sir Gervase long?’ ‘About two years, I fancy.’

‘And there is no one else - ?’ Poirot broke off.

A tall, fair-haired man in a lounge suit came hurrying in. He was out of breath and looked disturbed.

‘Good evening, Major Riddle. I heard a rumour that Sir Gervase had shot himself, and I hurried up here. Snell tells me it’s true. It’s incredible! I can’t believe it!’

‘It’s true enough, Lake. Let me introduce you. This is Captain Lake, Sir Gervase’s agent for the estate. M. Hercule Poirot, of whom you may have heard.’

Lake’s face lit up with what seemed a kind of delighted incredulity.

‘M. Hercule Poirot? I’m most awfully pleased to meet you. At least - ’ He broke off, the quick charming smile vanished - he looked disturbed and upset. ‘There isn’t anything - fishy - about this suicide, is there, sir?’

‘Why should there be anything “fishy,” as you call it?’ asked the chief constable sharply.

‘I mean, because M. Poirot is here. Oh, and because the whole business seems so incredible!’

‘No, no,’ said Poirot quickly. ‘I am not here on account of the death of Sir Gervase. I was already in the house - as a guest.’

‘Oh, I see. Funny, he never told me you were coming when I was going over accounts with him this afternoon.’

Poirot said quietly:

‘You have twice used the word “incredible,” Captain Lake. Are you, then, so surprised to hear of Sir Gervase committing suicide?’

‘Indeed I am. Of course, he was mad as a hatter; everyone would agree about that. But all the same, I simply can’t imagine his thinking the world would be able to get on without him.’

‘Yes,’ said Poirot. ‘It is a point, that.’ And he looked with appreciation at the frank, intelligent countenance of the young man.

Major Riddle cleared his throat.

‘Since you are here, Captain Lake, perhaps you will sit down and answer a few questions.’ ‘Certainly, sir.’

Lake took a chair opposite the other two. ‘When did you last see Sir Gervase?’

‘This afternoon, just before three o’clock. There were some accounts to be checked, and the question of a new tenant for one of the farms.’

‘How long were you with him?’ ‘Perhaps half an hour.’

‘Think carefully, and tell me whether you noticed anything unusual in his manner.’ The young man considered.

‘No, I hardly think so. He was, perhaps, a trifle excited - but that wasn’t unusual with him.’ ‘He was not depressed in any way?’

‘Oh, no, he seemed in good spirits. He was enjoying himself very much just now, writing up a history of the family.’

‘How long had he been doing this?’ ‘He began it about six months ago.’

‘Is that when Miss Lingard came here?’

‘No. She arrived about two months ago when he had discovered that he could not manage the necessary research work by himself.’

‘And you consider he was enjoying himself?’

‘Oh, simply enormously! He really didn’t think that anything else mattered in the world except his family.’

There was a momentary bitterness in the young man’s tone.

‘Then, as far as you know, Sir Gervase had no worries of any kind?’ There was a slight - a very slight - pause before Captain Lake answered. ‘No.’

Poirot suddenly interposed a question:

‘Sir Gervase was not, you think, worried about his daughter in any way?’ ‘His daughter?’

‘That is what I said.’

‘Not as far as I know,’ said the young man stiffly. Poirot said nothing further. Major Riddle said:

‘Well, thank you, Lake. Perhaps you’d stay around in case I might want to ask you anything.’ ‘Certainly, sir.’ He rose. ‘Anything I can do?’

‘Yes, you might send the butler here. And perhaps you’d find out for me how Lady Chevenix-Gore is, and if I could have a few words with her presently, or if she’s too upset.’

The young man nodded and left the room with a quick, decisive step. ‘An attractive personality,’ said Hercule Poirot.

‘Yes, nice fellow, and good at his job. Everyone likes him.’

Chapter 5

‘Sit down, Snell,’ said Major Riddle in a friendly tone. ‘I’ve a good many questions to ask you, and I expect this has been a shock to you.’

‘Oh, it has indeed, sir. Thank you, sir.’ Snell sat down with such a discreet air that it was practically the same as though he had remained on his feet.

‘Been here a good long time, haven’t you?’

‘Sixteen years, sir, ever since Sir Gervase - er - settled down, so to speak.’ ‘Ah, yes, of course, your master was a great traveller in his day.’

‘Yes, sir. He went on an expedition to the Pole and many other interesting places.’

‘Now, Snell, can you tell me when you last saw your master this evening?’

‘I was in the dining-room, sir, seeing that the table arrangements were all complete. The door into the hall was open, and I saw Sir Gervase come down the stairs, cross the hall and go along the passage to the study.’

‘That was at what time?’

‘Just before eight o’clock. It might have been as much as five minutes before eight.’ ‘And that was the last you saw of him?’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘Did you hear a shot?’

‘Oh, yes, indeed, sir; but of course I had no idea at the time - how should I have had?’ ‘What did you think it was?’

‘I thought it was a car, sir. The road runs quite near the park wall. Or it might have been a shot in the woods - a poacher, perhaps. I never dreamed - ’

Major Riddle cut him short. ‘What time was that?’

‘It was exactly eight minutes past eight, sir.’ The chief constable said sharply:

‘How is it you can fix the time to a minute?’ ‘That’s easy, sir. I had just sounded the first going.’ ‘The first gong?’

‘Yes, sir. By Sir Gervase’s orders, a gong was always to be sounded seven minutes before the actual dinner gong. Very particular he was, sir, that everyone should be assembled ready in the drawing-room when the second gong went. As soon as I had sounded the second gong, I went to the drawing-room and announced dinner, and everyone went in.’

‘I begin to understand,’ said Hercule Poirot, ‘why you looked so surprised when you announced dinner this evening. It was usual for Sir Gervase to be in the drawing-room?’

‘I’d never known him not be there before, sir. It was quite a shock. I little thought - ’ Again Major Riddle interrupted adroitly:

‘And were the others also usually there?’

Snell coughed.

‘Anyone who was late for dinner, sir, was never asked to the house again.’ ‘H’m, very drastic.’

‘Sir Gervase, sir, employed a chef who was formerly with the Emperor of Moravia. He used to say, sir, that dinner was as important as a religious ritual.’

‘And what about his own family?’

‘Lady Chevenix-Gore was always very particular not to upset him, sir, and even Miss Ruth dared not be late for dinner.’

‘Interesting,’ murmured Hercule Poirot.

‘I see,’ said Riddle. ‘So, dinner being at a quarter past eight, you sounded the first gong at eight minutes past as usual?’

‘That is so, sir - but it wasn’t as usual. Dinner was usually at eight. Sir Gervase gave orders that dinner was to be a quarter of an hour later this evening, as he was expecting a gentleman by the late train.’

Snell made a little bow towards Poirot as he spoke.

‘When your master went to the study, did he look upset or worried in any way?’

‘I could not say, sir. It was too far for me to judge of his expression. I just noticed him, that was all.’ ‘Was he left alone when he went to the study?’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘Did anyone go to the study after that?’

‘I could not say, sir. I went to the butler’s pantry after that, and was there until I sounded the first gong at eight minutes past eight.’

‘That was when you heard the shot?’ ‘Yes, sir.’

Poirot gently interposed a question.

‘There were others, I think, who also heard the shot?’ ‘Yes, sir. Mr Hugo and Miss Cardwell. And Miss Lingard.’ ‘These people were also in the hall?’

‘Miss Lingard came out from the drawing-room, and Miss Cardwell and Mr Hugo were just coming down the stairs.’ Poirot asked:

‘Was there any conversation about the matter?’

‘Well, sir, Mr Hugo asked if there was champagne for dinner. I told him that sherry, hock and burgundy were being served.’

‘He thought it was a champagne cork?’ ‘Yes, sir.’

‘But nobody took it seriously?’

‘Oh, no, sir. They all went into the drawing-room talking and laughing.’ ‘Where were the other members of the household?’

‘I could not say, sir.’ Major Riddle said:

‘Do you know anything about this pistol?’ He held it out as he spoke.

‘Oh, yes, sir. That belonged to Sir Gervase. He always kept it in the drawer of his desk in here.’ ‘Was it usually loaded?’

‘I couldn’t say, sir.’

Major Riddle laid down the pistol and cleared his throat.

‘Now, Snell, I’m going to ask you a rather important question. I hope you will answer it as truthfully as you can. Do you know of any reason which might lead your master to commit suicide? ’

‘No, sir. I know of nothing.’

‘Sir Gervase had not been odd in his manner of late? Not depressed? Or worried?’ Snell coughed apologetically.

‘You’ll excuse my saying it, sir, but Sir Gervase was always what might have seemed to strangers a little odd in his manner. He was a highly original gentleman, sir.’

‘Yes, yes, I am quite aware of that.’

‘Outsiders, sir, did not always Understand Sir Gervase.’ Snell gave the phrase a definite value of capital letter.

‘I know. I know. But there was nothing that you would have called unusual?’ The butler hesitated.

‘I think, sir, that Sir Gervase was worried about something,’ he said at last. ‘Worried and depressed?’

‘I shouldn’t say depressed, sir. But worried, yes.’ ‘Have you any idea of the cause of that worry?’ ‘No, sir.’

‘Was it connected with any particular person, for instance?’

‘I could not say at all, sir. In any case, it is only an impression of mine.’ Poirot spoke again.

‘You were surprised at his suicide?’

‘Very surprised, sir. It has been a terrible shock to me. I never dreamed of such a thing.’ Poirot nodded thoughtfully.

Riddle glanced at him, then he said:

‘Well, Snell, I think that is all we want to ask you. You are quite sure that there is nothing else you can tell us - no unusual incident, for instance, that has happened in the last few days?’

The butler, rising to his feet, shook his head. ‘There is nothing, sir, nothing whatever.’ ‘Then you can go.’

‘Thank you, sir.’

Moving towards the doorway, Snell drew back and stood aside. Lady Chevenix-Gore floated into the room.

She was wearing an oriental-looking garment of purple and orange silk wound tightly round her body. Her face was serene and her manner collected and calm.

‘Lady Chevenix-Gore.’ Major Riddle sprang to his feet. She said:

‘They told me you would like to talk to me, so I came.’

‘Shall we go into another room? This must be painful for you in the extreme.’

Lady Chevenix-Gore shook her head and sat down on one of the Chippendale chairs. She murmured: ‘Oh, no, what does it matter?’

‘It is very good of you, Lady Chevenix-Gore, to put your feelings aside. I know what a frightful shock this must have been and - ’

She interrupted him.

‘It was rather a shock at first,’ she admitted. Her tone was easy and conversational. ‘But there is no such thing as Death, really, you know, only Change.’ She added: ‘As a matter of fact, Gervase is standing just behind your left shoulder now. I can see him distinctly.’

Major Riddle's left shoulder twitched slightly. He looked at Lady Chevenix-Gore rather doubtfully. She smiled at him, a vague, happy smile.

'You don't believe, of course! So few people will. To me, the spirit world is quite as real as this one. But please ask me anything you like, and don't worry about distressing me. I'm not in the least distressed. Everything, you see, is Fate. One cannot escape one's Karma. It all fits in - the mirror - everything.'

'The mirror, madame?' asked Poirot. She nodded her head towards it vaguely.

'Yes. It's splintered, you see. A symbol! You know Tennyson's poem? I used to read it as a girl - though, of course, I didn't realise then the esoteric side of it. "The mirror cracked from side to side. 'The curse is come upon me!' cried the Lady of Shalott." That's what happened to Gervase. The Curse came upon him suddenly. I think, you know, most very old families have a curse... the mirror cracked. He knew that he was doomed! The Curse had come! '

'But, madame, it was not a curse that cracked the mirror - it was a bullet!' Lady Chevenix-Gore said, still in the same sweet vague manner:

'It's all the same thing, really... It was Fate.' 'But your husband shot himself.'

Lady Chevenix-Gore smiled indulgently.

‘He shouldn’t have done that, of course. But Gervase was always impatient. He could never wait. His hour had come - he went forward to meet it. It’s all so simple, really.’

Major Riddle, clearing his throat in exasperation, said sharply:

‘Then you weren’t surprised at your husband’s taking his own life? Had you been expecting such a thing to happen?’

‘Oh, no.’ Her eyes opened wide. ‘One can’t always foresee the future. Gervase, of course, was a very strange man, a very unusual man. He was quite unlike anyone else. He was one of the Great Ones born again. I’ve known that for some time. I think he knew it himself. He found it very hard to conform to the silly little standards of the everyday world.’ She added, looking over Major Riddle’s shoulder, ‘He’s smiling now. He’s thinking how foolish we all are. So we are really. Just like children. Pretending that life is real and that it matters… Life is only one of the Great Illusions.’

Feeling that he was fighting a losing battle, Major Riddle asked desperately: ‘You can’t help us at all as to why your husband should have taken his life?’ She shrugged her thin shoulders.

‘Forces move us - they move us… You cannot understand. You move only on the material plane.’ Poirot coughed.

‘Talking of the material plane, have you any idea, madame, as to how your husband has left his money?’ ‘Money?’ she stared at him. ‘I never think of money.’

Her tone was disdainful.

Poirot switched to another point.

‘At what time did you come downstairs to dinner tonight?’ ‘Time? What is Time? Infinite, that is the answer. Time is infinite.’ Poirot murmured:

‘But your husband, madame, was rather particular about time - especially, so I have been told, as regards the dinner hour.’

‘Dear Gervase,’ she smiled indulgently. ‘He was very foolish about that. But it made him happy. So we were never late.’

‘Were you in the drawing-room, madame, when the first gong went?’ ‘No, I was in my room then.’

‘Do you remember who was in the drawing-room when you did come down?’ ‘Nearly everybody, I think,’ said Lady Chevenix-Gore vaguely. ‘Does it matter?’

‘Possibly not,’ admitted Poirot. ‘Then there is something else. Did your husband ever tell you that he suspected he was being robbed?’

Lady Chevenix-Gore did not seem much interested in the question.

‘Robbed? No, I don’t think so.’

‘Robbed, swindled - victimized in some way - ?’

‘No - no - I don’t think so… Gervase would have been very angry if anybody had dared to do anything like that.’

‘At any rate he said nothing about it to you?’

‘No - no.’ Lady Chevenix-Gore shook her head, still without much real interest. ‘I should have remembered…’

‘When did you last see your husband alive?’

‘He looked in, as usual, on his way downstairs before dinner. My maid was there. He just said he was going down.’

‘What has he talked about most in the last few weeks?’

‘Oh, the family history. He was getting on so well with it. He found that funny old thing, Miss Lingard, quite invaluable. She looked up things for him in the British Museum - all that sort of thing. She worked with Lord Mulcaster on his book, you know. And she was tactful - I mean, she didn’t look up the wrong things. After all, there are ancestors one doesn’t want raked up. Gervase was very sensitive. She helped me, too. She got a lot of information for me about Hatshepsut. I am a reincarnation of Hatshepsut, you know.’

Lady Chevenix-Gore made this announcement in a calm voice. ‘Before that,’ she went on, ‘I was a Priestess in Atlantis.’ Major Riddle shifted a little in his chair.

‘Er - er - very interesting,’ he said. ‘Well, really, Lady Chevenix-Gore, I think that will be all. Very kind of you.’

Lady Chevenix-Gore rose, clasping her oriental robes about her.

‘Goodnight,’ she said. And then, her eyes shifting to a point behind Major Riddle. ‘Goodnight, Gervase dear. I wish you could come, but I know you have to stay here.’ She added in an explanatory fashion, ‘You have to stay in the place where you’ve passed over for at least twenty-four hours. It’s some time before you can move about freely and communicate.’

She trailed out of the room. Major Riddle wiped his brow.

‘Phew,’ he murmured. ‘She’s a great deal madder than I ever thought. Does she really believe all that nonsense?’

Poirot shook his head thoughtfully.

‘It is possible that she finds it helpful,’ he said. ‘She needs, at this moment, to create for herself a world of illusion so that she can escape the stark reality of her husband’s death.’

‘She seems almost certifiable to me,’ said Major Riddle. ‘A long farrago of nonsense without one word of sense in it.’

‘No, no, my friend. The interesting thing is, as Mr Hugo Trent casually remarked to me, that amidst all the vapouring there is an occasional shrewd thrust. She showed it by her remark about Miss Lingard’s tact in not stressing undesirable ancestors. Believe me, Lady Chevenix-Gore is no fool.’

He got up and paced up and down the room.

‘There are things in this affair that I do not like. No, I do not like them at all.’ Riddle looked at him curiously.

‘You mean the motive for his suicide?’

‘Suicide - suicide! It is all wrong, I tell you. It is wrong psychologically. How did Chevenix-Gore think of himself? As a Colossus, as an immensely important person, as the centre of the universe! Does such a man destroy himself? Surely not. He is far more likely to destroy someone else - some miserable crawling ant of a human being who had dared to cause him annoyance... Such an act he might regard as necessary - as sanctified! But self-destruction? The destruction of such a Self?’

‘It’s all very well, Poirot. But the evidence is clear enough. Door locked, key in his own pocket. Window closed and fastened. I know these things happen in books - but I’ve never come across them in real life. Anything else?’

‘But yes, there is something else.’ Poirot sat down in the chair. ‘Here I am. I am Chevenix-Gore. I am sitting at my desk. I am determined to kill myself - because, let us say, I have made a discovery concerning some terrific dishonour to the family name. It is not very convincing, that, but it must suffice.

‘Eh bien, what do I do? I scrawl on a piece of paper the word SORRY. Yes, that is quite possible. Then I open a drawer of the desk, take out the pistol which I keep there, load it, if it is not loaded, and

then - do I proceed to shoot myself? No, I first turn my chair round - so, and I lean over a little to the right - so - and then I put the pistol to my temple and fire!'

Poirot sprang up from his chair, and wheeling round, demanded:

'I ask you, does that make sense? Why turn the chair round? If, for instance, there had been a picture on the wall there, then, yes, there might be an explanation. Some portrait which a dying man might wish to be the last thing on earth his eyes would see, but a window-curtain - ah non, that does not make sense.'

'He might have wished to look out of the window. Last view out over the estate.'

'My dear friend, you do not suggest that with any conviction. In fact, you know it is nonsense. At eight minutes past eight it was dark, and in any case the curtains are drawn. No, there must be some other explanation...'

'There's only one as far as I can see. Gervase Chevenix-Gore was mad.'

Poirot shook his head in a dissatisfied manner. Major Riddle rose.

'Come,' he said. 'Let us go and interview the rest of the party. We may get at something that way.'

Chapter 6

After the difficulties of getting a direct statement from Lady Chevenix-Gore, Major Riddle found considerable relief in dealing with a shrewd lawyer like Forbes.

Mr Forbes was extremely guarded and cautious in his statements, but his replies were all directly to the point.

He admitted that Sir Gervase's suicide had been a great shock to him. He should never have considered Sir Gervase the kind of man who would take his own life. He knew nothing of any cause for such an act.

'Sir Gervase was not only my client, but was a very old friend. I have known him since boyhood. I should say that he had always enjoyed life.'

'In the circumstances, Mr Forbes, I must ask you to speak quite candidly. You did not know of any secret anxiety or sorrow in Sir Gervase's life?'

'No. He had minor worries, like most men, but there was nothing of a serious nature.' 'No illness? No trouble between him and his wife?'

'No. Sir Gervase and Lady Chevenix-Gore were devoted to each other.' Major Riddle said cautiously:

‘Lady Chevenix-Gore appears to hold somewhat curious views.’ Mr Forbes smiled - an indulgent, manly smile.

‘Ladies,’ he said, ‘must be allowed their fancies.’ The chief constable went on:

‘You managed all Sir Gervase’s legal affairs?’

‘Yes, my firm, Forbes, Ogilvie and Spence, have acted for the Chevenix-Gore family for well over a hundred years.’

‘Were there any - scandals in the Chevenix-Gore family?’ Mr Forbes’s eyebrows rose.

‘Really, I fail to understand you?’

‘M. Poirot, will you show Mr Forbes the letter you showed me?’

In silence Poirot rose and handed the letter to Mr Forbes with a little bow. Mr Forbes read it and his eyebrows rose still more.

‘A most remarkable letter,’ he said. ‘I appreciate your question now. No, so far as my knowledge went, there was nothing to justify the writing of such a letter.’

‘Sir Gervase said nothing of this matter to you?’

‘Nothing at all. I must say I find it very curious that he should not have done so.’ ‘He was accustomed to confide in you?’

‘I think he relied on my judgment.’

‘And you have no idea as to what this letter refers?’ ‘I should not like to make any rash speculations.’ Major Riddle appreciated the subtlety of this reply.

‘Now, Mr Forbes, perhaps you can tell us how Sir Gervase has left his property.’

‘Certainly. I see no objection to such a course. To his wife, Sir Gervase left an annual income of six thousand pounds chargeable on the estate, and the choice of the Dower House or the town house in Lowndes Square, whichever she should prefer. There were, of course, several legacies and bequests, but nothing of an outstanding nature. The residue of his property was left to his adopted daughter, Ruth, on condition that, if she married, her husband should take the name of Chevenix-Gore.’

‘Was nothing left to his nephew, Mr Hugo Trent?’ ‘Yes. A legacy of five thousand pounds.’

‘And I take it that Sir Gervase was a rich man?’

‘He was extremely wealthy. He had a vast private fortune apart from the estate. Of course, he was not quite so well-off as in the past. Practically all invested incomes have felt the strain. Also, Sir Gervase had dropped a good deal of money over a certain company - the Paragon Synthetic Rubber Substitute in which Colonel Bury persuaded him to invest a good deal of money.’

‘Not very wise advice?’ Mr Forbes sighed.

‘Retired soldiers are the worst sufferers when they engage in financial operations. I have found that their credulity far exceeds that of widows - and that is saying a good deal.’

‘But these unfortunate investments did not seriously affect Sir Gervase’s income?’

‘Oh, no, not seriously. He was still an extremely rich man.’ ‘When was this will made?’

‘Two years ago.’ Poirot murmured:

‘This arrangement, was it not possibly a little unfair to Mr Hugo Trent, Sir Gervase’s nephew? He is, after all, Sir Gervase’s nearest blood relation.’

Mr Forbes shrugged his shoulders.

‘One has to take a certain amount of family history into account.’ ‘Such as - ?’

Mr Forbes seemed slightly unwilling to proceed. Major Riddle said:

‘You mustn’t think we’re unduly concerned with raking up old scandals or anything of that sort. But this letter of Sir Gervase’s to M. Poirot has got to be explained.’

‘There is certainly nothing scandalous in the explanation of Sir Gervase’s attitude to his nephew,’ said Mr Forbes quickly. ‘It was simply that Sir Gervase always took his position as head of the family very seriously. He had a younger brother and sister. The brother, Anthony Chevenix-Gore, was killed in the war. The sister, Pamela, married, and Sir Gervase disapproved of the marriage. That is to say, he considered that she ought to obtain his consent and approval before marrying. He thought that Captain Trent’s family was not of sufficient prominence to be allied with a Chevenix-Gore. His sister was merely amused by his attitude. As a result, Sir Gervase has always been inclined to dislike his nephew. I think that dislike may have influenced him in deciding to adopt a child.’

‘There was no hope of his having children of his own?’

‘No. There was a still-born child about a year after his marriage. The doctors told Lady Chevenix-Gore that she would never be able to have another child. About two years later he adopted Ruth.’

‘And who was Mademoiselle Ruth? How did they come to settle upon her?’ ‘She was, I believe, the child of a distant connection.’

‘That I had guessed,’ said Poirot. He looked up at the wall which was hung with family portraits. ‘One can see that she was of the same blood - the nose, the line of the chin. It repeats itself on these walls many times.’

‘She inherits the temper too,’ said Mr Forbes dryly.

‘So I should imagine. How did she and her adopted father get on?’

‘Much as you might imagine. There was a fierce clash of wills more than once. But in spite of these quarrels I believe there was also an underlying harmony.’ ‘Nevertheless, she caused him a good deal of anxiety?’

‘Incessant anxiety. But I can assure you not to the point of causing him to take his own life.’

‘Ah, that, no,’ agreed Poirot. ‘One does not blow one’s brains out because one has a headstrong daughter! And so mademoiselle inherits! Sir Gervase, he never thought of altering his will?’

‘Ahem!’ Mr Forbes coughed to hide a little discomposure. ‘As a matter of fact, I took instructions from Sir Gervase on my arrival here (two days ago, that is to say) as to the drafting of a new will.’

‘What’s this?’ Major Riddle hitched his chair a little closer. ‘You didn’t tell us this.’ Mr Forbes said quickly:

‘You merely asked me what the terms of Sir Gervase’s will were. I gave you the information for which you asked. The new will was not even properly drawn up - much less signed.’

‘What were its provisions? They may be some guide to Sir Gervase’s state of mind.’

‘In the main, they were the same as before, but Miss Chevenix-Gore was only to inherit on condition that she married Mr Hugo Trent.’

‘Aha,’ said Poirot. ‘But there is a very decided difference there.’

‘I did not approve of the clause,’ said Mr Forbes. ‘And I felt bound to point out that it was quite possible it might be contested successfully. The Court does not look upon such conditional bequests with approval. Sir Gervase, however, was quite decided.’

‘And if Miss Chevenix-Gore (or, incidentally, Mr Trent) refused to comply?’

‘If Mr Trent was not willing to marry Miss Chevenix-Gore, then the money went to her unconditionally. But if he was willing and she refused, then the money went to him instead.’

‘Odd business,’ said Major Riddle.

Poirot leaned forward. He tapped the lawyer on the knee.

‘But what is behind it? What was in the mind of Sir Gervase when he made that stipulation? There must have been something very definite… There must, I think, have been the image of another man… a man of whom he disapproved. I think, Mr Forbes, that you must know who that man was?’

‘Really, M. Poirot, I have no information.’ ‘But you could make a guess.’

‘I never guess,’ said Mr Forbes, and his tone was scandalized.

Removing his pince-nez, he wiped them with a silk handkerchief and inquired:

'Is there anything else that you desire to know?'

'At the moment, no,' said Poirot. 'Not, that is, as far as I am concerned.'

Mr Forbes looked as though, in his opinion, that was not very far, and bent his attention on the chief constable.

'Thank you, Mr Forbes. I think that's all. I should like, if I may, to speak to Miss Chevenix-Gore.' 'Certainly. I think she is upstairs with Lady Chevenix-Gore.'

'Oh, well, perhaps I'll have a word with - what's his name? - Burrows, first, and the family-history woman.'

'They're both in the library. I will tell them.'

Chapter 7

'Hard work, that,' said Major Riddle, as the lawyer left the room. 'Extracting information from these old-fashioned legal wallahs takes a bit of doing. The whole business seems to me to centre about the girl.'

‘It would seem so - yes.’ ‘Ah, here comes Burrows.’

Godfrey Burrows came in with a pleasant eagerness to be of use. His smile was discreetly tempered with gloom and showed only a fraction too much teeth. It seemed more mechanical than spontaneous.

‘Now, Mr Burrows, we want to ask you a few questions.’ ‘Certainly, Major Riddle. Anything you like.’

‘Well, first and foremost, to put it quite simply, have you any ideas of your own about Sir Gervase’s suicide?’

‘Absolutely none. It was the greatest shock to me.’ ‘You heard the shot?’

‘No; I must have been in the library at the time, as far as I can make out. I came down rather early and went to the library to look up a reference I wanted. The library’s right the other side of the house from the study, so I shouldn’t hear anything.’

‘Was anyone with you in the library?’ asked Poirot. ‘No one at all.’

‘You’ve no idea where the other members of the household were at that time?’

‘Mostly upstairs dressing, I should imagine.’ ‘When did you come to the drawing-room?’

‘Just before M. Poirot arrived. Everybody was there then - except Sir Gervase, of course.’ ‘Did it strike you as strange that he wasn’t there?’

‘Yes, it did, as a matter of fact. As a rule he was always in the drawing-room before the first gong sounded.’

‘Have you noticed any difference in Sir Gervase’s manner lately? Has he been worried? Or anxious? Depressed?’

Godfrey Burrows considered.

‘No - I don’t think so. A little - well, preoccupied, perhaps.’

‘But he did not appear to be worried about any one definite matter?’ ‘Oh, no.’

‘No - financial worries of any kind?’

‘He was rather perturbed about the affairs of one particular company - the Paragon Synthetic Rubber Company to be exact.’

‘What did he actually say about it?’

Again Godfrey Burrows’ mechanical smile flashed out, and again it seemed slightly unreal.

‘Well - as a matter of fact - what he said was, “Old Bury’s either a fool or a knave. A fool, I suppose. I must go easy with him for Vanda’s sake.”’

‘And why did he say that - for Vanda’s sake?’ inquired Poirot.

‘Well, you see, Lady Chevenix-Gore was very fond of Colonel Bury, and he worshipped her. Followed her about like a dog.’

‘Sir Gervase was not - jealous at all?’

‘Jealous?’ Burrows stared and then laughed. ‘Sir Gervase jealous? He wouldn’t know how to set about it. Why, it would never have entered his head that anyone could ever prefer another man to him. Such a thing couldn’t be, you understand.’

Poirot said gently:

‘You did not, I think, like Sir Gervase Chevenix-Gore very much?’ Burrows flushed.

‘Oh, yes, I did. At least - well, all that sort of thing strikes one as rather ridiculous nowadays.’ ‘All what sort of thing?’ asked Poirot.

‘Well, the feudal motif, if you like. This worship of ancestry and personal arrogance. Sir Gervase was a very able man in many ways, and had led an interesting life, but he would have been more interesting if he hadn’t been so entirely wrapped up in himself and his own egoism.’

‘Did his daughter agree with you there?’ Burrows flushed again - this time a deep purple. He said:

‘I should imagine Miss Chevenix-Gore is quite one of the moderns! Naturally, I shouldn’t discuss her father with her.’

‘But the moderns do discuss their fathers a good deal!’ said Poirot. ‘It is entirely in the modern spirit to criticize your parents!’

Burrows shrugged his shoulders. Major Riddle asked:

‘And there was nothing else - no other financial anxiety? Sir Gervase never spoke of having been victimized?’

‘Victimized?’ Burrows sounded very astonished. ‘Oh, no.’ ‘And you yourself were on quite good terms with him?’ ‘Certainly I was. Why not?’

‘I am asking you, Mr Burrows.’ The young man looked sulky. ‘We were on the best of terms.’

‘Did you know that Sir Gervase had written to M. Poirot asking him to come down here?’ ‘No.’

‘Did Sir Gervase usually write his own letters?’ ‘No, he nearly always dictated them to me.’ ‘But he did not do so in this case?’

‘No.’

‘Why was that, do you think?’ ‘I can’t imagine.’

‘You can suggest no reason why he should have written this particular letter himself?’ ‘No, I can’t.’

‘Ah!’ said Major Riddle, adding smoothly, ‘Rather curious. When did you last see Sir Gervase?’ ‘Just before I went to dress for dinner. I took him some letters to sign.’

‘What was his manner then?’

‘Quite normal. In fact I should say he was feeling rather pleased with himself about something.’ Poirot stirred a little in his chair.

‘Ah?’ he said. ‘So that was your impression, was it? That he was pleased about something. And yet, not so very long afterwards, he shoots himself. It is odd, that!’

Godfrey Burrows shrugged his shoulders. ‘I’m only telling you my impressions.’

‘Yes, yes, they are very valuable. After all, you are probably one of the last people who saw Sir Gervase alive.’

‘Snell was the last person to see him.’

‘To see him, yes, but not to speak to him.’ Burrows did not reply.

Major Riddle said:

‘What time was it when you went up to dress for dinner?’ ‘About five minutes past seven.’

‘What did Sir Gervase do?’ ‘I left him in the study.’

‘How long did he usually take to change?’

‘He usually gave himself a full three-quarters of an hour.’

‘Then, if dinner was at a quarter-past eight, he would probably have gone up at half-past seven at the latest?’

‘Very likely.’

‘You yourself went to change early?’

‘Yes, I thought I would change and then go to the library and look up the references I wanted.’ Poirot nodded thoughtfully. Major Riddle said:

‘Well, I think that’s all for the moment. Will you send Miss What’s-her-name along?’

Little Miss Lingard tripped in almost immediately. She was wearing several chains which tinkled a little as she sat down and looked inquiringly from one to the other of the two men.

‘This is all very - er - sad, Miss Lingard,’ began Major Riddle. ‘Very sad indeed,’ said Miss Lingard decorously.

‘You came to this house - when?’

‘About two months ago. Sir Gervase wrote to a friend of his in the Museum - Colonel Fotheringary it was - and Colonel Fotheringary

recommended me. I have done a good deal of historical research work.'

'Did you find Sir Gervase difficult to work for?'

'Oh, not really. One had to humour him a little, of course. But then I always find one has to do that with men.'

With an uneasy feeling that Miss Lingard was probably humouring him at this moment, Major Riddle went on:

'Your work here was to help Sir Gervase with the book he was writing?' 'Yes.'

'What did it involve?'

For a moment, Miss Lingard looked quite human. Her eyes twinkled as she replied:

'Well, actually, you know, it involved writing the book! I looked up all the information and made notes, and arranged the material. And then, later, I revised what Sir Gervase had written.'

'You must have had to exercise a good deal of tact, mademoiselle,' said Poirot. 'Tact and firmness. One needs them both,' said Miss Lingard.

'Sir Gervase did not resent your - er - firmness?'

‘Oh not at all. Of course I put it to him that he mustn’t be bothered with all the petty detail.’ ‘Oh, yes, I see.’

‘It was quite simple, really,’ said Miss Lingard. ‘Sir Gervase was perfectly easy to manage if one took him the right way.’

‘Now, Miss Lingard, I wonder if you know anything that can throw light on this tragedy?’ Miss Lingard shook her head.

‘I’m afraid I don’t. You see, naturally he wouldn’t confide in me at all. I was practically a stranger. In any case I think he was far too proud to speak to anyone of family troubles.’

‘But you think it was family troubles that caused him to take his life?’ Miss Lingard looked rather surprised.

‘But of course! Is there any other suggestion?’

‘You feel sure that there were family troubles worrying him?’ ‘I know that he was in great distress of mind.’

‘Oh, you know that?’ ‘Why, of course.’

‘Tell me, mademoiselle, did he speak to you of the matter?’ ‘Not explicitly.’

‘What did he say?’

‘Let me see. I found that he didn’t seem to be taking in what I was saying - ’ ‘One moment. Pardon. When was this?’

‘This afternoon. We usually worked from three to five.’ ‘Pray go on.’

‘As I say, Sir Gervase seemed to be finding it hard to concentrate - in fact, he said as much, adding that he had several grave matters preying on his mind. And he said - let me see - something like this - (of course, I can’t be sure of the exact words): “It’s a terrible thing, Miss Lingard, when a family has been one of the proudest in the land, that dishonour should be brought on it.”’

‘And what did you say to that?’

‘Oh, just something soothing. I think I said that every generation had its weaklings - that that was one of the penalties of greatness - but that their failings were seldom remembered by posterity.’

‘And did that have the soothing effect you hoped?’

‘More or less. We got back to Sir Roger Chevenix-Gore. I had found a most interesting mention of him in a contemporary manuscript. But Sir Gervase’s attention wandered again. In the end he said he would not do any more work that afternoon. He said he had had a shock.’

‘A shock?’

‘That is what he said. Of course, I didn’t ask any questions. I just said, “I am sorry to hear it, Sir Gervase.” And then he asked me to tell Snell that M. Poirot would be arriving and to put off dinner until eight-fifteen, and send the car to meet the seven-fifty train.’

‘Did he usually ask you to make these arrangements?’

‘Well - no - that was really Mr Burrows’s business. I did nothing but my own literary work. I wasn’t a secretary in any sense of the word.’

Poirot asked:

‘Do you think Sir Gervase had a definite reason for asking you to make these arrangements, instead of asking Mr Burrows to do so?’

Miss Lingard considered.

‘Well, he may have had… I did not think of it at the time. I thought it was just a matter of convenience. Still, it’s true now I come to think of it, that he did ask me not to tell anyone that M. Poirot was coming. It was to be a surprise, he said.’

‘Ah! he said that, did he? Very curious, very interesting. And did you tell anyone?’

‘Certainly not, M. Poirot. I told Snell about dinner and to send the chauffeur to meet the seven-fifty as a gentleman was arriving by it.’

‘Did Sir Gervase say anything else that may have had a bearing on the situation?’ Miss Lingard thought.

‘No - I don’t think so - he was very much strung-up - I do remember that just as I was leaving the room, he said, “Not that it’s any good his coming now. It’s too late.”’

‘And you have no idea at all what he meant by that?’ ‘N - no.’

Just the faintest suspicion of indecision about the simple negative. Poirot repeated with a frown: ‘“Too late.” That is what he said, is it? “Too late.”’

Major Riddle said:

‘You can give us no idea, Miss Lingard, as to the nature of the circumstance that so distressed Sir Gervase?’

Miss Lingard said slowly:

‘I have an idea that it was in some way connected with Mr Hugo Trent.’ ‘With Hugo Trent? Why do you think that?’

‘Well, it was nothing definite, but yesterday afternoon we were just touching on Sir Hugo de Chevenix (who, I’m afraid, didn’t bear too good a character in the Wars of the Roses), and Sir Gervase said, “My sister would choose the family name of Hugo for her son! It’s always been an unsatisfactory name in our family. She might have known no Hugo would turn out well.”’

‘What you tell us there is suggestive,’ said Poirot. ‘Yes, it suggests a new idea to me.’ ‘Sir Gervase said nothing more definite than that?’ asked Major Riddle.

Miss Lingard shook her head.

‘No, and of course it wouldn’t have done for me to say anything. Sir Gervase was really just talking to himself. He wasn’t really speaking to me.’

‘Quite so.’ Poirot said:

‘Mademoiselle, you, a stranger, have been here for two months. It would be, I think, very valuable if you were to tell us quite frankly your impressions of the family and household.’

Miss Lingard took off her pince-nez and blinked reflectively.

‘Well, at first, quite frankly, I felt as though I’d walked straight into a madhouse! What with Lady Chevenix-Gore continually seeing things that weren’t there, and Sir Gervase behaving like - like a king - and dramatizing himself in the most extraordinary way - well, I really did think they were the queerest people I had ever come across. Of course, Miss Chevenix-Gore was perfectly normal, and I soon found that Lady Chevenix-Gore was really an extremely kind, nice woman. Nobody could be kinder and nicer to me than she has been. Sir Gervase - well, I really think he was mad. His egomania - isn’t that what you call it? - was getting worse and worse every day.’

‘And the others?’

‘Mr Burrows had rather a difficult time with Sir Gervase, I should imagine. I think he was glad that our work on the book gave him a little more breathing space. Colonel Bury was always charming. He was devoted to Lady Chevenix-Gore and he managed Sir Gervase

quite well. Mr Trent, Mr Forbes and Miss Cardwell have only been here a few days, so of course I don't know much about them.'

'Thank you, mademoiselle. And what about Captain Lake, the agent?' 'Oh, he's very nice. Everybody liked him.'

'Including Sir Gervase?'

'Oh, yes. I've heard him say Lake was much the best agent he'd had. Of course, Captain Lake had his difficulties with Sir Gervase, too - but he managed pretty well on the whole. It wasn't easy.'

Poirot nodded thoughtfully. He murmured, 'There was something - something - that I had in mind to ask you - some little thing... What was it now?'

Miss Lingard turned a patient face towards him. Poirot shook his head vexedly.

'Tchah! It is on the tip of my tongue.'

Major Riddle waited a minute or two, then as Poirot continued to frown perplexedly, he took up the interrogation once more.

'When was the last time you saw Sir Gervase?' 'At tea-time, in this room.'

'What was his manner then? Normal?' 'As normal as it ever was.'

‘Was there any sense of strain among the party?’ ‘No, I think everybody seemed quite ordinary.’ ‘Where did Sir Gervase go after tea?’

‘He took Mr Burrows with him into the study, as usual.’ ‘That was the last time you saw him?’

‘Yes. I went to the small morning-room where I worked, and typed a chapter of the book from the notes I had gone over with Sir Gervase, until seven o’clock, when I went upstairs to rest and dress for dinner.’

‘You actually heard the shot, I understand?’

‘Yes, I was in this room. I heard what sounded like a shot and I went out into the hall. Mr Trent was there, and Miss Cardwell. Mr Trent asked Snell if there was champagne for dinner, and made rather a joke of it. It never entered our heads to take the matter seriously, I’m afraid. We felt sure it must have been a car back-firing.’

Poirot said:

‘Did you hear Mr Trent say, “There’s always murder”?’

‘I believe he did say something like that - joking, of course.’ ‘What happened next?’

‘We all came in here.’

‘Can you remember the order in which the others came down to dinner?’

‘Miss Chevenix-Gore was the first, I think, and then Mr Forbes. Then Colonel Bury and Lady Chevenix-Gore together, and Mr Burrows immediately after them. I think that was the order, but I can’t be quite sure because they more or less came in all together.’

‘Gathered by the sound of the first gong?’

‘Yes. Everyone always hustled when they heard that gong. Sir Gervase was a terrible stickler for punctuality in the evening.’

‘What time did he himself usually come down?’

‘He was nearly always in the room before the first gong went.’ ‘Did it surprise you that he was not down on this occasion?’ ‘Very much.’

‘Ah, I have it!’ cried Poirot.

As the other two looked inquiringly at him he went on:

‘I have remembered what I wanted to ask. This evening, mademoiselle, as we all went along to the study on Snell’s reporting it to be locked, you stooped and picked something up.’

‘I did?’ Miss Lingard seemed very surprised.

‘Yes, just as we turned into the straight passage to the study. Something small and bright.’

‘How extraordinary - I don’t remember. Wait a minute - yes, I do. Only I wasn’t thinking. Let me see - it must be in here.’

Opening her black satin bag, she poured the contents on a table.

Poirot and Major Riddle surveyed the collection with interest. There were two handkerchiefs, a powder-compact, a small bunch of keys, a spectacle-case and one other object on which Poirot pounced eagerly.

‘A bullet, by jove!’ said Major Riddle.

The thing was indeed shaped like a bullet, but it proved to be a small pencil. ‘That’s what I picked up,’ said Miss Lingard. ‘I’d forgotten all about it.’ ‘Do you know who this belongs to, Miss Lingard?’

‘Oh, yes, it’s Colonel Bury’s. He had it made out of a bullet that hit him - or rather, didn’t hit him, if you know what I mean - in the South African War.’

‘Do you know when he had it last?’

‘Well, he had it this afternoon when they were playing bridge, because I noticed him writing with it on the score when I came in to tea.’

‘Who was playing bridge?’

‘Colonel Bury, Lady Chevenix-Gore, Mr Trent and Miss Cardwell.’

‘I think,’ said Poirot gently, ‘we will keep this and return it to the colonel ourselves.’ ‘Oh, please do. I am so forgetful, I might not remember to do so.’

‘Perhaps, mademoiselle, you would be so good as to ask Colonel Bury to come here now?’ ‘Certainly. I will go and find him at once.’

She hurried away. Poirot got up and began walking aimlessly round the room.

‘We begin,’ he said, ‘to reconstruct the afternoon. It is interesting. At half-past two Sir Gervase goes over accounts with Captain Lake. He is slightly preoccupied. At three, he discusses the book he is writing with Miss Lingard. He is in great distress of mind. Miss Lingard associates that distress of mind with Hugo Trent on the strength of a chance remark. At teatime his behaviour is normal. After tea, Godfrey Burrows tells us he was in good spirits over something. At five minutes to eight he comes downstairs, goes to his study, scrawls “Sorry” on a sheet of paper, and shoots himself!’

Riddle said slowly:

‘I see what you mean. It isn’t consistent.’

‘Strange alteration of moods in Sir Gervase Chevenix-Gore! He is preoccupied - he is seriously upset - he is normal - he is in high spirits! There is something very curious here! And then that phrase he used, “Too late.” That I should get here “Too late.” Well, it is true that. I did get here too late - to see him alive.’

‘I see. You really think - ?’

‘I shall never know now why Sir Gervase sent for me! That is certain!’

Poirot was still wandering round the room. He straightened one or two objects on the mantelpiece; he examined a card-table that stood against a wall, he opened the drawer of it and took out the bridge-markers. Then he wandered over to the writing-table and peered into the wastepaper basket. There was nothing in it but a paper bag. Poirot took it out, smelt it, murmured ‘Oranges’ and flattened it out, reading the name on it. ‘Carpenter and Sons, Fruiterers, Hamborough St Mary.’ He was just folding it neatly into squares when Colonel Bury entered the room.

Chapter 8

The Colonel dropped into a chair, shook his head, sighed and said:

‘Terrible business, this, Riddle. Lady Chevenix-Gore is being wonderful - wonderful. Grand woman! Full of courage!’

Coming softly back to his chair, Poirot said: ‘You have known her very many years, I think?’

‘Yes, indeed, I was at her coming-out dance. Wore rosebuds in her hair, I remember. And a white, fluffy dress… Wasn’t anyone to touch her in the room!’

His voice was full of enthusiasm. Poirot held out the pencil to him. ‘This is yours, I think?’

‘Eh? What? Oh, thank you, had it this afternoon when we were playing bridge. Amazing, you know, I held a hundred honours in spades three times running. Never done such a thing before.’

‘You were playing bridge before tea, I understand?’ said Poirot. ‘What was Sir Gervase’s frame of mind when he came in to tea?’

‘Usual - quite usual. Never dreamed he was thinking of making away with himself. Perhaps he was a little more excitable than usual, now I come to think of it.’

‘When was the last time you saw him?’

‘Why, then! Tea-time. Never saw the poor chap alive again.’ ‘You didn’t go to the study at all after tea?’

‘No, never saw him again.’

‘What time did you come down to dinner?’ ‘After the first gong went.’

‘You and Lady Chevenix-Gore came down together?’

‘No, we - er - met in the hall. I think she’d been into the dining-room to see to the flowers - something like that.’

Major Riddle said:

‘I hope you won’t mind, Colonel Bury, if I ask you a somewhat personal question. Was there any trouble between you and Sir Gervase over the question of the Paragon Synthetic Rubber Company?’

Colonel Bury’s face became suddenly purple. He spluttered a little.

‘Not at all. Not at all. Old Gervase was an unreasonable sort of fellow. You’ve got to remember that. He always expected everything he touched to turn out trumps! Didn’t seem to realize that the whole world was going through a period of crisis. All stocks and shares bound to be affected.’

‘So there was a certain amount of trouble between you?’ ‘No trouble. Just damned unreasonable of Gervase!’ ‘He blamed you for certain losses he had sustained?’

‘Gervase wasn’t normal! Vanda knew that. But she could always handle him. I was content to leave it all in her hands.’

Poirot coughed and Major Riddle, after glancing at him, changed the subject.

‘You are a very old friend of the family, I know, Colonel Bury. Had you any knowledge as to how Sir Gervase had left his money?’

‘Well, I should imagine the bulk of it would go to Ruth. That’s what I gathered from what Gervase let fall.’

‘You don’t think that was at all unfair on Hugo Trent?’ ‘Gervase didn’t like Hugo. Never could stick him.’

‘But he had a great sense of family. Miss Chevenix-Gore was, after all, only his adopted daughter.’ Colonel Bury hesitated, then after humming and hawing a moment, he said:

‘Look here, I think I’d better tell you something. Strict confidence, and all that.’ ‘Of course - of course.’

‘Ruth’s illegitimate, but she’s a Chevenix-Gore all right. Daughter of Gervase’s brother, Anthony, who was killed in the war. Seemed he’d had an affair with a typist. When he was killed, the girl wrote to Vanda. Vanda went to see her - girl was expecting a baby. Vanda took it up with Gervase, she’d just been told that she herself could never have another child. Result was they took over the child when it was born, adopted it legally. The mother renounced all rights in it. They’ve brought Ruth up as their own daughter and to all intents and purposes, she is their own daughter, and you’ve only got to look at her to realise she’s a Chevenix-Gore all right!’

‘Aha,’ said Poirot. ‘I see. That makes Sir Gervase’s attitude very much clearer. But if he did not like Mr Hugo Trent, why was he so anxious to arrange a marriage between him and Mademoiselle Ruth?’

‘To regularize the family position. It pleased his sense of fitness.’ ‘Even though he did not like or trust the young man?’

Colonel Bury snorted.

‘You don’t understand old Gervase. He couldn’t regard people as human beings. He arranged alliances as though the parties were royal personages! He considered it fitting that Ruth and Hugo should marry, Hugo taking the name of Chevenix-Gore. What Hugo and Ruth thought about it didn’t matter.’

‘And was Mademoiselle Ruth willing to fall in with this arrangement?’ Colonel Bury chuckled.

‘Not she! She’s a tartar!’

‘Did you know that shortly before his death Sir Gervase was drafting a new will by which Miss Chevenix-Gore would inherit only on condition that she should marry Mr Trent?’

Colonel Bury whistled.

‘Then he really had got the wind-up about her and Burrows - ’

As soon as he had spoken, he bit the words off, but it was too late. Poirot had pounced upon the admission.

‘There was something between Mademoiselle Ruth and young Monsieur Burrows?’ ‘Probably nothing in it - nothing in it at all.’

Major Riddle coughed and said:

'I think, Colonel Bury, that you must tell us all you know. It might have a direct bearing on Sir Gervase's state of mind.'

'I suppose it might,' said Colonel Bury, doubtfully. 'Well, the truth of it is, young Burrows is not a bad-looking chap - at least, women seem to think so. He and Ruth seem to have got as thick as thieves just lately, and Gervase didn't like it - didn't like it at all. Didn't like to sack Burrows for fear of precipitating matters. He knows what Ruth's like. She won't be dictated to in any way. So I suppose he hit on this scheme. Ruth's not the sort of girl to sacrifice everything for love. She's fond of the fleshpots and she likes money.'

'Do you yourself approve of Mr Burrows?'

The colonel delivered himself of the opinion that Godfrey Burrows was slightly hairy at the heel, a pronouncement which baffled Poirot completely, but made Major Riddle smile into his moustache.

A few more questions were asked and answered, and then Colonel Bury departed. Riddle glanced over at Poirot who was sitting absorbed in thought.

'What do you make of it all, M. Poirot?' The little man raised his hands.

'I seem to see a pattern - a purposeful design.' Riddle said, 'It's difficult.'

‘Yes, it is difficult. But more and more one phrase, lightly uttered, strikes me as significant.’

‘What was that?’

‘That laughing sentence spoken by Hugo Trent: “There’s always murder”…’ Riddle said sharply:

‘Yes, I can see that you’ve been leaning that way all along.’

‘Do you not agree, my friend, that the more we learn, the less and less motive we find for suicide? But for murder, we begin to have a surprising collection of motives!’

‘Still, you’ve got to remember the facts - door locked, key in dead man’s pocket. Oh, I know there are ways and means. Bent pins, strings - all sorts of devices. It would, I suppose, be possible… But do those things really work? That’s what I very much doubt.’

‘At all events, let us examine the position from the point of view of murder, not of suicide.’ ‘Oh, all right. As you are on the scene, it probably would be murder!’

For a moment Poirot smiled. ‘I hardly like that remark.’

Then he became grave once more.

‘Yes, let us examine the case from the standpoint of murder. The shot is heard, four people are in the hall, Miss Lingard, Hugo Trent, Miss Cardwell and Snell. Where are all the others?’

‘Burrows was in the library, according to his own story. No one to check that statement. The others were presumably in their rooms, but who is to know if they were really there? Everybody seems to have come down separately. Even Lady Chevenix-Gore and Bury only met in the hall. Lady Chevenix-Gore came from the dining-room. Where did Bury come from? Isn’t it possible that he came, not from upstairs, but from the study ? There’s that pencil.’

‘Yes, the pencil is interesting. He showed no emotion when I produced it, but that might be because he did not know where I found it and was unaware himself of having dropped it. Let us see, who else was playing bridge when the pencil was in use? Hugo Trent and Miss Cardwell. They’re out of it. Miss Lingard and the butler can vouch for their alibis. The fourth was Lady Chevenix-Gore.’

‘You can’t seriously suspect her.’

‘Why not, my friend? I tell you, me, I can suspect everybody! Supposing that, in spite of her apparent devotion to her husband, it is the faithful Bury she really loves?’

‘H’m,’ said Riddle. ‘In a way it has been a kind of ménage à trois for years.’

‘And there is some trouble about this company between Sir Gervase and Colonel Bury.’

‘It’s true that Sir Gervase might have been meaning to turn really nasty. We don’t know the ins-and-outs of it. It might fit in with that

summons to you. Say Sir Gervase suspects that Bury has deliberately fleeced him, but he doesn't want publicity because of a suspicion that his wife may be mixed up in it. Yes, that's possible. That gives either of those two a possible motive. And it is a bit odd really that Lady Chevenix-Gore should take her husband's death so calmly. All this spirit business may be acting!'

'Then there is the other complication,' said Poirot. 'Miss Chevenix-Gore and Burrows. It is very much to their interest that Sir Gervase should not sign the new will. As it is, she gets everything on condition that her husband takes the family name - '

'Yes, and Burrows's account of Sir Gervase's attitude this evening is a bit fishy. High spirits, pleased about something! That doesn't fit with anything else we've been told.'

'There is, too, Mr Forbes. Most correct, most severe, of an old and well-established firm. But lawyers, even the most respectable, have been known to embezzle their client's money when they themselves are in a hole.'

'You're getting a bit too sensational, I think, Poirot.'

'You think what I suggest is too like the pictures? But life, Major Riddle, is often amazingly like the pictures.'

'It has been, so far, in Westshire,' said the chief constable. 'We'd better finish interviewing the rest of them, don't you think? It's getting late. We haven't seen Ruth Chevenix-Gore yet, and she's probably the most important of the lot.'

‘I agree. There is Miss Cardwell, too. Perhaps we might see her first, since that will not take long, and interview Miss Chevenix-Gore last.

‘Quite a good idea.’

Chapter 9

That evening Poirot had only given Susan Cardwell a fleeting glance. He examined her now more attentively. An intelligent face, he thought, not strictly good-looking, but possessing an attraction that a merely pretty girl might envy. Her hair was magnificent, her face skilfully made-up. Her eyes, he thought, were watchful.

After a few preliminary questions, Major Riddle said:

‘I don’t know how close a friend you are of the family, Miss Cardwell?’

‘I don’t know them at all. Hugo arranged that I should be asked down here.’ ‘You are, then, a friend of Hugo Trent’s?’

‘Yes, that’s my position. Hugo’s girl-friend.’ Susan Cardwell smiled as she drawled out the words. ‘You have known him a long time?’

‘Oh, no, just a month or so.’ She paused and then added:

‘I’m by way of being engaged to him.’

‘And he brought you down here to introduce you to his people?’

‘Oh, dear no, nothing like that. We were keeping it very hush-hush. I just came down to spy out the land. Hugo told me the place was just like a madhouse. I thought I’d better come and see for myself. Hugo, poor sweet, is a perfect pet, but he’s got absolutely no brains. The position, you see, was rather critical. Neither Hugo nor I have any money, and old Sir Gervase, who was Hugo’s main hope, had set his heart on Hugo making a match of it with Ruth. Hugo’s a bit weak, you know. He might agree to this marriage and count on being able to get out of it later.’

‘That idea did not commend itself to you, mademoiselle?’ inquired Poirot gently.

‘Definitely not. Ruth might have gone all peculiar and refused to divorce him or something. I put my foot down. No trotting off to St Paul’s, Knightsbridge, until I could be there dithering with a sheaf of lilies.’

‘So you came down to study the situation for yourself?’ ‘Yes.’

‘Eh bien!’ said Poirot.

‘Well, of course, Hugo was right! The whole family were bughouse! Except Ruth, who seems perfectly sensible. She’d got her own boy-friend and wasn’t any keener on the marriage idea than I was.’

‘You refer to M. Burrows?’

‘Burrows? Of course not. Ruth wouldn’t fall for a bogus person like that.’ ‘Then who was the object of her affection?’

Susan Cardwell paused, stretched for a cigarette, lit it, and remarked: ‘You’d better ask her that. After all, it isn’t my business.’

Major Riddle asked:

‘When was the last time you saw Sir Gervase?’ ‘At tea.’

‘Did his manner strike you as peculiar in any way?’ The girl shrugged her shoulders.

‘Not more than usual.’ ‘What did you do after tea?’ ‘Played billiards with Hugo.’

‘You didn’t see Sir Gervase again?’ ‘No.’

‘What about the shot?’

‘That was rather odd. You see, I thought the first gong had gone, so I hurried up with my dressing, came dashing out of my room, heard, as I thought, the second gong and fairly raced down the stairs. I’d been one minute late for dinner the first night I was here and Hugo told me it had about wrecked our chances with the old man, so I fairly hared down. Hugo was just ahead of me and then there was a queer kind of pop-bang and Hugo said it was a champagne cork, but Snell said “No” to that and, anyway, I didn’t think it had come from

the dining-room. Miss Lingard thought it came from upstairs, but anyway we agreed it was a back-fire and we trooped into the drawing-room and forgot about it.'

'It did not occur to you for one moment that Sir Gervase might have shot himself?' asked Poirot.

'I ask you, should I be likely to think of such a thing? The Old Man seemed to enjoy himself throwing his weight about. I never imagined he'd do such a thing. I can't think why he did it. I suppose just because he was nuts.'

'An unfortunate occurrence.'

'Very - for Hugo and me. I gather he's left Hugo nothing at all, or practically nothing.' 'Who told you that?'

'Hugo got it out of old Forbes.'

'Well, Miss Cardwell - ' Major Riddle paused a moment, 'I think that's all. Do you think Miss Chevenix-Gore is feeling well enough to come down and talk to us?'

'Oh, I should think so. I'll tell her.' Poirot intervened.

'A little moment, mademoiselle. Have you seen this before?' He held out the bullet pencil.

'Oh, yes, we had it at bridge this afternoon. Belongs to old Colonel Bury, I think.' 'Did he take it when the rubber was over?'

‘I haven’t the faintest idea.’

‘Thank you, mademoiselle. That is all.’ ‘Right, I’ll tell Ruth.’

Ruth Chevenix-Gore came into the room like a queen. Her colour was vivid, her head held high. But her eyes, like the eyes of Susan Cardwell, were watchful. She wore the same frock she had had on when Poirot arrived. It was a pale shade of apricot. On her shoulder was pinned a deep, salmon-pink rose. It had been fresh and blooming an hour earlier, now it drooped.

‘Well?’ said Ruth.

‘I’m extremely sorry to bother you,’ began Major Riddle. She interrupted him.

‘Of course you have to bother me. You have to bother everyone. I can save you time, though. I haven’t the faintest idea why the Old Man killed himself. All I can tell you is that it wasn’t a bit like him.’

‘Did you notice anything amiss in his manner today? Was he depressed, or unduly excited - was there anything at all abnormal?’

‘I don’t think so. I wasn’t noticing - ’ ‘When did you see him last?’ ‘Tea-time.’

Poirot spoke:

‘You did not go to the study - later?’

‘No. The last I saw of him was in this room. Sitting there.’ She indicated a chair.

‘I see. Do you know this pencil, mademoiselle?’ ‘It’s Colonel Bury’s.’

‘Have you seen it lately?’ ‘I don’t really remember.’

‘Do you know anything of a - disagreement between Sir Gervase and Colonel Bury?’ ‘Over the Paragon Rubber Company, you mean?’

‘Yes.’

‘I should think so. The Old Man was rabid about it!’ ‘He considered, perhaps, that he had been swindled?’ Ruth shrugged her shoulders.

‘He didn’t understand the first thing about finance.’

Poirot said:

‘May I ask you a question, mademoiselle - a somewhat impertinent question?’ ‘Certainly, if you like.’

‘It is this - are you sorry that your - father is dead?’ She stared at him.

‘Of course I’m sorry. I don’t indulge in sob-stuff. But I shall miss him... I was fond of the Old Man. That’s what we called him, Hugo and I, always. The “Old Man” - you know - something of the primitive - anthropoid-ape-original-Patriarch-of-the-tribe business. It sounds

disrespectful, but there's really a lot of affection behind it. Of course, he was really the most complete, muddle-headed old ass that ever lived!'

'You interest me, mademoiselle.'

'The Old Man had the brains of a louse! Sorry to have to say it, but it's true. He was incapable of any kind of headwork. Mind you, he was a character. Fantastically brave and all that! Could go careering off to the Pole, or fighting duels. I always think that he blustered such a lot because he really knew that his brains weren't up to much. Anyone could have got the better of him.'

Poirot took the letter from his pocket. 'Read this, mademoiselle.'

She read it through and handed it back to him. 'So that's what brought you here!'

'Does it suggest anything to you, that letter?' She shook her head.

'No. It's probably quite true. Anyone could have robbed the poor old pet. John says the last agent before him swindled him right and left. You see, the Old Man was so grand and so pompous that he never really condescended to look into details! He was an invitation to crooks.'

'You paint a different picture of him, mademoiselle, from the accepted one.'

‘Oh, well - he put up a pretty good camouflage. Vanda (my mother) backed him for all she was worth. He was so happy stalking round pretending he was God Almighty. That’s why, in a way, I’m glad he’s dead. It’s the best thing for him.’

‘I do not quite follow you, mademoiselle.’ Ruth said broodingly:

‘It was growing on him. One of these days he would have had to be locked up… People were beginning to talk as it was.’

‘Did you know, mademoiselle, that he was contemplating a will whereby you could only inherit his money if you married Mr Trent?’

She cried:

‘How absurd! Anyway, I’m sure that could be set aside by law… I’m sure you can’t dictate to people about whom they shall marry.’

‘If he had actually signed such a will, would you have complied with its provisions, mademoiselle?’ She stared.

‘I - I - ’

She broke off. For two or three minutes she sat irresolute, looking down at her dangling slipper. A little piece of earth detached itself from the heel and fell on the carpet.

Suddenly Ruth Chevenix-Gore said: ‘Wait!’

She got up and ran out of the room. She returned almost immediately with Captain Lake by her side.

‘It’s got to come out,’ she said rather breathlessly. ‘You might as well know now. John and I were married in London three weeks ago.’

Chapter 10

Of the two of them, Captain Lake looked far the more embarrassed.

‘This is a great surprise, Miss Chevenix-Gore - Mrs Lake, I should say,’ said Major Riddle. ‘Did no one know of this marriage of yours?’

‘No, we kept it quite dark. John didn’t like that part of it much.’ Lake said, stammering a little:

‘I - I know that it seems rather a rotten way to set about things. I ought to have gone straight to Sir Gervase - ’

Ruth interrupted:

‘And told him you wanted to marry his daughter, and have been kicked out on your head and he’d probably have disinherited me, raised hell generally in the house, and we could have told each other how beautifully we’d behaved! Believe me, my way was better! If a thing’s done, it’s done. There would still have been a row - but he’d have come round.’

Lake still looked unhappy. Poirot asked:

'When did you intend to break the news to Sir Gervase?' Ruth answered:

'I was preparing the ground. He'd been rather suspicious about me and John, so I pretended to turn my attentions to Godfrey. Naturally, he was ready to go quite off the deep-end about that. I figured it out that the news I was married to John would come almost as a relief!'

'Did anybody at all know of this marriage?'

'Yes, I told Vanda in the end. I wanted to get her on my side.' 'And you succeeded in doing so?'

'Yes. You see, she wasn't very keen about my marrying Hugo - because he was a cousin, I think. She seemed to think the family was so batty already that we'd probably have completely batty children. That was probably rather absurd, because I'm only adopted, you know. I believe I'm some quite distant cousin's child.'

'You are sure Sir Gervase had no suspicion of the truth?' 'Oh, no.'

Poirot said:

'Is that true, Captain Lake? In your interview with Sir Gervase this afternoon, are you quite sure the matter was not mentioned?'

'No, sir. It was not.'

‘Because, you see, Captain Lake, there is certain evidence to show that Sir Gervase was in a highly-excitable condition after the time he spent with you, and that he spoke once or twice of family dishonour.’

‘The matter was not mentioned,’ Lake repeated. His face had gone very white. ‘Was that the last time you saw Sir Gervase?’

‘Yes, I have already told you so.’

‘Where were you at eight minutes past eight this evening?’

‘Where was I? In my house. At the end of the village, about half a mile away.’ ‘You did not come up to Hamborough Close round about that time?’

‘No.’

Poirot turned to the girl.

‘Where were you, mademoiselle, when your father shot himself?’ ‘In the garden.’

‘In the garden? You heard the shot?’

‘Oh, yes. But I didn’t think about it particularly. I thought it was someone out shooting rabbits, although now I remember I did think it sounded quite close at hand.’

‘You returned to the house - which way?’ ‘I came in through this window.’

Ruth indicated with a turn of her head the window behind her. ‘Was anyone in here?’

‘No. But Hugo and Susan and Miss Lingard came in from the hall almost immediately. They were talking about shooting and murders and things.’

‘I see,’ said Poirot. ‘Yes, I think I see now…’ Major Riddle said rather doubtfully:

‘Well - er - thank you. I think that’s all for the moment.’ Ruth and her husband turned and left the room.

‘What the devil - ’ began Major Riddle, and ended rather hopelessly: ‘It gets more and more difficult to keep track of this business.’

Poirot nodded. He had picked up the little piece of earth that had fallen from Ruth’s shoe and was holding it thoughtfully in his hand.

‘It is like the mirror smashed on the wall,’ he said. ‘The dead man’s mirror. Every new fact we come across shows us some different angle of the dead man. He is reflected from every conceivable point of view. We shall have soon a complete picture…’

He rose and put the little piece of earth tidily in the waste-paper basket.

‘I will tell you one thing, my friend. The clue to the whole mystery is the mirror. Go into the study and look for yourself, if you do not believe me.’

Major Riddle, said decisively:

‘If it’s murder, it’s up to you to prove it. If you ask me, I say it’s definitely suicide. Did you notice what the girl said about a former agent having swindled old Gervase? I bet Lake told that tale for his own purposes. He was probably helping himself a bit, Sir Gervase suspected it, and sent for you because he didn’t know how far things had gone between Lake and Ruth. Then this afternoon Lake told him they were married. That broke Gervase up. It was “too late” now for anything to be done. He determined to get out of it all. In fact his brain, never very well balanced at the best of times, gave way. In my opinion that’s what happened. What have you got to say against it?’ Poirot stood still in the middle of the room.

‘What have I to say? This: I have nothing to say against your theory - but it does not go far enough. There are certain things it does not take into account.’

‘Such as?’

‘The discrepancies in Sir Gervase’s moods today, the finding of Colonel Bury’s pencil, the evidence of Miss Cardwell (which is very important), the evidence of Miss Lingard as to the order in which people came down to dinner, the position of Sir Gervase’s chair when he was found, the paper bag which had held oranges and, finally, the all-important clue of the broken mirror.’

Major Riddle stared.

‘Are you going to tell me that that rigmarole makes sense?’ he asked. Hercule Poirot replied softly:

‘I hope to make it do so - by tomorrow.’

Chapter 11

It was just after dawn when Hercule Poirot awoke on the following morning. He had been given a bedroom on the east side of the house.

Getting out of bed, he drew aside the window-blind and satisfied himself that the sun had risen, and that it was a fine morning.

He began to dress with his usual meticulous care. Having finished his toilet, he wrapped himself up in a thick overcoat and wound a muffler round his neck.

Then he tiptoed out of his room and through the silent house down to the drawing-room. He opened the french windows noiselessly and passed out into the garden.

The sun was just showing now. The air was misty, with the mist of a fine morning. Hercule Poirot followed the terraced walk round the

side of the house till he came to the windows of Sir Gervase's study. Here he stopped and surveyed the scene.

Immediately outside the windows was a strip of grass that ran parallel with the house. In front of that was a wide herbaceous border. The michaelmas daisies still made a fine show. In front of the border was the flagged walk where Poirot was standing. A strip of grass ran from the grass walk behind the border to the terrace. Poirot examined it carefully, then shook his head. He turned his attention to the border on either side of it.

Very slowly he nodded his head. In the right-hand bed, distinct in the soft mould, there were footprints. As he stared down at them, frowning, a sound caught his ears and he lifted his head sharply.

Above him a window had been pushed up. He saw a red head of hair. Framed in an aureole of golden red he saw the intelligent face of Susan Cardwell.

'What on earth are you doing at this hour, M. Poirot? A spot of sleuthing?' Poirot bowed with the utmost correctitude.

'Good morning, mademoiselle. Yes, it is as you say. You now behold a detective - a great detective, I may say - in the act of detecting!'

The remark was a little flamboyant. Susan put her head on one side.

'I must remember this in my memoirs,' she remarked. 'Shall I come down and help?' 'I should be enchanted.'

‘I thought you were a burglar at first. Which way did you get out?’
‘Through the drawing-room window.’

‘Just a minute and I’ll be with you.’

She was as good as her word. To all appearances Poirot was exactly in the same position as when she had first seen him.

‘You are awake very early, mademoiselle?’

‘I haven’t been to sleep really properly. I was just getting that desperate feeling that one does get at five in the morning.’

‘It’s not quite so early as that!’

‘It feels like it! Now then, my super-sleuth, what are we looking at?’
‘But observe, mademoiselle, footprints.’

‘So they are.’

‘Four of them,’ continued Poirot. ‘See, I will point them out to you. Two going towards the window, two coming from it.’

‘Whose are they? The gardener’s?’

‘Mademoiselle, mademoiselle! Those footmarks are made by the small dainty high-heeled shoes of a woman. See, convince yourself. Step, I beg of you, in the earth here beside them.’

Susan hesitated a minute, then placed a foot gingerly on to the mould in the place indicated by Poirot. She was wearing small high-heeled slippers of dark brown leather.

'You see, yours are nearly the same size. Nearly, but not quite. These others are made by a rather longer foot than yours. Perhaps Miss Chevenix-Gore's - or Miss Lingard's - or even Lady Chevenix-Gore's.'

'Not Lady Chevenix-Gore - she's got tiny feet. People did in those days - manage to have small feet, I mean. And Miss Lingard wears queer flat-heeled things.'

'Then they are the marks of Miss Chevenix-Gore. Ah, yes, I remember she mentioned having been out in the garden yesterday evening.'

He led the way back round the house. 'Are we still sleuthing?' asked Susan.

'But certainly. We will go now to Sir Gervase's study.' He led the way. Susan Cardwell followed him.

The door still hung in a melancholy fashion. Inside, the room was as it had been last night. Poirot pulled the curtains and admitted the daylight.

He stood looking out at the border a minute or two, then he said:

‘You have not, I presume, mademoiselle, much acquaintance with burglars?’ Susan Cardwell shook her red head regretfully.

‘I’m afraid not, M. Poirot.’

‘The chief constable, he, too, has not had the advantages of a friendly relationship with them. His connection with the criminal classes has always been strictly official. With me that is not so. I had a very pleasant chat with a burglar once. He told me an interesting thing about french windows - a trick that could sometimes be employed if the fastening was sufficiently loose.’

He turned the handle of the left-hand window as he spoke, the middle shaft came up out of the hole in the ground, and Poirot was able to pull the two doors of the window towards him. Having opened them wide, he closed them again - closed them without turning the handle, so as not to send the shaft down into its socket. He let go of the handle, waited a moment, then struck a quick, jarring blow high up on the centre of the shaft. The jar of the blow sent the shaft down into the socket in the ground - the handle turned of its own accord.

‘You see, mademoiselle?’ ‘I think I do.’

Susan had gone rather pale.

‘The window is now closed. It is impossible to enter a room when the window is closed, but it is possible to leave a room, pull the doors to from outside, then hit it as I did, and the bolt goes down into the ground, turning the handle. The window then is firmly closed, and anyone looking at it would say it had been closed from the inside.’

‘Is that’ - Susan’s voice shook a little - ‘is that what happened last night?’

‘I think so, yes, mademoiselle.’ Susan said violently:

‘I don’t believe a word of it.’

Poirot did not answer. He walked over to the mantelpiece. He wheeled sharply round.

‘Mademoiselle, I have need of you as a witness. I have already one witness, Mr Trent. He saw me find this tiny sliver of looking-glass last night. I spoke of it to him. I left it where it was for the police. I even told the chief constable that a valuable clue was the broken mirror. But he did not avail himself of my hint. Now you are a witness that I place this sliver of looking-glass (to which, remember, I have already called Mr Trent’s attention) into a little envelope - so.’ He suited the action to the word. ‘And I write on it - so - and seal it up. You are a witness, mademoiselle?’

‘Yes - but - but I don’t know what it means.’

Poirot walked over to the other side of the room. He stood in front of the desk and stared at the shattered mirror on the wall in front of him.

‘I will tell you what it means, mademoiselle. If you had been standing here last night, looking into this mirror, you could have seen in it murder being committed …’

Chapter 12

I

For once in her life Ruth Chevenix-Gore - now Ruth Lake - came down to breakfast in good time. Hercule Poirot was in the hall and drew her aside before she went into the dining-room.

'I have a question to ask you, madame.' 'Yes?'

'You were in the garden last night. Did you at any time step in the flower-bed outside Sir Gervase's study window?'

Ruth stared at him. 'Yes, twice.'

'Ah! Twice. How twice?'

'The first time I was picking michaelmas daisies. That was about seven o'clock.' 'Was it not rather an odd time of day to pick flowers?'

'Yes, it was, as a matter of fact. I'd done the flowers yesterday morning, but Vanda said after tea that the flowers on the dinner-table weren't good enough. I had thought they would be all right, so I hadn't done them fresh.'

'But your mother requested you to do them? Is that right?'

‘Yes. So I went out just before seven. I took them from that part of the border because hardly anyone goes round there, and so it didn’t matter spoiling the effect.’

‘Yes, yes, but the second time. You went there a second time, you said?’

‘That was just before dinner. I had dropped a spot of brilliantine on my dress - just by the shoulder. I didn’t want to bother to change, and none of my artificial flowers went with the yellow of that dress. I remembered I’d seen a late rose when I was picking the michaelmas daisies, so I hurried out and got it and pinned it on my shoulder.’

Poirot nodded his head slowly.

‘Yes, I remember that you wore a rose last night. What time was it, madame, when you picked that rose?’

‘I don’t really know.’

‘But it is essential, madame. Consider - reflect.’

Ruth frowned. She looked swiftly at Poirot and then away again.

‘I can’t say exactly,’ she said at last. ‘It must have been - oh, of course - it must have been about five minutes past eight. It was when I was on my way back round the house that I heard the gong go, and then that funny bang. I was hurrying because I thought it was the second gong and not the first.’

‘Ah, so you thought that - and did you not try the study window when you stood there in the flower-bed?’

‘As a matter of fact, I did. I thought it might be open, and it would be quicker to come in that way. But it was fastened.’

‘So everything is explained. I congratulate you, madame.’ She stared at him.

‘What do you mean?’

‘That you have an explanation for everything, for the mould on your shoes, for your footprints in the flower-bed, for your fingerprints on the outside of the window. It is very convenient that.’

Before Ruth could answer, Miss Lingard came hurrying down the stairs. There was a queer purple flush on her cheeks, and she looked a little startled at seeing Poirot and Ruth standing together.

‘I beg your pardon,’ she said. ‘Is anything the matter?’ Ruth said angrily:

‘I think M. Poirot has gone mad!’

She swept by them and into the dining-room. Miss Lingard turned an astonished face on Poirot. He shook his head.

‘After breakfast,’ he said. ‘I will explain. I should like everyone to assemble in Sir Gervase’s study at ten o’clock.’

He repeated this request on entering the dining-room.

Susan Cardwell gave him a quick glance, then transferred her gaze to Ruth. When Hugo said: 'Eh? What's the idea?' she gave him a sharp nudge in the side, and he shut up obediently.

When he had finished his breakfast, Poirot rose and walked to the door. He turned and drew out a large old-fashioned watch.

'It is five minutes to ten. In five minutes - in the study.'

II

Poirot looked round him. A circle of interested faces stared back at him. Everyone was there, he noted, with one exception, and at that very moment the exception swept into the room. Lady Chevenix-Gore came in with a soft, gliding step. She looked haggard and ill.

Poirot drew forward a big chair for her, and she sat down.

She looked up at the broken mirror, shivered, and pulled her chair a little way round.

'Gervase is still here,' she remarked in a matter-of-fact tone. 'Poor Gervase... He will soon be free now.'

Poirot cleared his throat and announced:

‘I have asked you all to come here so that you may hear the true facts of Sir Gervase’s suicide.’ ‘It was Fate,’ said Lady Chevenix-Gore. ‘Gervase was strong, but his Fate was stronger.’ Colonel Bury moved forward a little.

‘Vanda - my dear.’

She smiled up at him, then put up her hand. He took it in his. She said softly: ‘You are such a comfort, Ned.’

Ruth said sharply:

‘Are we to understand, M. Poirot, that you have definitely ascertained the cause of my father’s suicide?’

Poirot shook his head. ‘No, madame.’

‘Then what is all this rigmarole about?’ Poirot said quietly:

‘I do not know the cause of Sir Gervase Chevenix-Gore’s suicide, because Sir Gervase Chevenix-Gore did not commit suicide. He did not kill himself. He was killed…’

‘Killed?’ Several voices echoed the word. Startled faces were turned in Poirot’s direction. Lady Chevenix-Gore looked up, said, ‘Killed? Oh, no!’ and gently shook her head.

‘Killed, did you say?’ It was Hugo who spoke now. ‘Impossible. There was no one in the room when we broke in. The window was

fastened. The door was locked on the inside, and the key was in my uncle's pocket. How could he have been killed?'

'Nevertheless, he was killed.'

'And the murderer escaped through the keyhole, I suppose?' said Colonel Bury sceptically. 'Or flew up the chimney?'

'The murderer,' said Poirot, 'went out through the window. I will show you how.' He repeated his manoeuvres with the window.

'You see?' he said. 'That was how it was done! From the first I could not consider it likely that Sir Gervase had committed suicide. He had pronounced egomania, and such a man does not kill himself.

'And there were other things! Apparently, just before his death, Sir Gervase had sat down at his desk, scrawled the word SORRY on a sheet of note-paper and had then shot himself. But before this last action he had, for some reason or other altered the position of his chair, turning it so that it was sideways to the desk. Why? There must be some reason. I began to see light when I found, sticking to the base of a heavy bronze statuette, a tiny sliver of looking-glass...

'I asked myself, how does a sliver of broken looking-glass come to be there? - and an answer suggested itself to me. The mirror had been broken, not by a bullet, but by being struck with the heavy bronze figure. That mirror had been broken deliberately.

'But why? I returned to the desk and looked down at the chair. Yes, I saw now. It was all wrong. No suicide would turn his chair round,

lean over the edge of it, and then shoot himself. The whole thing was arranged. The suicide was a fake!

'And now I come to something very important. The evidence of Miss Cardwell. Miss Cardwell said that she hurried downstairs last night because she thought that the second gong had sounded. That is to say, she thought that she had already heard the first gong.

'Now observe, if Sir Gervase was sitting at his desk in the normal fashion when he was shot, where would the bullet go? Travelling in a straight line, it would pass through the door, if the door were open, and finally hit the gong!

'You see now the importance of Miss Cardwell's statement? No one else heard the first gong, but, then, her room is situated immediately above this one, and she was in the best position for hearing it. It would consist of only one single note, remember.

'There could be no question of Sir Gervase's shooting himself. A dead man cannot get up, shut the door, lock it and arrange himself in a convenient position! Somebody else was concerned, and therefore it was not suicide, but murder. Someone whose presence was easily accepted by Sir Gervase, stood by his side talking to him. Sir Gervase was busy writing, perhaps. The murderer brings the pistol up to the right side of his head and fires. The deed is done! Then quick, to work! The murderer slips on gloves. The door is locked, the key put in Sir Gervase's pocket. But supposing that one loud note of the gong has been heard? Then it will be realized that the door was open, not shut, when the shot was fired. So the chair is turned, the body rearranged, the dead man's fingers pressed on the pistol, the

mirror deliberately smashed. Then the murderer goes out through the window, jars it shut, steps, not on the grass, but in the flower-bed where footprints can be smoothed out afterwards; then round the side of the house and into the drawing-room.'

He paused and said:

'There was only one person who was out in the garden when the shot was fired. That same person left her footprints in the flower-bed and her fingerprints on the outside of the window.'

He came towards Ruth.

'And there was a motive, wasn't there? Your father had learnt of your secret marriage. He was preparing to disinherit you.'

'It's a lie!' Ruth's voice came scornful and clear. 'There's not a word of truth in your story. It's a lie from start to finish!'

'The proofs against you are very strong, madame. A jury may believe you. It may not!' 'She won't have to face a jury.'

The others turned - startled. Miss Lingard was on her feet. Her face altered. She was trembling all over.

'I shot him. I admit it! I had my reason. I - I've been waiting for some time. M. Poirot is quite right. I followed him in here. I had taken the pistol out of the drawer earlier. I stood beside him talking about the book - and I shot him. That was just after eight. The bullet struck the gong. I never dreamt it would pass right through his head like that.

There wasn't time to go out and look for it. I locked the door and put the key in his pocket. Then I swung the chair round, smashed the mirror, and, after scrawling 'Sorry' on a piece of paper, I went out through the window and shut it the way M. Poirot showed you. I stepped in the flower-bed, but I smoothed out the footprints with a little rake I had put there ready. Then I went round to the drawing-room. I had left the window open. I didn't know Ruth had gone out through it. She must have come round the front of the house while I went round the back. I had to put the rake away, you see, in a shed. I waited in the drawing-room till I heard someone coming downstairs and Snell going to the gong, and then - '

She looked at Poirot.

'You don't know what I did then?'

'Oh yes, I do. I found the bag in the wastepaper basket. It was very clever, that idea of yours. You did what children love to do. You blew up the bag and then hit it. It made a satisfactory big bang. You threw the bag into the wastepaper basket and rushed out into the hall. You had established the time of the suicide - and an alibi for yourself. But there was still one thing that worried you. You had not had time to pick up the bullet. It must be somewhere near the gong. It was essential that the bullet should be found in the study somewhere near the mirror. I didn't know when you had the idea of taking Colonel Bury's pencil - '

'It was just then,' said Miss Lingard. 'When we all came in from the hall. I was surprised to see Ruth in the room. I realized she must have come from the garden through the window. Then I noticed

Colonel Bury's pencil lying on the bridge table. I slipped it into my bag. If, later, anyone saw me pick up the bullet, I could pretend it was the pencil. As a matter of fact, I didn't think anyone saw me pick up the bullet. I dropped it by the mirror while you were looking at the body. When you tackled me on the subject, I was very glad I had thought of the pencil.'

'Yes, that was clever. It confused me completely.'

'I was afraid someone must hear the real shot, but I knew everyone was dressing for dinner, and would be shut away in their rooms. The servants were in their quarters. Miss Cardwell was the only one at all likely to hear it, and she would probably think it was a backfire. What she did hear was the gong. I thought - I thought everything had gone without a hitch...'

Mr Forbes said slowly in his precise tones:

'This is a most extraordinary story. There seems no motive - ' Miss Lingard said clearly: 'There was a motive...'

She added fiercely:

'Go on, ring up the police! What are you waiting for?' Poirot said gently:

'Will you all please leave the room? Mr Forbes, ring up Major Riddle. I will stay here till he comes.'

Slowly, one by one, the family filed out of the room. Puzzled, uncomprehending, shocked, they cast abashed glances at the trim, upright figure with its neatly-parted grey hair.

Ruth was the last to go. She stood, hesitating in the doorway.

'I don't understand.' She spoke angrily, defiantly, accusing Poirot. 'Just now, you thought I had done it.' 'No, no,' Poirot shook his head. 'No, I never thought that.'

Ruth went out slowly.

Poirot was left with the little middle-aged prim woman who had just confessed to a cleverly-planned and cold-blooded murder.

'No,' said Miss Lingard. 'You didn't think she had done it. You accused her to make me speak. That's right, isn't it?'

Poirot bowed his head.

'While we're waiting,' said Miss Lingard in a conversational tone, 'you might tell me what made you suspect me.'

'Several things. To begin with, your account of Sir Gervase. A proud man like Sir Gervase would never speak disparagingly of his nephew to an outsider, especially someone in your position. You wanted to strengthen the theory of suicide. You also went out of your way to suggest that the cause of the suicide was some dishonourable trouble connected with Hugo Trent. That, again, was a thing Sir Gervase would never have admitted to a stranger. Then there was

the object you picked up in the hall, and the very significant fact that you did not mention that Ruth, when she entered the drawing-room, did so from the garden. And then I found the paper bag - a most unlikely object to find in the wastepaper basket in the drawing-room of a house like Hamborough Close! You were the only person who had been in the drawing-room when the "shot" was heard. The paper bag trick was one that would suggest itself to a woman - an ingenious homemade device. So everything fitted in. The endeavour to throw suspicion on Hugo, and to keep it away from Ruth. The mechanism of crime - and its motive.'

The little grey-haired woman stirred. 'You know the motive?'

'I think so. Ruth's happiness - that was the motive! I fancy that you had seen her with John Lake - you knew how it was with them. And then with your easy access to Sir Gervase's papers, you came across the draft of his new will - Ruth disinherited unless she married Hugo Trent. That decided you to take the law into your own hands, using the fact that Sir Gervase had previously written to me. You probably saw a copy of that letter. What muddled feeling of suspicion and fear had caused him to write originally, I do not know. He must have suspected either Burrows or Lake of systematically robbing him. His uncertainty regarding Ruth's feelings made him seek a private investigation. You used that fact and deliberately set the stage for suicide, backing it up by your account of his being very distressed over something connected with Hugo Trent. You sent a telegram to me and reported Sir Gervase as having said I should arrive "too late."'

Miss Lingard said fiercely:

‘Gervase Chevenix-Gore was a bully, a snob and a windbag! I wasn’t going to have him ruin Ruth’s happiness.’

Poirot said gently: ‘Ruth is your daughter?’

‘Yes - she is my daughter - I’ve often - thought about her. When I heard Sir Gervase Chevenix-Gore wanted someone to help him with a family history, I jumped at the chance. I was curious to see my - my girl. I knew Lady Chevenix-Gore wouldn’t recognize me. It was years ago - I was young and pretty then, and I changed my name after that time. Besides Lady Chevenix-Gore is too vague to know anything definitely. I liked her, but I hated the Chevenix-Gore family. They treated me like dirt. And here was Gervase going to ruin Ruth’s life with pride and snobbery. But I determined that she should be happy. And she will be happy - if she never knows about me!’ It was a plea - not a question.

Poirot bent his head gently. ‘No one shall know from me.’ Miss Lingard said quietly: ‘Thank you.’

III

Later, when the police had come and gone, Poirot found Ruth Lake with her husband in the garden. She said challengingly:

‘Did you really think that I had done it, M. Poirot?’

‘I knew, madame, that you could not have done it - because of the michaelmas daisies.’ ‘The michaelmas daisies? I don’t understand.’

‘Madame, there were four footprints and four foot printsonly in the border. But if you had been picking flowers there would have been many more. That meant that between your first visit and your second, someone had smoothed all those footsteps away. That could only have been done by the guilty person, and since your footprints had not been removed, you were not the guilty person. You were automatically cleared.’

Ruth’s face lightened.

‘Oh, I see. You know - I suppose it’s dreadful, but I feel rather sorry for that poor woman. After all, she did confess rather than let me be arrested - or at any rate, that is what she thought. That was - rather noble in a way. I hate to think of her going through a trial for murder.’

Poirot said gently:

‘Do not distress yourself. It will not come to that. The doctor, he tells me that she has serious heart trouble. She will not live many weeks.’

‘I’m glad of that.’ Ruth picked an autumn crocus and pressed it idly against her cheek. ‘Poor woman. I wonder why she did it…’

Chapter 1

Hercule Poirot sat on the white sand and looked out across the sparkling blue water. He was carefully dressed in a dandified fashion in white flannels and a large panama hat protected his head. He belonged to the old-fashioned generation which believed in covering itself carefully from the sun. Miss Pamela Lyall, who sat beside him and talked ceaselessly, represented the modern school of thought in that she was wearing the barest minimum of clothing on her sun-browned person.

Occasionally her flow of conversation stopped whilst she reanointed herself from a bottle of oily fluid which stood beside her.

On the farther side of Miss Pamela Lyall her great friend, Miss Sarah Blake, lay face downwards on a gaudily-striped towel. Miss Blake's tanning was as perfect as possible and her friend cast dissatisfied glances at her more than once.

'I'm so patchy still,' she murmured regretfully. 'M. Poirot – would you mind? Just below the right shoulder-blade - I can't reach to rub it in properly.'

M. Poirot obliged and then wiped his oily hand carefully on his handkerchief. Miss Lyall, whose principal interests in life were the

observation of people round her and the sound of her own voice, continued to talk.

'I was right about that woman - the one in the Chanel model – it is Valentine Dacres - Chantry, I mean. I thought it was. I recognized her at once. She's really rather marvellous, isn't she? I mean I can understand how people go quite crazy about her. She just obviously expects them to! That's half the battle. Those other people who came last night are called Gold. He's terribly good-looking.'

'Honeymooners?' murmured Sarah in a stifled voice. Miss Lyall shook her head in an experienced manner.

'Oh, no - her clothes aren't new enough. You can always tell brides! Don't you think it's the most fascinating thing in the world to watch people, M. Poirot, and see what you can find out about them by just looking?'

'Not just looking, darling,' said Sarah sweetly. 'You ask a lot of questions, too.'

'I haven't even spoken to the Golds yet,' said Miss Lyall with dignity. 'And anyway I don't see why one shouldn't be interested in one's fellow-creatures? Human nature is simply fascinating. Don't you think so, M. Poirot?'

This time she paused long enough to allow her companion to reply. Without taking his eyes off the blue water, M. Poirot replied:

'Ça depend.' Pamela was shocked.

‘Oh, M. Poirot! I don’t think anything’s so interesting – so incalculable as a human being!’ ‘Incalculable? That, no.’

‘Oh, but they are. Just as you think you’ve got them beautifully taped - they do something completely unexpected.’

Hercule Poirot shook his head.

‘No, no, that is not true. It is most rare that anyone does an action that is not dans son caractère. It is in the end monotonous.’

‘I don’t agree with you at all!’ said Miss Pamela Lyall.

She was silent for quite a minute and a half before returning to the attack.

‘As soon as I see people I begin wondering about them - what they’re like - what relations they are to each other - what they’re thinking and feeling. It’s - oh, it’s quite thrilling.’

‘Hardly that,’ said Hercule Poirot. ‘Nature repeats herself more than one would imagine. The sea,’ he added thoughtfully, ‘has infinitely more variety.’

Sarah turned her head sideways and asked:

‘You think that human beings tend to reproduce certain patterns? Stereotyped patterns?’ ‘Précisément,’ said Poirot, and traced a design in the sand with his finger.

‘What’s that you’re drawing?’ asked Pamela curiously. ‘A triangle,’ said Poirot.

But Pamela’s attention had been diverted elsewhere. ‘Here are the Chantrys,’ she said.

A woman was coming down the beach - a tall woman, very conscious of herself and her body. She gave a half-nod and smile and sat down a little distance away on the beach. The scarlet and gold silk wrap slipped down from her shoulders. She was wearing a white bathing-dress.

Pamela sighed.

‘Hasn’t she got a lovely figure?’

But Poirot was looking at her face - the face of a woman of thirty-nine who had been famous since sixteen for her beauty.

He knew, as everyone knew, all about Valentine Chantry. She had been famous for many things - for her caprices, for her wealth, for her enormous sapphire-blue eyes, for her matrimonial ventures and adventures. She had had five husbands and innumerable lovers. She had in turn been the wife of an Italian count, of an American steel magnate, of a tennis professional, of a racing motorist. Of these four the American had died, but the others had been shed negligently in the divorce court. Six months ago she had married a fifth time - a commander in the navy.

He it was who came striding down the beach behind her. Silent, dark - with a pugnacious jaw and a sullen manner. A touch of the primeval ape about him. She said:

'Tony darling - my cigarette case…'

He had it ready for her - lighted her cigarette - helped her to slip the straps of the white bathing-dress from her shoulders. She lay, arms outstretched in the sun. He sat by her like some wild beast that guards its prey.

Pamela said, her voice just lowered sufficiently:

'You know they interest me frightfully… He's such a brute! So silent and - sort of glowering. I suppose a woman of her kind likes that. It must be like controlling a tiger! I wonder how long it will last. She gets tired of them very soon, I believe - especially nowadays. All the same, if she tried to get rid of him, I think he might be dangerous.'

Another couple came down the beach - rather shyly. They were the newcomers of the night before. Mr and Mrs Douglas Gold as Miss Lyall knew from her inspection of the hotel visitors' book. She knew, too, for such were the Italian regulations - their Christian names and their ages as set down from their passports.

Mr Douglas Cameron Gold was thirty-one and Mrs Marjorie Emma Gold was thirty-five.

Miss Lyall's hobby in life, as has been said, was the study of human beings. Unlike most English people, she was capable of speaking to

strangers on sight instead of allowing four days to a week to elapse before making the first cautious advance as is the customary British habit. She, therefore, noting the slight hesitancy and shyness of Mrs Gold's advance, called out:

'Good morning, isn't it a lovely day?'

Mrs Gold was a small woman - rather like a mouse. She was not bad-looking, indeed her features were regular and her complexion good, but she had a certain air of diffidence and dowdiness that made her liable to be overlooked. Her husband, on the other hand, was extremely good-looking, in an almost theatrical manner. Very fair, crisply curling hair, blue eyes, broad shoulders, narrow hips. He looked more like a young man on the stage than a young man in real life, but the moment he opened his mouth that impression faded. He was quite natural and unaffected, even, perhaps, a little stupid.

Mrs Gold looked gratefully at Pamela and sat down near her. 'What a lovely shade of brown you are. I feel terribly underdone!'

'One has to take a frightful lot of trouble to brown evenly,' sighed Miss Lyall. She paused a minute and then went on:

'You've only just arrived, haven't you?'

'Yes. Last night. We came on the Vapo d'Italia boat.' 'Have you ever been to Rhodes before?'

'No. It is lovely, isn't it?' Her husband said:

‘Pity it’s such a long way to come.’ ‘Yes, if it were only nearer England - ’ In a muffled voice Sarah said:

‘Yes, but then it would be awful. Rows and rows of people laid out like fish on a slab. Bodies everywhere!’

‘That’s true, of course,’ said Douglas Gold. ‘It’s a nuisance the Italian exchange is so absolutely ruinous at present.’

‘It does make a difference, doesn’t it?’

The conversation was running on strictly stereotyped lines. It could hardly have been called brilliant.

A little way along the beach, Valentine Chantry stirred and sat up. With one hand she held her bathing-dress in position across her breast.

She yawned, a wide yet delicate cat-like yawn. She glanced casually down the beach. Her eyes slanted past Marjorie Gold - and stayed thoughtfully on the crisp, golden head of Douglas Gold.

She moved her shoulders sinuously. She spoke and her voice was raised a little higher than it need have been.

‘Tony darling - isn’t it divine - this sun? I simply must have been a sun worshipper once - don’t you think so?’

Her husband grunted something in reply that failed to reach the others. Valentine Chantry went on in that high, drawling voice.

‘Just pull that towel a little flatter, will you, darling?’

She took infinite pains in the resettling of her beautiful body. Douglas Gold was looking now. His eyes were frankly interested.

Mrs Gold chirped happily in a subdued key to Miss Lyall. ‘What a beautiful woman!’

Pamela, as delighted to give as to receive information, replied in a lower voice:

‘That’s Valentine Chantry - you know, who used to be Valentine Dacres – she is rather marvellous, isn’t she? He’s simply crazy about her - won’t let her out of his sight!’

Mrs Gold looked once more along the beach. Then she said:

‘The sea really is lovely - so blue. I think we ought to go in now, don’t you, Douglas?’

He was still watching Valentine Chantry and took a minute or two to answer. Then he said, rather absently:

‘Go in? Oh, yes, rather, in a minute.’

Marjorie Gold got up and strolled down to the water’s edge.

Valentine Chantry rolled over a little on one side. Her eyes looked along at Douglas Gold. Her scarlet mouth curved faintly into a smile.

The neck of Mr Douglas Gold became slightly red. Valentine Chantry said:

'Tony darling - would you mind? I want a little pot of face-cream - it's up on the dressing-table. I meant to bring it down. Do get it for me - there's an angel.'

The commander rose obediently. He stalked off into the hotel. Marjorie Gold plunged into the sea, calling out:

'It's lovely, Douglas - so warm. Do come.' Pamela Lyall said to him:

'Aren't you going in?' He answered vaguely:

'Oh! I like to get well hotted up first.'

Valentine Chantry stirred. Her head was lifted for a moment as though to recall her husband - but he was just passing inside the wall of the hotel garden.

'I like my dip the last thing,' explained Mr Gold.

Mrs Chantry sat up again. She picked up a flask of sunbathing oil. She had some difficulty with it - the screw top seemed to resist her efforts.

She spoke loudly and petulantly.

‘Oh, dear – I can’t get this thing undone!’ She looked towards the other ‘I wonder - ’

Always gallant, Poirot rose to his feet, but Douglas Gold had the advantage of youth and suppleness. He was by her side in a moment. ‘Can I do it for you?’

‘Oh, thank you - ’ It was the sweet, empty drawl again.

‘You are kind. I’m such a fool at undoing things - I always seem to screw them the wrong way. Oh! you’ve done it! Thank you ever so much - ’

Hercule Poirot smiled to himself.

He got up and wandered along the beach in the opposite direction. He did not go very far but his progress was leisurely. As he was on his way back, Mrs Gold came out of the sea and joined him. She had been swimming. Her face, under a singularly unbecoming bathing cap, was radiant.

She said breathlessly, ‘I do love the sea. And it’s so warm and lovely here.’ She was, he perceived, an enthusiastic bather.

She said, ‘Douglas and I are simply mad on bathing. He can stay in for hours.’

And at that Hercule Poirot’s eyes slid over her shoulder to the spot on the beach where that enthusiastic bather, Mr Douglas Gold, was sitting talking to Valentine Chantry.

His wife said:

‘I can’t think why he doesn’t come…’

Her voice held a kind of childish bewilderment.

Poirot’s eyes rested thoughtfully on Valentine Chantry. He thought that other women in their time had made that same remark.

Beside him, he heard Mrs Gold draw in her breath sharply. She said - and her voice was cold:

‘She’s supposed to be very attractive, I believe. But Douglas doesn’t like that type of woman.’ Hercule Poirot did not reply.

Mrs Gold plunged into the sea again.

She swam away from the shore with slow, steady strokes. You could see that she loved the water. Poirot retraced his steps to the group on the beach.

It had been augmented by the arrival of old General Barnes, a veteran who was usually in the company of the young. He was sitting now between Pamela and Sarah, and he and Pamela were engaged in dishing up various scandals with appropriate embellishments.

Commander Chantry had returned from his errand. He and Douglas Gold were sitting on either side of Valentine.

Valentine was sitting up very straight between the two men and talking. She talked easily and lightly in her sweet, drawling voice, turning her head to take first one man and then the other in the conversation.

She was just finishing an anecdote.

‘ - and what do you think the foolish man said? “It may have been only a minute, but I’d remember you anywhere, Mum!” Didn’t he, Tony? And you know, I thought it was so sweet of him. I do think it’s such a kind world - I mean, everybody is so frightfully kind tome always - I don’t know why - they just are. But I said to Tony - d’you remember, darling - “Tony, if you want to be a teeny-weeny bit jealous, you can be jealous of that commissionaire.” Because he really was too adorable…’

There was a pause and Douglas Gold said: ‘Good fellows - some of these commissionaires.’

‘Oh, yes - but he took such trouble - really an immense amount of trouble - and seemed just pleased to be able to help me.’

Douglas Gold said:

‘Nothing odd about that. Anyone would for you, I’m sure.’ She cried delightedly:

‘How nice of you! Tony, did you hear that?’ Commander Chantry grunted.

His wife sighed:

‘Tony never makes pretty speeches - do you, my lamb?’ Her white hand with its long red nails ruffled up his dark head. He gave her a sudden sidelong look. She murmured:

‘I don’t really know how he puts up with me. He’s simply frightfully clever - absolutely frantic with brains - and I just go on talking nonsense the whole time, but he doesn’t seem to mind. Nobody minds what I do or say - everybody spoils me. I’m sure it’s frightfully bad for me.’

Commander Chantry said across her to the other man: ‘That your missus in the sea?’

‘Yes. Expect it’s about time I joined her.’ Valentine murmured:

‘But it’s so lovely here in the sun. You mustn’t go into the sea yet. Tony darling, I don’t think I shall actually bathe today - not my first day. I might get a chill or something. But why don’t you go in now, Tony darling? Mr - Mr Gold will stay and keep me company while you’re in.’

Chantry said rather grimly:

‘No, thanks. Shan’t go in just yet. Your wife seems to be waving to you, Gold.’ Valentine said:

‘How well your wife swims. I’m sure she’s one of those terribly efficient women who do everything well. They always frighten me so because I feel they despise me. I’m so frightfully bad at everything - an absolute duffer, aren’t I, Tony darling?’

But again Commander Chantry only grunted. His wife murmured affectionately:

‘You’re too sweet to admit it. Men are so wonderfully loyal - that’s what I like about them. I do think men are so much more loyal than women - and they never say nasty things. Women, I always think, are rather petty.’

Sarah Blake rolled over on her side towards Poirot. She murmured between her teeth.

‘Examples of pettiness, to suggest that dear Mrs Chantry is in any way not absolute perfection! What a complete idiot the woman is! I really do think Valentine Chantry is very nearly the most idiotic woman I ever met. She can’t do anything but say, “Tony, darling,” and roll her eyes. I should fancy she’d got cotton wool padding instead of brains.’

Poirot raised his expressive eyebrows. ‘Un peu sévère!’

‘Oh, yes. Put it down as pure “Cat,” if you like. She certainly has her methods! Can’t she leave any man alone? Her husband’s looking like thunder.’

Looking out to sea, Poirot remarked: ‘Mrs Gold swims well.’

‘Yes, she isn’t like us who find it a nuisance to get wet. I wonder if Mrs Chantry will ever go into the sea at all while she’s out here.’

‘Not she,’ said General Barnes huskily. ‘She won’t risk that make-up of hers coming off. Not that she isn’t a fine-looking woman although perhaps a bit long in the tooth.’

‘She’s looking your way, General,’ said Sarah wickedly. ‘And you’re wrong about the make-up. We’re all waterproof and kissproof nowadays.’

‘Mrs Gold’s coming out,’ announced Pamela.

‘Here we go gathering nuts and may,’ hummed Sarah. ‘Here comes his wife to fetch him away - fetch him away - fetch him away…’

Mrs Gold came straight up the beach. She had quite a pretty figure but her plain, waterproof cap was rather too serviceable to be attractive.

‘Aren’t you coming, Douglas?’ she demanded impatiently. ‘The sea is lovely and warm.’ ‘Rather.’

Douglas Gold rose hastily to his feet. He paused a moment and as he did so Valentine Chantry looked up at him with a sweet smile.

‘Au revoir,’ she said.

Gold and his wife went down the beach.

As soon as they were out of earshot, Pamela said critically:

‘I don’t think, you know, that that was wise. To snatch your husband away from another woman is always bad policy. It makes you seem so possessive. And husbands hate that.’

‘You seem to know a lot about husbands, Miss Pamela,’ said General Barnes. ‘Other people’s - not my own!’

‘Ah! that’s where the difference comes in.’

‘Yes, but General, I shall have learnt a lot of Do Nots.’

‘Well, darling,’ said Sarah, ‘I shouldn’t wear a cap like that for one thing…’

‘Seems very sensible to me,’ said the General. ‘Seems a nice, sensible little woman altogether.’

‘You’ve hit it exactly, General,’ said Sarah. ‘But you know there’s a limit to the sensibleness of sensible women. I have a feeling she won’t be so sensible when it’s a case of Valentine Chantry.’

She turned her head and exclaimed in a low, excited whisper:

‘Look at him now. Just like thunder. That man looks as though he had got the most frightful temper…’

Commander Chantry was indeed scowling after the retreating husband and wife in a singularly unpleasant fashion.

Sarah looked up at Poirot.

'Well?' she said. 'What do you make of all this?'

Hercule Poirot did not reply in words, but once again his forefinger traced a design in the sand. The same design - a triangle.

'The eternal triangle,' mused Sarah. 'Perhaps you're right. If so, we're in for an exciting time in the next few weeks.'

Chapter 2

M. Hercule Poirot was disappointed with Rhodes. He had come to Rhodes for a rest and for a holiday. A holiday, especially, from crime. In late October, so he had been told, Rhodes would be nearly empty. A peaceful, secluded spot.

That, in itself, was true enough. The Chantrys, the Golds, Pamela and Sarah, the General and himself and two Italian couples were the only guests. But within that restricted circle the intelligent brain of M. Poirot perceived the inevitable shaping of events to come.

'It is that I am criminal-minded,' he told himself reproachfully. 'I have the indigestion! I imagine things.' But still he worried.

One morning he came down to find Mrs Gold sitting on the terrace doing needlework.

As he came up to her he had the impression that there was the flicker of a cambric handkerchief swiftly whisked out of sight.

Mrs Gold's eyes were dry, but they were suspiciously bright. Her manner, too, struck him as being a shade too cheerful. The brightness of it was a shade overdone.

She said:

'Good morning, M. Poirot,' with such enthusiasm as to arouse his doubts.

He felt that she could not possibly be quite as pleased to see him as she appeared to be. For she did not, after all, know him very well. And though Hercule Poirot was a conceited little man where his profession was concerned, he was quite modest in his estimate of his personal attractions.

'Good morning, madame,' he responded. 'Another beautiful day.'

'Yes, isn't it fortunate? But Douglas and I are always lucky in our weather.' 'Indeed?'

'Yes. We're really very lucky altogether. You know, M. Poirot, when one sees so much trouble and unhappiness, and so many couples

divorcing each other and all that sort of thing, well, one does feel very grateful for one's own happiness.'

'It is pleasant to hear you say so, madame.'

'Yes. Douglas and I are so wonderfully happy together. We've been married five years, you know, and after all, five years is quite a long time nowadays - '

'I have no doubt that in some cases it can seem an eternity, madame,' said Poirot dryly.

' - but I really believe that we're happier now than when we were first married. You see, we're so absolutely suited to each other.'

'That, of course, is everything.'

'That's why I feel so sorry for people who aren't happy.' 'You mean - '

'Oh! I was speaking generally, M. Poirot.' 'I see. I see.'

Mrs Gold picked up a strand of silk, held it to the light, approved of it, and went on: 'Mrs Chantry, for instance - '

'Yes, Mrs Chantry?'

'I don't think she's at all a nice woman.' 'No. No, perhaps not.'

‘In fact, I’m quite sure she’s not a nice woman. But in a way one feels sorry for her. Because in spite of her money and her good looks and all that’ - Mrs Gold’s fingers were trembling and she was quite unable to thread her needle - ‘she’s not the sort of woman men really stick to. She’s the sort of woman, I think, that men would get tired of very easily. Don’t you think so?’

‘I myself should certainly get tired of her conversation before any great space of time had passed,’ said Poirot cautiously.

‘Yes, that’s what I mean. She has, of course, a kind of appeal…’ Mrs Gold hesitated, her lips trembled, she stabbed uncertainly at her work. A less acute observer than Hercule Poirot could not have failed to notice her distress. She went on inconsequently:

‘Men are just like children! They believe anything…’

She bent over her work. The tiny wisp of cambric came out again unobtrusively. Perhaps Hercule Poirot thought it well to change the subject.

He said:

‘You do not bathe this morning? And monsieur your husband, is he down on the beach?’ Mrs Gold looked up, blinked, resumed her defiantly bright manner and replied:

‘No, not this morning. We arranged to go round the walls of the old city. But somehow or other we - we missed each other. They started without me.’

The pronoun was revealing, but before Poirot could say anything, General Barnes came up from the beach below and dropped into a chair beside them.

'Good morning, Mrs Gold. Good morning, Poirot. Both deserters this morning? A lot of absentees. You two, and your husband, Mrs Gold - and Mrs Chantry.'

'And Commander Chantry?' inquired Poirot casually.

'Oh, no, he's down there. Miss Pamela's got him in hand.' The General chuckled. 'She's finding him a little bit difficult! One of the strong, silent men you hear about in books.'

Marjorie Gold said with a little shiver:

'He frightens me a little, that man. He - he looks so black sometimes. As though he might do - anything!'

She shivered.

'Just indigestion, I expect,' said the General cheerfully. 'Dyspepsia is responsible for many a reputation for romantic melancholy or ungovernable rages.'

Marjorie Gold smiled a polite little smile.

'And where's your good man?' inquired the General.

Her reply came without hesitation - in a natural, cheerful voice.

'Douglas? Oh, he and Mrs Chantry have gone into the town. I believe they've gone to have a look at the walls of the old city.'

'Ha, yes - very interesting. Time of the knights and all that. You ought to have gone too, little lady.' Mrs Gold said:

'I'm afraid I came down rather late.'

She got up suddenly with a murmured excuse and went into the hotel.

General Barnes looked after her with a concerned expression, shaking his head gently.

'Nice little woman, that. Worth a dozen painted trollops like someone whose name we won't mention! Ha! Husband's a fool! Doesn't know when he's well off.'

He shook his head again. Then, rising, he went indoors.

Sarah Blake had just come up from the beach and had heard the General's last speech. Making a face at the departing warrior's back, she remarked as she flung herself into a chair:

'Nice little woman - nice little woman! Men always approve of dowdy women - but when it comes to brass tacks the dress-up trollops win hands down! Sad, but there it is.' 'Mademoiselle,' said Poirot, and his voice was abrupt. 'I do not like all this!'

‘Don’t you? Nor do I. No, let’s be honest, I suppose I do like it really. There is a horrid side of one that enjoys accidents and public calamities and unpleasant things that happen to one’s friends.’

Poirot asked:

‘Where is Commander Chantry?’

‘On the beach being dissected by Pamela (she’s enjoying herself if you like!) and not being improved in temper by the proceeding. He was looking like a thunder cloud when I came up. There are squalls ahead, believe me.’

Poirot murmured:

‘There is something I do not understand - ’

‘It’s not easy to understand,’ said Sarah. ‘But what’s going to happen that’s the question.’ Poirot shook his head and murmured:

‘As you say, mademoiselle - it is the future that causes one inquietude.’ ‘What a nice way of putting it,’ said Sarah and went into the hotel.

In the doorway she almost collided with Douglas Gold. The young man came out looking rather pleased with himself but at the same time slightly guilty. He said:

‘Hallo, M. Poirot,’ and added rather self-consciously, ‘Been showing Mrs Chantry the Crusaders’ walls. Marjorie didn’t feel up to going.’

Poirot’s eyebrows rose slightly, but even had he wished he would have had no time to make a comment for Valentine Chantry came sweeping out, crying in her high voice:

‘Douglas - a pink gin - positively I must have a pink gin.’

Douglas Gold went off to order the drink. Valentine sank into a chair by Poirot. She was looking radiant this morning.

She saw her husband and Pamela coming up towards them and waved a hand, crying out: ‘Have a nice bathe, Tony darling? Isn’t it a divine morning?’

Commander Chantry did not answer. He swung up the steps, passed her without a word or a look and vanished into the bar.

His hands were clenched by his sides and that faint likeness to a gorilla was accentuated. Valentine Chantry’s perfect but rather foolish mouth fell open.

She said, ‘Oh,’ rather blankly.

Pamela Lyall’s face expressed keen enjoyment of the situation. Masking it as far as was possible to one of her ingenuous disposition she sat down by Valentine Chantry and inquired:

‘Have you had a nice morning?’

As Valentine began, ‘Simply marvellous. We - ’ Poirot got up and in his turn strolled gently towards the bar. He found young Gold waiting for the pink gin with a flushed face. He looked disturbed and angry.

He said to Poirot, ‘That man’s a brute!’ And he nodded his head in the direction of the retreating figure of Commander Chantry.

‘It is possible,’ said Poirot. ‘Yes, it is quite possible. But les femmes, they like brutes, remember that!’ Douglas muttered:

‘I shouldn’t be surprised if he ill-treats her!’ ‘She probably likes that too.’

Douglas Gold looked at him in a puzzled way, took up the pink gin and went out with it.

Hercule Poirot sat on a stool and ordered a sirop de cassis. Whilst he was sipping it with long sighs of enjoyment, Chantry came in and drank several pink gins in rapid succession.

He said suddenly and violently to the world at large rather than to Poirot:

‘If Valentine thinks she can get rid of me like she’s got rid of a lot of other damned fools, she’s mistaken! I’ve got her and I mean to keep her. No other fellow’s going to get her except over my dead body.’

He flung down some money, turned on his heel and went out.

Chapter 3

It was three days later that Hercule Poirot went to the Mount of the Prophet. It was a cool, agreeable drive through the golden green fir trees, winding higher and higher, far above the petty wrangling and squabbling of human beings. The car stopped at the restaurant. Poirot got out and wandered into the woods. He came out at last on a spot that seemed truly on top of the world. Far below, deeply and dazzlingly blue, was the sea.

Here at last he was at peace - removed from cares - above the world. Carefully placing his folded overcoat on a tree stump, Hercule Poirot sat down.

'Doubtless le bon Dieu knows what he does. But it is odd that he should have permitted himself to fashion certain human beings. Eh bien, here for a while at least I am away from these vexing problems.' Thus he mused.

He looked up with a start. A little woman in a brown coat and skirt was hurrying towards him. It was Marjorie Gold and this time she had abandoned all pretence. Her face was wet with tears.

Poirot could not escape. She was upon him.

'M. Poirot. You've got to help me. I'm so miserable I don't know what to do! Oh, what shall I do? What shall I do?'

She looked up at him with a distracted face. Her fingers fastened on his coat sleeve. Then, as something she saw in his face alarmed her, she drew back a little.

'What - what is it?' she faltered.

'You want my advice, madame? It is that you ask?' She stammered, 'Yes... Yes...'

'Eh bien - here it is.' He spoke curtly - trenchantly. 'Leave this place at once - before it is too late.' 'What?' She stared at him.

'You heard me. Leave this island.' 'Leave the island?'

She stared at him stupefied. 'That is what I say.'

'But why - why?'

'It is my advice to you - if you value your life.' She gave a gasp.

'Oh! what do you mean? You're frightening me - you're frightening me.' 'Yes,' said Poirot gravely, 'that is my intention.'

She sank down, her face in her hands.

'But I can't! He wouldn't come! Douglas wouldn't, I mean. She wouldn't let him. She's got hold of him - body and soul. He won't listen to anything against her... He's crazy about her... He believes everything she tells him - that her husband ill-treats her - that she's

an injured innocent - that nobody has ever understood her... He doesn't even think about me any more - I don't count - I'm not real to him. He wants me to give him his freedom - to divorce him. He believes that she'll divorce her husband and marry him. But I'm afraid... Chantry won't give her up. He's not that kind of man. Last night she showed Douglas bruises on her arm - said her husband had done it. It made Douglas wild. He's so chivalrous... Oh! I'm afraid! What will come of it all? Tell me what to do!'

Hercule Poirot stood looking straight across the water to the blue line of hills on the mainland of Asia.

He said:

'I have told you. Leave the island before it is too late...' She shook her head.

'I can't - I can't - unless Douglas...' Poirot sighed.

He shrugged his shoulders.

Chapter 4

Hercule Poirot sat with Pamela Lyall on the beach.

She said with a certain amount of gusto, 'The triangle's going strong! They sat one each side of her last night - glowering at each

other! Chantry had had too much to drink. He was positively insulting to Douglas Gold. Gold behaved very well. Kept his temper. The Valentine woman enjoyed it, of course. Purred like the man-eating tiger she is. What do you think will happen?'

Poirot shook his head.

'I am afraid. I am very much afraid…'

'Oh, we all are,' said Miss Lyall hypocritically. She added, 'This business is rather in your line. Or it may come to be. Can't you do anything?'

'I have done what I could.'

Miss Lyall leaned forward eagerly.

'What have you done?' she asked with pleasurable excitement. 'I advised Mrs Gold to leave the island before it was too late.' 'Oo-er - so you think - ' she stopped.

'Yes, mademoiselle?'

'So that's what you think is going to happen!' said Pamela slowly. 'But he couldn't - he'd never do a thing like that… He's so nice really. It's all that Chantry woman. He wouldn't - He wouldn't - do - '

She stopped - then she said softly:

‘Murder? Is that - is that really the word that’s in your mind?’ ‘It is in someone’s mind, mademoiselle. I will tell you that.’ Pamela gave a sudden shiver.

‘I don’t believe it,’ she declared.

Chapter 5

The sequence of events on the night of October the twenty-ninth was perfectly clear.

To begin with, there was a scene between the two men - Gold and Chantry. Chantry’s voice rose louder and louder and his last words were overheard by four persons - the cashier at the desk, the manager, General Barnes and Pamela Lyall.

‘You god-damned swine! If you and my wife think you can put this over on me, you’re mistaken! As long as I’m alive, Valentine will remain my wife.’

Then he had flung out of the hotel, his face livid with rage.

That was before dinner. After dinner (how arranged no one knew) a reconciliation took place. Valentine asked Marjorie Gold to come out for a moonlight drive. Pamela and Sarah went with them. Gold and Chantry played billiards together. Afterwards they joined Hercule Poirot and General Barnes in the lounge.

For the first time almost, Chantry's face was smiling and good-tempered. 'Have a good game?' asked the General.

The Commander said:

'This fellow's too good for me! Ran out with a break of forty-six.' Douglas Gold deprecated this modestly.

'Pure fluke. I assure you it was. What'll you have? I'll go and get hold of a waiter.' 'Pink gin for me, thanks.'

'Right. General?'

'Thanks. I'll have a whisky and soda.' 'Same for me. What about you, M. Poirot?'

'You are most amiable. I should like a sirop de cassis.' 'A sirop - excuse me?'

'Sirop de cassis. The syrup of blackcurrants.'

'Oh, a liqueur! I see. I suppose they have it here? I never heard of it.' 'They have it, yes. But it is not a liqueur.'

Douglas Gold said, laughing:

'Sounds a funny taste to me - but every man his own poison! I'll go and order them.'

Commander Chantry sat down. Though not by nature a talkative or a social man, he was clearly doing his best to be genial.

'Odd how one gets used to doing without any news,' he remarked. The General grunted.

'Can't say the Continental Daily Mail four days old is much use tome. Of course I get The Times sent to me and Punch every week, but they're a devilish long time in coming.'

'Wonder if we'll have a general election over this Palestine business?'

'Whole thing's been badly mismanaged,' declared the General just as Douglas Gold reappeared followed by a waiter with the drinks.

The General had just begun on an anecdote of his military career in India in the year 1905. The two Englishmen were listening politely, if without great interest. Hercule Poirot was sipping his sirop de cassis.

The General reached the point of his narrative and there was dutiful laughter all round.

Then the women appeared at the doorway of the lounge. They all four seemed in the best of spirits and were talking and laughing.

'Tony, darling, it was too divine,' cried Valentine as she dropped into a chair by his side. 'The most marvellous idea of Mrs Gold's. You all ought to have come!'

Her husband said: ‘What about a drink?’

He looked inquiringly at the others. ‘Pink gin for me, darling,’ said Valentine. ‘Gin and ginger beer,’ said Pamela. ‘Sidecar,’ said Sarah.

‘Right.’ Chantry stood up. He pushed his own untouched pink gin over to his wife. ‘You have this. I’ll order another for myself. What’s yours, Mrs Gold?’

Mrs Gold was being helped out of her coat by her husband. She turned smiling: ‘Can I have an orangeade, please?’

‘Right you are. Orangeade.’

He went towards the door. Mrs Gold smiled up in her husband’s face. ‘It was so lovely, Douglas. I wish you had come.’

‘I wish I had too. We’ll go another night, shall we?’ They smiled at each other. Valentine Chantry picked up the pink gin and drained it.

‘Oo! I needed that,’ she sighed.

Douglas Gold took Marjorie’s coat and laid it on a settee. As he strolled back to the others he said sharply:

‘Hallo, what’s the matter?’

Valentine Chantry was leaning back in her chair. Her lips were blue and her hand had gone to her heart. ‘I feel - rather queer…’

She gasped, fighting for breath.

Chantry came back into the room. He quickened his step. ‘Hallo, Val, what’s the matter?’

‘I - I don’t know… That drink - it tasted queer…’ ‘The pink gin?’

Chantry swung round his face worked. He caught Douglas Gold by the shoulder. ‘That was my drink… Gold, what the hell did you put in it?’

Douglas Gold was staring at the convulsed face of the woman in the chair. He had gone dead white. ‘I - I - never - ’

Valentine Chantry slipped down in her chair. General Barnes cried out:

‘Get a doctor - quick…’

Five minutes later Valentine Chantry died…

Chapter 6

There was no bathing the next morning.

Pamela Lyall, white-faced, clad in a simple dark dress, clutched at Hercule Poirot in the hall and drew him into the little writing-room.

'It's horrible!' she said. 'Horrible! You said so! You foresaw it! Murder!' He bent his head gravely.

'Oh!' she cried out. She stamped her foot on the floor. 'You should have stopped it! Somehow! It could have been stopped!'

'How?' asked Hercule Poirot.

That brought her up short for the moment. 'Couldn't you go to someone - to the police - ?'

'And say what? What is there to say - before the event? That someone has murder in their heart? I tell you, mon enfant, if one human being is determined to kill another human being - '

'You could warn the victim,' insisted Pamela. 'Sometimes,' said Hercule Poirot, 'warnings are useless.'

Pamela said slowly, 'You could warn the murderer - show him that you knew what was intended…' Poirot nodded appreciatively.

'Yes - a better plan, that. But even then you have to reckon with a criminal's chief vice.' 'What is that?'

'Conceit. A criminal never believes that his crime can fail.'

‘But it’s absurd - stupid,’ cried Pamela. ‘The whole crime was childish! Why, the police arrested Douglas Gold at once last night.’

‘Yes.’ He added thoughtfully, ‘Douglas Gold is a very stupid young man.’ ‘Incredibly stupid! I hear that they found the rest of the poison - whatever it was - ?’ ‘A form of stropanthin. A heart poison.’

‘That they actually found the rest of it in his dinner jacket pocket?’ ‘Quite true.’

‘Incredibly stupid!’ said Pamela again. ‘Perhaps he meant to get rid of it - and the shock of the wrong person being poisoned paralysed him. What a scene it would make on the stage. The lover putting the stropanthin in the husband’s glass and then, just when his attention is elsewhere, the wife drinks it instead… Think of the ghastly moment when Douglas Gold turned round and realized he had killed the woman he loved…’ She gave a little shiver.

‘Your triangle. The Eternal Triangle! Who would have thought it would end like this?’ ‘I was afraid of it,’ murmured Poirot.

Pamela turned on him.

‘You warned her - Mrs Gold. Then why didn’t you warn him as well?’ ‘You mean, why didn’t I warn Douglas Gold?’

‘No. I mean Commander Chantry. You could have told him that he was in danger - after all, he was the real obstacle! I’ve no doubt Douglas Gold relied on being able to bully his wife into giving him a divorce - she’s a meek-spirited little woman and terribly fond of him.

But Chantry is a mulish sort of devil. He was determined not to give Valentine her freedom.'

Poirot shrugged his shoulders.

'It would have been no good my speaking to Chantry,' he said.

'Perhaps not,' Pamela admitted. 'He'd probably have said he could look after himself and told you to go to the devil. But I do feel there ought to have been something one could have done.'

'I did think,' said Poirot slowly, 'of trying to persuade Valentine Chantry to leave the island, but she would not have believed what I had to tell her. She was far too stupid a woman to take in a thing like that. Pauvre femme, her stupidity killed her.'

'I don't believe it would have been any good if she had left the island,' said Pamela. 'He would simply have followed her.'

'He?'

'Douglas Gold.'

'You think Douglas Gold would have followed her? Oh, no, mademoiselle, you are wrong - you are completely wrong. You have not yet appreciated the truth of this matter. If Valentine Chantry had left the island, her husband would have gone with her.'

Pamela looked puzzled. 'Well, naturally.'

‘And then, you see, the crime would simply have taken place somewhere else.’ ‘I don’t understand you?’

‘I am saying to you that the same crime would have occurred somewhere else - that crime being the murder of Valentine Chantry by her husband.’

Pamela stared.

‘Are you trying to say that it was Commander Chantry - Tony Chantry - who murdered Valentine?’

‘Yes. You saw him do it! Douglas Gold brought him his drink. He sat with it in front of him. When the women came in we all looked across the room, he had the stropanthin ready, he dropped it into the pink gin and presently, courteously, he passed it along to his wife and she drank it.’

‘But the packet of stropanthin was found in Douglas Gold’s pocket!’

‘A very simple matter to slip it there when we were all crowding round the dying woman.’ It was quite two minutes before Pamela got her breath.

‘But I don’t understand a word! The triangle - you said yourself - ’ Hercule Poirot nodded his head vigorously.

‘I said there was a triangle - yes. But you, you imagined the wrong one. You were deceived by some very clever acting! You thought, as

you were meant to think, that both Tony Chantry and Douglas Gold were in love with Valentine Chantry. You believed, as you were meant to believe, that Douglas Gold, being in love with Valentine Chantry (whose husband refused to divorce her) took the desperate step of administering a powerful heart poison to Chantry and that, by a fatal mistake, Valentine Chantry drank that poison instead. All that is illusion. Chantry has been meaning to do away with his wife for some time. He was bored to death with her, I could see that from the first. He married her for her money. Now he wants to marry another woman - so he planned to get rid of Valentine and keep her money. That entailed murder.'

'Another woman?'

Poirot said slowly:

'Yes, yes - the little Marjorie Gold. It was the eternal triangle all right! But you saw it the wrong way round. Neither of those two men cared in the least for Valentine Chantry. It was her vanity and Majorie Gold's very clever stage managing that made you think they did! A very clever woman, Mrs Gold, and amazingly attractive in her demure Madonna, poor-little-thing-way! I have known four women criminals of the same type. There was Mrs Adams who was acquitted of murdering her husband, but everybody knows she did it. Mary Parker did away with an aunt, a sweetheart and two brothers before she got a little careless and was caught. Then there was Mrs Rowden, she was hanged all right. Mrs Lecray escaped by the skin of her teeth. This woman is exactly the same type. I recognized it as soon as I saw her! That type takes to crime like a duck to water! And a very pretty bit of well-planned work it was. Tell me, what evidence

did you ever have that Douglas Gold was in love with Valentine Chantry? When you come to think it out, you will realize that there was only Mrs Gold's confidences and Chantry's jealous bluster. Yes? You see?'

'It's horrible,' cried Pamela.

'They were a clever pair,' said Poirot with professional detachment. 'They planned to "meet" here and stage their crime. That Marjorie Gold, she is a cold-blooded devil! She would have sent her poor, innocent fool of a husband to the scaffold without the least remorse.'

Pamela cried out:

'But he was arrested and taken away by the police last night.'

'Ah,' said Hercule Poirot, 'but after that, me, I had a few little words with the police. It is true that I did not see Chantry put the stropanthin in the glass. I, like everyone else, looked up when the ladies came in. But the moment I realized that Valentine Chantry had been poisoned, I watched her husband without taking my eyes off him. And so, you see, I actually saw him slip the packet of stropanthin in Douglas Gold's coat pocket...'

He added with a grim expression on his face:

'I am a good witness. My name is well known. The moment the police heard my story they realized that it put an entirely different complexion on the matter.'

‘And then?’ demanded Pamela, fascinated.

‘Eh bien, then they asked Commander Chantry a few questions. He tried to bluster it out, but he is not really clever, he soon broke down.’

‘So Douglas Gold was set at liberty?’ ‘Yes.’

‘And - Marjorie Gold?’ Poirot’s face grew stern.

‘I warned her,’ he said. ‘Yes, I warned her… Up on the Mount of the Prophet… It was the only chance of averting the crime. I as good as told her that I suspected her. She understood. But she believed herself too clever… I told her to leave the island if she valued her life. She chose - to remain…’

FOREWORD

Hercule Poirot's flat was essentially modern in its furnishings. It gleamed with chromium. Its easy-chairs, though comfortably padded, were square and uncompromising in outline.

On one of these chairs sat Hercule Poirot, neatly - in the middle of the chair. Opposite him, in another chair, sat Dr Burton, Fellow of All Souls, sipping appreciatively at a glass of Poirot's Château Mouton Rothschild. There was no neatness about Dr Burton. He was plump, untidy, and beneath his thatch of white hair beamed a rubicund and benign countenance. He had a deep wheezy chuckle and the habit of covering himself and everything round him with tobacco ash. In vain did Poirot surround him with ashtrays.

Dr Burton was asking a question.

"Tell me," he said. "Why Hercule?"

"You mean, my Christian name?"

"Hardly a Christian name," the other demurred. "Definitely pagan. But why? That's what I want to know. Father's fancy? Mother's whim? Family reasons? If I remember rightly - though my memory isn't what it was - you had a brother called Achille, did you not?"

Poirot's mind raced back over the details of Achille Poirot's career. Had all that really happened?

"Only for a short space of time," he replied.

Dr Burton passed tactfully from the subject of Achille Poirot.

"People should be more careful how they name their children," he ruminated. "I've got god-children. I know. Blanche, one of 'em is called - dark as a gipsy! Then there's Deirdre, Deirdre of the Sorrows - she's turned out merry as a grig. As for young Patience, she might as well have been named Impatience and be done with it! And Diana - well, Diana -" the old Classical scholar shuddered. "Weighs twelve stone now - and she's only fifteen! They say it's puppy fat - but it doesn't look that way to me. Diana! They wanted to call her Helen, but I did put my foot down there. Knowing what her father and mother looked like! And her grandmother for that matter! I tried hard for Martha or Dorcas or something sensible - but it was no good - waste of breath. Rum people, parents..."

He began to wheeze gently - his small fat face crinkled up.

Poirot looked at him inquiringly.

"Thinking of an imaginary conversation. Your mother and the late Mrs Holmes, sitting sewing little garments or knitting: 'Achille, Hercule, Sherlock, Mycroft...'"

Poirot failed to share his friend's amusement.

"What I understand you to mean is, that in physical appearance I do not resemble a Hercules?"

Dr Burton's eyes swept over Hercule Poirot, over his small neat person attired in striped trousers, correct black jacket and natty bow tie, swept up from his patent leather shoes to his egg-shaped head and the immense moustache that adorned his upper lip.

"Frankly, Poirot," said Dr Burton, "you don't! I gather," he added, "that you've never had much time to study the Classics?"

"That is so."

"Pity. Pity. You've missed a lot. Everyone should be made to study the Classics if I had my way."

Poirot shrugged his shoulders.

"Eh bien, I have got on very well without them."

"Got on! Got on! It's not a question of getting on. That's the wrong view altogether. The Classics aren't a ladder leading to quick success like a modern correspondence course! It's not a man's working hours that are important - it's his leisure hours. That's the mistake we all make. Take yourself now, you're getting on, you'll be wanting to get out of things, to take things easy - what are you going to do then with your leisure hours?"

Poirot was ready with his reply.

"I am going to attend - seriously - to the cultivation of vegetable marrows."

Dr Burton was taken aback.

"Vegetable marrows? What d'yer mean? Those great swollen green things that taste of water?"

"Ah," Poirot spoke enthusiastically. "But that is the whole point of it. They need not taste of water."

"Oh! I know - sprinkle 'em with cheese, or minced onion or white sauce."

"No, no - you are in error. It is my idea that the actual flavour of the marrow itself can be improved. It can be given," he screwed up his eyes, "a bouquet -"

"Good God, man, it's not a claret." The word bouquet reminded Dr Burton of the glass at his elbow. He sipped and savoured. "Very good wine, this. Very sound. Yes." His head nodded in approbation. "But this vegetable marrow business - you're not serious? You don't mean -" he spoke in lively horror - "that you're actually going to stoop -" his hands descended in sympathetic horror on his own plump stomach - "stoop, and fork dung on the things, and feed 'em with strands of wool dipped in water and all the rest of it?"

"You seem," Poirot said, "to be well acquainted with the culture of the marrow?"

"Seen gardeners doing it when I've been staying in the country. But seriously, Poirot, what a hobby! Compare that to -" his voice sank to an appreciative purr - "an easy-chair in front of a wood fire in a long, low

room lined with books - must be a long room - not a square one. Books all round one. A glass of port - and a book open in your hand. Time rolls back as you read," he quoted sonorously, translating from the Greek:

'By skill again, the pilot on the wine-dark sea straightens

The swift ship buffeted by the winds.'

"Of course you can never really get the spirit of the original."

For the moment, in his enthusiasm, he had forgotten Poirot. And Poirot, watching him, felt suddenly a doubt - an uncomfortable twinge. Was there, here, something that he had missed? Some richness of the spirit? Sadness crept over him. Yes, he should have become acquainted with the Classics... Long ago... Now, alas, it was too late...

Dr Button interrupted his melancholy.

"Do you mean that you really are thinking of retiring?"

"Yes."

The other chuckled. "You won't!"

"But I assure you -"

"You won't be able to do it, man. You're too interested in your work."

"No - indeed - I make all the arrangements. A few more cases - specially selected ones - not, you understand, everything that presents itself - just problems that have a personal appeal."

Dr Burton grinned.

"That's the way of it. Just a case or two, just one case more - and so on. The Prima Donna's farewell performance won't be in it with yours, Poirot!"

He chuckled and rose slowly to his feet, an amiable white-haired gnome.

"Yours aren't the Labours of Hercules," he said. "Yours are labours of love. You'll see if I'm not right. Bet you that in twelve months' time you'll still be here, and vegetable marrows will still be -" he shuddered - "merely marrows."

Taking leave of his host, Dr Burton left the severe rectangular room.

He passes out of these pages not to return to them. We are concerned only with what he left behind him, which was an Idea.

For after his departure Hercule Poirot sat down again slowly like a man in a dream and murmured:

"The Labours of Hercules... Mais oui, c'est une idée, ça..."

The following day saw Hercule Poirot perusing a large calf-bound volume and other slimmer works, with occasional harried glances at various typewritten slips of paper.

His secretary. Miss Lemon, had been detailed to collect information on the subject of Hercules and to place same before him.

Without interest (hers not the type to wonder why!) but with perfect efficiency, Miss Lemon had fulfilled her task.

Hercule Poirot was plunged head first in a bewildering sea of classical lore with particular reference to "Hercules, a celebrated hero who, after death, was ranked among the gods, and received divine honours."

So far, so good - but thereafter it was far from plain sailing. For two hours Poirot read diligently, making notes, frowning, consulting his slips of paper and his other books of reference. Finally he sank back in his chair and shook his head. His mood of the previous evening was dispelled. What people!

Take this Hercules - this hero! Hero, indeed! What was he but a large muscular creature of low intelligence and criminal tendencies! Poirot was reminded of one Adolfe Durand, a butcher, who had been tried at Lyons in 1895 - a creature of ox-like strength who had killed several children. The defence had been epilepsy - from which he undoubtedly suffered - though whether grand mal or petit mal had been an argument of several days' discussion. This ancient Hercules probably suffered from grand mal. No, Poirot shook his head, if that was the Greeks' idea of a hero, then measured by modern standards it

certainly would not do. The whole classical pattern shocked him. These gods and goddesses - they seemed to have as many different aliases as a modern criminal. Indeed they seemed to be definitely criminal types. Drink, debauchery, incest, rape, loot, homicide and chicanery - enough to keep a juge d'Instruction constantly busy. No decent family life. No order, no method. Even in their crimes, no order or method!

"Hercules indeed!" said Hercule Poirot, rising to his feet, disillusioned.

He looked round him with approval. A square room, with good square modern furniture - even a piece of good modern sculpture representing one cube placed on another cube and above it a geometrical arrangement of copper wire. And in the midst of this shining and orderly room, himself. He looked at himself in the glass. Here, then, was a modern Hercules - very distinct from that unpleasant sketch of a naked figure with bulging muscles, brandishing a club. Instead, a small compact figure attired in correct urban wear with a moustache - such a moustache as Hercules never dreamed of cultivating - a moustache magnificent yet sophisticated.

Yet there was between this Hercule Poirot and the Hercules of Classical lore one point of resemblance. Both of them, undoubtedly, had been instrumental in ridding the world of certain pests... Each of them could be described as a benefactor to the Society he lived in...

What had Dr Burton said last night as he left: "Yours are not the Labours of Hercules..."

Ah, but there he was wrong, the old fossil. There should be, once again, the Labours of Hercules - a modern Hercules. An ingenious and amusing conceit! In the period before his final retirement he would accept twelve cases, no more, no less. And those twelve cases should be selected with special reference to the twelve labours of ancient Hercules. Yes, that would not only be amusing, it would be artistic, it would be spiritual.

Poirot picked up the Classical Dictionary and immersed himself once more in classical lore. He did not intend to follow his prototype too closely. There should be no women, no shirt of Nessus... The Labours and the Labours only.

The first Labour, then, would be that of the Nemean Lion.

"The Nemean Lion," he repeated, trying it over on his tongue.

Naturally he did not expect a case to present itself actually involving a flesh and blood lion. It would be too much of a coincidence should he be approached by the Directors of the Zoological Gardens to solve a problem for them involving a real lion.

No, here symbolism must be involved. The first case must concern some celebrated public figure, it must be sensational and of the first importance! Some master criminal - or alternately someone who was a lion in the public eye. Some well-known writer, or politician, or painter - or even Royalty?

He liked the idea of Royalty...

He would not be in a hurry. He would wait - wait for that case of high importance that should be the first of his self-imposed Labours.

Chapter 1

THE NEMEAN LION

"Anything of interest this morning, Miss Lemon?" he asked as he entered the room the following morning.

He trusted Miss Lemon. She was a woman without imagination, but she had an instinct. Anything that she mentioned as worth consideration usually was worth consideration. She was a born secretary.

"Nothing much, M. Poirot. There is just one letter that I thought might interest you. I have put it on the top of the pile."

"And what is that?" he took an interested step forward.

"It's from a man who wants you to investigate the disappearance of his wife's Pekinese dog."

Poirot paused with his foot still in the air. He threw a glance of deep reproach at Miss Lemon. She did not notice it. She had begun to type. She typed with the speed and precision of a quick-firing tank.

Poirot was shaken; shaken and embittered. Miss Lemon, the efficient Miss Lemon, had let him down! A Pekinese dog. A Pekinese dog! And after the dream he had had last night. He had been leaving Buckingham Palace after being personally thanked when his valet had come in with his morning chocolate!

Words trembled on his lips - witty caustic words. He did not utter them because Miss Lemon, owing to the speed and efficiency of her typing, would not have heard them.

With a grunt of disgust he picked up the topmost letter from the little pile on the side of his desk.

Yes, it was exactly as Miss Lemon had said. A city address - a curt businesslike unrefined demand. The subject - the kidnapping of a Pekinese dog. One of those bulging-eyed, over-pampered pets of a rich woman. Hercule Poirot's lip curled as he read it.

Nothing unusual about this. Nothing out of the way or - But yes, yes, in one small detail. Miss Lemon was right. In one small detail there was something unusual.

Hercule Poirot sat down. He read the letter slowly and carefully. It was not the kind of case he wanted, it was not the kind of case he had promised himself. It was not in any sense an important case, it was supremely unimportant. It was not - and here was the crux of his objection - it was not a proper Labour of Hercules.

But unfortunately he was curious... Yes, he was curious...

He raised his voice so as to be heard by Miss Lemon above the noise of her typing.

"Ring up this Sir Joseph Hoggin," he ordered, "and make an appointment for me to see him at his office as he suggests."

As usual. Miss Lemon had been right.

II

"I'm a plain man, M. Poirot," said Sir Joseph Hoggin.

Hercule Poirot made a noncommittal gesture with his right hand. It expressed (if you chose to take it so) admiration for the solid worth of Sir Joseph's career and an appreciation of his modesty in so describing himself. It could also have conveyed a graceful deprecation of the statement. In any case it gave no clue to the thought then uppermost in Hercule Poirot's mind, which was that Sir Joseph certainly was (using the term in its more colloquial sense) a very plain man indeed. Hercule Poirot's eyes rested critically on the swelling jowl, the small pig eyes, the bulbous nose and the close-lipped mouth. The whole general effect reminded him of someone or something - but for the moment he could not recollect who or what it was. A memory stirred dimly. A long time ago... in Belgium... something, surely, to do with soap...

Sir Joseph was continuing.

"No frills about me. I don't beat about the bush. Most people, M. Poirot, would let this business go. Write it off as a bad debt and forget about it. But that's not Joseph Hoggin's way. I'm a rich man - and in a manner of speaking two hundred pounds is neither here nor there to me -"

Poirot interpolated swiftly: "I congratulate you."

"Eh?" Sir Joseph paused a minute. His small eyes narrowed themselves still more. He said sharply: "That's not to say that I'm in the habit of throwing my money about. What I want I pay for. But I pay the market price - no more."

Hercule Poirot said: "You realise that my fees are high?"

"Yes, yes. But this," Sir Joseph looked at him cunningly, "is a very small matter."

Hercule Poirot shrugged his shoulders.

He said: "I do not bargain. I am an expert. For the services of an expert you have to pay."

Sir Joseph said frankly: "I know you're a tip-top man at this sort of thing. I made inquiries and I was told that you were the best man available. I mean to get to the bottom of this business and I don't grudge the expense. That's why I got you to come here."

"You were fortunate," said Hercule Poirot.

Sir Joseph said "Eh?" again.

"Exceedingly fortunate," said Hercule Poirot firmly. "I am, I may say so without undue modesty, at the apex of my career. Very shortly I intend to retire - to live in the country, to travel occasionally to see the world - also, it may be, to cultivate my garden - with particular attention to improving the strain of vegetable marrows. Magnificent vegetables - but they lack flavour. That, however, is not the point. I wished merely to explain that before retiring I had imposed upon myself a certain task. I have decided to accept twelve cases - no more, no less. A self-imposed 'Labours of Hercules' if I may so describe it. Your case. Sir Joseph, is the first of the twelve. I was attracted to it," he sighed, "by its striking unimportance."

"Importance?" said Sir Joseph.

"Unimportance was what I said. I have been called in for varying causes - to investigate murders, unexplained deaths, robberies, thefts of jewellery. This is the first time that I have been asked to turn my talents to elucidate the kidnapping of a Pekinese dog."

Sir Joseph grunted. He said: "You surprise me! I should have said you'd have had no end of women pestering you about their pet dogs."

"That, certainly. But it is the first time that I am summoned by the husband in the case."

Sir Joseph's little eyes narrowed appreciatively.

He said: "I begin to see why they recommended you to me. You're a shrewd fellow, Mr Poirot."

Poirot murmured: "If you will now tell me the facts of the case. The dog disappeared, when?"

"Exactly a week ago."

"And your wife is by now quite frantic, I presume?"

Sir Joseph stared.

He said: "You don't understand. The dog has been returned."

"Returned? Then, permit me to ask, where do I enter the matter?"

Sir Joseph went crimson in the face.

"Because I'm damned if I'll be swindled! Now then, Mr Poirot, I'm going to tell you the whole thing. The dog was stolen a week ago - nipped in Kensington Gardens where he was out with my wife's companion. The next day my wife got a demand for two hundred pounds. I ask you - two hundred pounds! For a damned yapping little brute that's always getting under your feet anyway!"

Poirot murmured: "You did not approve of paying such a sum, naturally?"

"Of course I didn't - or wouldn't have if I'd known anything about it! Milly (my wife) knew that well enough. She didn't say anything to me.

Just sent off the money - in one-pound notes as stipulated - to the address given."

"And the dog was returned?"

"Yes. That evening the bell rang and there was the little brute sitting on the doorstep. And not a soul to be seen."

"Perfectly. Continue."

"Then, of course, Milly confessed what she'd done and I lost my temper a bit. However, I calmed down after a while - after all, the thing was done and you can't expect a woman to behave with any sense - and I daresay I should have let the whole thing go if it hadn't been for meeting old Samuelson at the Club."

"Yes?"

"Damn it all, this thing must be a positive racket! Exactly the same thing had happened to him. Three hundred pounds they'd rooked his wife of! Well, that was a bit too much. I decided the thing had got to be stopped. I sent for you."

"But surely. Sir Joseph, the proper thing (and a very much more inexpensive thing) would have been to send for the police?"

Sir Joseph rubbed his nose.

He said: "Are you married, Mr Poirot?"

"Alas," said Poirot, "I have not that felicity."

"H'm," said Sir Joseph. "Don't know about felicity, but if you were, you'd know that women are funny creatures. My wife went into hysterics at the mere mention of the police - she'd got it into her head that something would happen to her precious Shan Tung if I went to them. She wouldn't hear of the idea - and I may say she doesn't take very kindly to the idea of your being called in. But I stood firm there and at last she gave way. But, mind you, she doesn't like it."

Hercule Poirot murmured: "The position is, I perceive, a delicate one. It would be as well, perhaps, if I were to interview Madame your wife and gain further particulars from her whilst at the same time reassuring her as to the future safety of her dog?"

Sir Joseph nodded and rose to his feet.

He said: "I'll take you along in the car right away."

III

In a large, hot, ornately-furnished drawing-room two women were sitting.

As Sir Joseph and Hercule Poirot entered, a small Pekinese dog rushed forward, barking furiously, and circling dangerously round Poirot's ankles.

"Shan - Shan, come here. Come here to mother, lovey - Pick him up. Miss Carnaby."

The second woman hurried forward and Hercule Poirot murmured:

"A veritable lion, indeed."

Rather breathlessly Shan Tung's captor agreed.

"Yes, indeed, he's such a good watchdog. He's not frightened of anything or any one. There's a lovely boy, then."

Having performed the necessary introduction, Sir Joseph said: "Well, Mr Poirot, I'll leave you to get on with it," and with a short nod he left the room.

Lady Hoggin was a stout, petulant-looking woman with dyed henna red hair. Her companion, the fluttering Miss Carnaby, was a plump, amiable-looking creature between forty and fifty. She treated Lady Hoggin with great deference and was clearly frightened to death of her.

Poirot said: "Now tell me. Lady Hoggin, the full circumstances of this abominable crime."

Lady Hoggin flushed. "I'm very glad to hear you say that, Mr Poirot. For it was a crime. Pekinese are terribly sensitive - just as sensitive as children. Poor Shan Tung might have died of fright if of nothing else."

Miss Carnaby chimed in breathlessly: "Yes, it was wicked - wicked!"

"Please tell me the facts."

"Well, it was like this. Shan Tung was out for his walk in the Park with Miss Carnaby -"

"Oh dear me, yes, it was all my fault," chimed in the companion. "How could I have been so stupid - so careless -"

Lady Hoggin said acidly: "I don't want to reproach you, Miss Carnaby, but I do think you might have been more alert."

Poirot transferred his gaze to the companion.

"What happened?"

Miss Carnaby burst into voluble and slightly flustered speech.

"Well, it was the most extraordinary thing! We had just been along the flower walk - Shan Tung was on the lead, of course - he'd had his little run on the grass - and I was just about to turn and go home when my attention was caught by a baby in a pram - such a lovely baby - it smiled at me - lovely rosy cheeks and such curls. I couldn't just resist speaking to the nurse in charge and asking how old it was - seventeen months, she said - and I'm sure I was only speaking to her for about a

minute or two, and then suddenly I looked down and Shan wasn't there any more. The lead had been cut right through -"

Lady Hoggin said: "If you'd been paying proper attention to your duties, nobody could have sneaked up and cut that lead."

Miss Carnaby seemed inclined to burst into tears. Poirot said hastily:

"And what happened next?"

"Well, of course I looked everywhere. And called! And I asked the park attendant if he'd seen a man carrying a Pekinese dog but he hadn't noticed anything of the kind - and I didn't know what to do - and I went on searching, but at last, of course, I had to come home -"

Miss Carnaby stopped dead. Poirot could imagine the scene that followed well enough. He asked:

"And then you received a letter?"

Lady Hoggin took up the tale.

"By the first post the following morning. It said that if I wanted to see Shan Tung alive I was to send 200 pounds in one-pound notes in an unregistered packet to Captain Curtis, 38 Bloomsbury Road Square. It said that if the money were marked or the police informed then - then - Shan Tung's ears and tail would be - cut off!"

Miss Carnaby began to sniff.

"So awful," she murmured. "How people can be such fiends!"

Lady Hoggin went on: "It said that if I sent the money at once, Shan Tung would be returned the same evening alive and well, but that if - if afterwards I went to the police, it would be Shan Tung who would suffer for it -"

Miss Carnaby murmured tearfully: "Oh dear, I'm so afraid that even now - of course, M. Poirot isn't exactly the police -"

Lady Hoggin said anxiously: "So you see, Mr Poirot, you will have to be very careful."

Hercule Poirot was quick to allay her anxiety.

"But I, I am not of the police. My inquiries, they will be conducted very discreetly, very quietly. You can be assured, Lady Hoggin, that Shan Tung will be perfectly safe. That I will guarantee."

Both ladies seemed relieved by the magic word. Poirot went on:

"You have here the letter?"

Lady Hoggin shook her head.

"No, I was instructed to enclose it with the money."

"And you did so?"

"Yes."

"H'm, that is a pity."

Miss Carnaby said brightly: "But I have the dog lead still. Shall I get it?"

She left the room. Hercule Poirot profited by her absence to ask a few pertinent questions.

"Amy Carnaby? Oh! she's quite all right. A good soul, though foolish, of course. I have had several companions and they have all been complete fools. But Amy was devoted to Shan Tung and she was terribly upset over the whole thing - as well she might be - hanging over perambulators and neglecting my little sweetheart! These old maids are all the same, idiotic over babies! No, I'm quite sure she had nothing whatever to do with it."

"It does not seem likely," Poirot agreed. "But as the dog disappeared when in her charge one must make quite certain of her honesty. She has been with you long?"

"Nearly a year. I had excellent references with her. She was with old Lady Hartingfield until she died - ten years, I believe. After that she looked after an invalid sister for a while. She is really an excellent creature - but a complete fool, as I said."

Amy Carnaby returned at this minute, slightly more out of breath, and produced the cut dog lead which she handed to Poirot with the utmost solemnity, looking at him with hopeful expectancy.

Poirot surveyed it carefully.

"Mais oui," he said. "This has undoubtedly been cut."

The two women still waited expectantly.

He said: "I will keep this."

Solemnly he put it in his pocket. The two women breathed a sigh of relief. He had clearly done what was expected of him.

IV

It was the habit of Hercule Poirot to leave nothing untested.

Though on the face of it it seemed unlikely that Miss Carnaby was anything but the foolish and rather muddleheaded woman that she appeared to be, Poirot nevertheless managed to interview a somewhat forbidding lady who was the niece of the late Lady Hartingfield.

"Amy Carnaby?" said Miss Maltravers. "Of course, remember her perfectly. She was a good soul and suited Aunt Julia down to the ground. Devoted to dogs and excellent at reading aloud. Tactful, too, never contradicted an invalid. What's happened to her? Not in distress of any kind, I hope. I gave her a reference about a year ago to some woman - name began with H -"

Poirot explained hastily that Miss Carnaby was still in her post. There had been, he said, a little trouble over a lost dog.

"Amy Carnaby is devoted to dogs. My aunt had a Pekinese. She left it to Miss Carnaby when she died and Miss Carnaby was devoted to it. I believe she was quite heart-broken when it died. Oh yes, she's a good soul. Not, of course, precisely intellectual."

Hercule Poirot agreed that Miss Carnaby could not, perhaps be described as intellectual.

His next proceeding was to discover the Park Keeper to whom Miss Carnaby had spoken on the fateful afternoon. This he did without much difficulty. The man remembered the incident in question.

"Middle-aged lady, rather stout - in a regular state she was - lost her Pekinese dog. I knew her well by sight - brings the dog along most afternoons. I saw her come in with it. She was in a rare taking when she lost it. Came running to me to know if I'd seen any one with a Pekinese dog! Well, I ask you! I can tell you, the Gardens is full of dogs - every kind - terriers, Pekes, German sausage-dogs - even them Borzois - all kinds we have. Not likely as I'd notice one Peke more than another."

Hercule Poirot nodded his head thoughtfully.

He went to 38 Bloomsbury Road Square.

Nos. 38, 39, and 40 were incorporated together as the Balaclava Private Hotel. Poirot walked up the steps and pushed open the door.

He was greeted inside by gloom and a smell of cooking cabbage with a reminiscence of breakfast kippers. On his left was a mahogany table with a sad-looking chrysanthemum plant on it. Above the table was a big baize-covered rack into which letters were stuck. Poirot stared at the board thoughtfully for some minutes. He pushed open a door on his right. It led into a kind of lounge with small tables and some so-called easy-chairs covered with a depressing pattern of cretonne. Three old ladies and one fierce-looking old gentleman raised their heads and gazed at the intruder with deadly venom. Hercule Poirot blushed and withdrew.

He walked farther along the passage and came to a staircase. On his right a passage branched at right angles to what was evidently the dining-room.

A little way along this passage was a door marked "office".

On this Poirot tapped. Receiving no response, he opened the door and looked in. There was a large desk in the room covered with papers but there was no one to be seen. He withdrew, closing the door again. He penetrated to the dining-room.

A sad-looking girl in a dirty apron was shuffling about with a basket of knives and forks with which she was laying the tables.

Hercule Poirot said apologetically: "Excuse me, but could I see the manageress?"

The girl looked at him with lacklustre eyes.

She said: "I don't know, I'm sure."

Hercule Poirot said: "There is no one in the office."

"Well, I don't know where she'd be, I'm sure."

"Perhaps," Hercule Poirot said, patient and persistent, "you could find out?"

The girl sighed. Dreary as her day's round was, it had now been made additionally so by this new burden laid upon her. She said sadly:

"Well, I'll see what I can do."

Poirot thanked her and removed himself once more to the hall, not daring to face the malevolent glare of the occupants of the lounge. He was staring up at the baize-covered letter rack when a rustle and a strong smell of Devonshire violets proclaimed the arrival of the Manageress.

Mrs Harte was full of graciousness. She exclaimed:

"So sorry I was not in my office. You were requiring rooms?"

Hercule Poirot murmured: "Not precisely. I was wondering if a friend of mine had been staying here lately. A Captain Curtis."

"Curtis," exclaimed Mrs Harte. "Captain Curtis? Now where have I heard that name?"

Poirot did not help her. She shook her head vexedly.

He said: "You have not, then, had a Captain Curtis staying here?"

"Well, not lately, certainly. And yet, you know, the name is certainly familiar to me. Can you describe your friend at all?"

"That," said Hercule Poirot, "would be difficult." He went on: "I suppose it sometimes happens that letters arrive for people when in actual fact no one of that name is staying here?"

"That does happen, of course."

"What do you do with such letters?"

"Well, we keep them for a time. You see, it probably means that the person in question will arrive shortly. Of course, if letters or parcels are a long time here unclaimed, they are returned to the post office."

Hercule Poirot nodded thoughtfully.

He said: "I comprehend." He added: "It is like this, you see. I wrote a letter to my friend here."

Mrs Harte's face cleared.

"That explains it. I must have noticed the name on an envelope. But really we have so many ex-Army gentlemen staying here or passing through - Let me see now."

She peered up at the board.

Hercule Poirot said: "It is not there now."

"It must have been returned to the postman, I suppose. I am so sorry. Nothing important, I hope?"

"No, no, it was of no importance."

As he moved towards the door, Mrs Harte, enveloped in her pungent odour of violets, pursued him.

"If your friend should come -"

"It is most unlikely. I must have made a mistake..."

"Our terms," said Mrs Harte, "are very moderate. Coffee after dinner is included. I would like you to see one or two of our bed-sitting-rooms..."

With difficulty Hercule Poirot escaped.

V

The drawing-room of Mrs Samuelson was larger, more lavishly furnished, and enjoyed an even more stifling amount of central heating

than that of Lady Hoggin. Hercule Poirot picked his way giddily amongst gilded console tables and large groups of statuary.

Mrs Samuelson was taller than Lady Hoggin and her hair was dyed with peroxide. Her Pekinese was called Nanki Poo. His bulging eyes surveyed Hercule Poirot with arrogance. Miss Keble, Mrs Samuelson's companion, was thin and scraggy where Miss Carnaby had been plump, but she also was voluble and slightly breathless. She, too, had been blamed for Nanki Poo's disappearance.

"But really, Mr Poirot, it was the most amazing thing. It all happened in a second. Outside Harrods it was. A nurse there asked me the time -"

Poirot interrupted her.

"A nurse? A hospital nurse?"

"No, no - a children's nurse. Such a sweet baby it was, too! A dear little mite. Such lovely rosy cheeks. They say children don't look healthy in London, but I'm sure -"

"Ellen," said Mrs Samuelson.

Miss Keble blushed, stammered, and subsided into silence.

Mrs Samuelson said acidly: "And while Miss Keble was bending over a perambulator that had nothing to do with her, this audacious villain cut Nanki Poo's lead and made off with him."

Miss Keble murmured tearfully: "It all happened in a second. I looked round and the darling boy was gone - there was just the dangling lead in my hand. Perhaps you'd like to see the lead, Mr Poirot?"

"By no means," said Poirot hastily. He had no wish to make a collection of cut dog leads. "I understand," he went on, "that shortly afterwards you received a letter?"

The story followed the same course exactly - the letter - the threats of violence to Nanki Poo's ears and tail. Only two things were different - the sum of money demanded - £300 - and the address to which it was to be sent, this time it was to Commander Blackleigh, Harrington Hotel, 76 Clonmel Gardens, Kensington.

Mrs Samuelson went on: "When Nanki Poo was safely back again, I went to the place myself, Mr Poirot. After all, three hundred pounds is three hundred pounds."

"Certainly it is."

"The very first thing I saw was my letter enclosing the money in a kind of rack in the hall. Whilst I was waiting for the proprietress I slipped it into my bag. Unfortunately -"

Poirot said: "Unfortunately, when you opened it it contained only blank sheets of paper."

"How did you know?" Mrs Samuelson turned on him with awe.

Poirot shrugged his shoulders.

"Obviously, chère Madame, the thief would take care to recover the money before he returned the dog. He would then replace the notes with blank paper and return the letter to the rack in case its absence should be noticed."

"No such person as Commander Blackleigh had ever stayed there."

Poirot smiled.

"And of course, my husband was extremely annoyed about the whole thing. In fact, he was livid - absolutely livid!"

Poirot murmured cautiously: "You did not - er - consult him before dispatching the money?"

"Certainly not," said Mrs Samuelson with decision.

Poirot looked a question. The lady explained.

"I wouldn't have risked it for a moment. Men are so extraordinary when it's a question of money. Jacob would have insisted on going to the police. I couldn't risk that. My poor darling Nanki Poo. Anything might have happened to him! Of course, I had to tell my husband afterwards, because I had to explain why I was overdrawn at the Bank."

Poirot murmured: "Quite so - quite so."

"And I have really never seen him so angry. Men," said Mrs Samuelson, rearranging her handsome diamond bracelet and turning her rings on her fingers, "think of nothing but money."

VI

Hercule Poirot went up in the lift to Sir Joseph Hoggin's office. He sent in his card and was told that Sir Joseph was engaged at the moment but would see him presently. A haughty blonde sailed out of Sir Joseph's room at last with her hands full of papers. She gave the quaint little man a disdainful glance in passing.

Sir Joseph was seated behind his immense mahogany desk. There was a trace of lipstick on his chin.

"Well, Mr Poirot? Sit down. Got any news for me?"

Hercule Poirot said: "The whole affair is of a pleasing simplicity. In each case the money was sent to one of those boarding houses or private hotels where there is no porter or hall attendant and where a large number of guests are always coming and going, including a fairly large preponderance of ex-Service men. Nothing would be easier than for any one to walk in, abstract a letter from the rack, either take it away or else remove the money and replace it with blank paper. Therefore, in every case, the trail ends abruptly in a blank wall."

"You mean you've no idea who the fellow is?"

"I have certain ideas, yes. It will take a few days to follow them up."

Sir Joseph looked at him curiously.

"Good work. Then, when you have got anything to report -"

"I will report to you at your house."

Sir Joseph said: "If you get to the bottom of this business, it will be a pretty good piece of work."

Hercule Poirot said: "There is no question of failure. Hercule Poirot does not fail."

Sir Joseph Hoggin looked at the little man and grinned.

"Sure of yourself, aren't you?" he demanded.

"Entirely with reason."

"Oh well." Sir Joseph Hoggin leaned back in his chair. "Pride goes before a fall, you know."

VII

Hercule Poirot, sitting in front of his electric radiator (and feeling a quiet satisfaction in its neat geometrical pattern) was giving instructions to his valet and general factotum.

"You understand, Georges?"

"Perfectly, sir."

"More probably a flat or maisonette. And it will definitely be within certain limits. South of the Park, east of Kensington Church, west of Knightsbridge Barracks and north of Fulham Road."

"I understand perfectly, sir."

Poirot murmured: "A curious little case. There is evidence here of a very definite talent for organisation. And there is, of course, the surprising invisibility of the star performer - the Nemean Lion himself, if I may so style him. Yes, an interesting little case. I could wish that I felt more attracted to my client - but he bears an unfortunate resemblance to a soap manufacturer of Liege who poisoned his wife in order to marry a blonde secretary. One of my early successes."

George shook his head. He said gravely: "These blondes, sir, they're responsible for a lot of trouble."

VIII

It was three days later when the invaluable George said:

"This is the address, sir."

Hercule Poirot took the piece of paper handed to him.

"Excellent, my good Georges. And what day of the week?"

"Thursdays, sir."

"Thursdays. And today, most fortunately, is a Thursday. So there need be no delay."

Twenty minutes later Hercule Poirot was climbing the stairs of an obscure block of flats tucked away in a little street leading off a more fashionable one. No. 10 Rosholm Mansions was on the third and top floor and there was no lift. Poirot toiled upwards round and round the narrow corkscrew staircase.

He paused to regain his breath on the top landing and from behind the door of No. 10 a new sound broke the silence - the sharp bark of a dog.

Hercule Poirot nodded his head with a slight smile. He pressed the bell of No. 10.

The barking redoubled - footsteps came to the door, it was opened...

Miss Amy Carnaby fell back, her hand went to her ample breast.

"You permit that I enter?" said Hercule Poirot, and entered without waiting for the reply.

There was a sitting-room door open on the right and he walked in. Behind him Miss Carnaby followed as though in a dream.

The room was very small and much overcrowded. Amongst the furniture a human being could be discovered, an elderly woman lying on a sofa drawn up to the gas fire. As Poirot came in, a Pekinese dog jumped off the sofa and came forward uttering a few sharp suspicious barks.

"Aha," said Poirot. "The chief actor! I salute you, my little friend."

He bent forward, extending his hand. The dog sniffed at it, his intelligent eyes fixed on the man's face.

Miss Carnaby murmured faintly: "So you know?"

Hercule Poirot nodded. "Yes, I know." He looked at the woman on the sofa. "Your sister, I think?"

Miss Carnaby said mechanically: "Yes, Emily, this - this is Mr Poirot."

Emily Carnaby gave a gasp. She said: "Oh!"

Amy Carnaby said: "Augustus..."

The Pekinese looked towards her - his tail moved - then he resumed his scrutiny of Poirot's hand. Again his tail moved faintly.

Gently, Poirot picked the little dog up and sat down with Augustus on his knee. He said:

"So I have captured the Nemean Lion. My task is completed."

Amy Carnaby said in a hard dry voice: "Do you really know everything?"

Poirot nodded. "I think so. You organised this business - with Augustus to help you. You took your employees dog out for his usual walk, brought him here and went on to the Park with Augustus. The Park Keeper saw you with a Pekinese as usual. The nurse girl, if we ever found her, would also have agreed that you had a Pekinese with you when you spoke to her. Then, while you were talking, you cut the lead and Augustus, trained by you, slipped off at once and made a bee-line back home. A few minutes later you gave the alarm that the dog had been stolen."

There was a pause. Then Miss Carnaby drew herself up with a certain pathetic dignity. She said:

"Yes. It is all quite true. I - I have nothing to say."

The invalid woman on the sofa began to cry softly.

Poirot said: "Nothing at all. Mademoiselle?"

Miss Carnaby said: "Nothing. I have been a thief - and now I am found out."

Poirot murmured: "You have nothing to say - in your own defence?"

A spot of red showed suddenly in Amy Carnaby's white cheeks. She said:

"I - I don't regret what I did. I think that you are a kind man, Mr Poirot, and that possibly you might understand. You see, I've been so terribly afraid"

"Afraid?"

"Yes, it's difficult for a gentleman to understand, I expect. But you see, I'm not a clever woman at all, and I've no training and I'm getting older - and I'm so terrified for the future. I've not been able to save anything - how could I with Emily to be cared for? - and as I get older and more incompetent there won't be any one who wants me. They'll want somebody young and brisk. I've - I've known so many people like I am - nobody wants you and you live in one room and you can't have a fire or any warmth and not very much to eat, and at last you can't even pay the rent of your room... There are Institutions, of course, but it's not very easy to get into them unless you have influential friends, and I haven't. There are a good many others situated like I am - poor companions - untrained useless women with nothing to look forward to but a deadly fear..."

Her voice shook. She said: "And so - some of us - got together and - and I thought of this. It was really having Augustus that put it into my

mind. You see, to most people, one Pekinese is very much like another. (Just as we think the Chinese are.) Really, of course, it's ridiculous. No one who knew could mistake Augustus for Nanki Poo or Shan Tung or any of the other Pekes. He's far more intelligent for one thing, and he's much handsomer, but, as I say, to most people a Peke is just a Peke. Augustus put it into my head - that, combined with the fact that so many rich women have Pekinese dogs."

Poirot said with a faint smile: "It must have been a profitable - racket! How many are there in the - the gang? Or perhaps I had better ask how often operations have been successfully carried out?"

Miss Carnaby said simply: "Shang Tung was the sixteenth."

Hercule Poirot raised his eyebrows.

"I congratulate you. Your organisation must have been indeed excellent."

Emily Carnaby said: "Amy was always good at organisation. Our father - he was the Vicar of Kellington in Essex - always said that Amy had quite a genius for planning. She always made all the arrangements for the Socials and the Bazaars and all that."

Poirot said with a little bow: "I agree. As a criminal. Mademoiselle, you are quite in the first rank."

Amy Carnaby cried: "A criminal. Oh dear, I suppose I am. But - but it never felt like that."

"How did it feel?"

"Of course, you are quite right. It was breaking the law. But you see - how can I explain it? Nearly all these women who employ us are so very rude and unpleasant. Lady Hoggin, for instance, doesn't mind what she says to me. She said her tonic tasted unpleasant the other day and practically accused me of tampering with it. All that sort of thing." Miss Carnaby flushed. "It's really very unpleasant. And not being able to say anything or answer back makes it rankle more, if you know what I mean."

"I know what you mean," said Hercule Poirot.

"And then seeing money frittered away so wastefully - that is upsetting. And Sir Joseph, occasionally he used to describe a coup he had made in the City - sometimes something that seemed to me (of course, I know I've only got a woman's brain and don't understand finance) downright dishonest. Well, you know, M. Poirot, it all - it all unsettled me, and I felt that to take a little money away from these people who really wouldn't miss it and hadn't been too scrupulous in acquiring it - well, really it hardly seemed wrong at all."

Poirot murmured: "A modern Robin Hood! Tell me, Miss Carnaby, did you ever have to carry out the threats you used in your letters?"

"Threats?"

"Were you ever compelled to mutilate the animals in the way you specified?"

Miss Carnaby regarded him in horror.

"Of course, I would never have dreamed of doing such a thing! That was just - just an artistic touch."

"Very artistic. It worked."

"Well, of course I knew it would. I know how I should have felt about Augustus, and of course I had to make sure these women never told their husbands until afterwards. The plan worked beautifully every time. In nine cases out of ten the companion was given the letter with the money to post. We usually steamed it open, took out the notes, and replaced them with paper. Once or twice the woman posted it herself. Then, of course, the companion had to go to the hotel and take the letter out of the rack. But that was quite easy, too."

"And the nurse-maid touch? Was it always a nurse-maid?"

"Well, you see, M. Poirot, old maids are known to be foolishly sentimental about babies. So it seemed quite natural that they should be absorbed over a baby and not notice anything."

Hercule Poirot sighed. He said: "Your psychology is excellent, your organisation is first class, and you are also a very fine actress. Your performance the other day when I interviewed Lady Hoggin was irreproachable. Never think of yourself disparagingly, Miss Carnaby. You may be what is termed an untrained woman but there is nothing wrong with your brains or with your courage."

Miss Carnaby said with a faint smile: "And yet I have been found out, M. Poirot."

"Only by me. That was inevitable! When I had interviewed Mrs Samuelson I realised that the kidnapping of Shan Tung was one of a series. I had already learned that you had once been left a Pekinese dog and had an invalid sister. I had only to ask my invaluable servant to look for a small flat within a certain radius occupied by an invalid lady who had a Pekinese dog and a sister who visited her once a week on her day out. It was simple."

Amy Carnaby drew herself up.

She said: "You have been very kind. It emboldens me to ask you a favour. I cannot, I know, escape the penalty for what I have done. I shall be sent to prison, I suppose. But if you could, M. Poirot, avert some of the publicity. So distressing for Emily - and for those few who knew us in the old days. I could not, I suppose, go to prison under a false name? Or is that a very wrong thing to ask?"

Hercule Poirot said: "I think I can do more than that. But first of all I must make one thing quite dear. This ramp has got to stop. There must be no more disappearing dogs. All that is finished!"

"Yes! Oh yes!"

"And the money you extracted from Lady Hoggin must be returned."

Amy Carnaby crossed the room, opened the drawer of a bureau and returned with a packet of notes which she handed to Poirot.

"I was going to pay it into the pool today."

Poirot took the notes and counted them. He got up.

"I think it possible, Miss Carnaby, that I may be able to persuade Sir Joseph not to prosecute."

"Oh, M. Poirot!"

Amy Carnaby clasped her hands. Emily gave a cry of joy. Augustus barked and wagged his tail.

"As for you, mon ami," said Poirot addressing him. "There is one thing that I wish you would give me. It is your mantle of invisibility that I need. In all these cases nobody for a moment suspected that there was a second dog involved. Augustus possessed the lion's skin of invisibility."

"Of course, M. Poirot, according to the legend, Pekinese were lions once. And they still have the hearts of lions!"

"Augustus is, I suppose, the dog that was left to you by Lady Hartingfield and who is reported to have died? Were you never afraid of him coming home alone through the traffic?"

"Oh no, M. Poirot, Augustus is very clever about traffic. I have trained him most carefully. He has even grasped the principle of One Way Streets."

"In that case," said Hercule Poirot, "he is superior to most human beings!"

IX

Sir Joseph received Hercule Poirot in his study. He said:

"Well, Mr Poirot? Made your boast good?"

"Let me first ask you a question," said Poirot as he seated himself. "I know who the criminal is and I think it possible that I can produce sufficient evidence to convict this person. But in that case I doubt if you will ever recover your money."

"Not get back my money?" Sir Joseph turned purple.

Hercule Poirot went on: "But I am not a policeman. I am acting in this case solely in your interests. I could, I think, recover your money intact, if no proceedings were taken."

"Eh?" said Sir Joseph. "That needs a bit of thinking about."

"It is entirely for you to decide. Strictly speaking, I suppose you ought to prosecute in the public interest. Most people would say so."

"I dare say they would," said Sir Joseph sharply. "It wouldn't be their money that had gone west. If there's one thing I hate it's to be swindled. Nobody's ever swindled me and got away with it."

"Well then, what do you decide?"

Sir Joseph hit the table with his fist.

"I'll have the brass! Nobody's going to say they got away with two hundred pounds of my money."

Hercule Poirot rose, crossed to the writing-table, wrote out a cheque for two hundred pounds and handed it to the other man.

Sir Joseph said in a weak voice: "Well, I'm damned! Who the devil is this fellow?"

Poirot shook his head. "If you accept the money, there must be no questions asked."

Sir Joseph folded up the cheque and put it in his pocket.

"That's a pity. But the money's the thing. And what do I owe you, Mr Poirot?"

"My fees will not be high. This was, as I said, a very unimportant matter." He paused - and added, "Nowadays nearly all my cases are murder cases..."

Sir Joseph started slightly. "Must be interesting?" he said.

"Sometimes. Curiously enough, you recall to me one of my early cases in Belgium, many years ago - the chief protagonist was very like you in appearance. He was a wealthy soap manufacturer. He poisoned his wife in order to be free to marry his secretary... Yes - the resemblance is very remarkable..."

A faint sound came from Sir Joseph's lips - they had gone a queer blue colour. All the ruddy hue had faded from his cheeks. His eyes, starting out of his head, stared at Poirot. He slipped down a little in his chair.

Then, with a shaking hand, he fumbled in his pocket. He drew out the cheque and tore it into pieces.

"That's washed out - see? Consider it as your fee."

"Oh but, Sir Joseph, my fee would not have been as large as that."

"That's all right. You keep it."

"I shall send it to a deserving charity."

"Send it anywhere you damn well like."

Poirot leaned forward. He said: "I think I need hardly point out. Sir Joseph, that in your position, you would do well to be exceedingly careful."

Sir Joseph said, his voice almost inaudible: "You needn't worry. I shall be careful all right."

Hercule Poirot left the house. As he went down the steps he said to himself:

"So - I was right."

X

Lady Hoggin said to her husband: "Funny, this tonic tastes quite different. It hasn't got that bitter taste any more. I wonder why?"

Sir Joseph growled: "Chemist. Careless fellows. Make things up differently different times."

Lady Hoggin said doubtfully: "I suppose that must be it."

"Of course it is. What else could it be?"

"Has the man found out anything about Shan Tung?"

"Yes. He got me my money back all right."

"Who was it?"

"He didn't say. Very close fellow, Hercule Poirot. But you needn't worry."

"He's a funny little man, isn't he?"

Sir Joseph gave a slight shiver and threw a sideways glance upwards as though he felt the invisible presence of Hercule Poirot behind his right shoulder. He had an idea that he would always feel it there.

He said: "He's a damned clever little devil!"

And he thought to himself: "Greta can go hang! I'm not going to risk my neck for any damned platinum blonde!"

XI

"Oh!"

Amy Carnaby gazed down incredulously at the cheque for two hundred pounds. She cried: "Emily! Emily! Listen to this.

Dear Miss Carnaby,

Allow me to enclose a contribution to your very deserving Fund before it is finally wound up.

Yours very truly,

Hercule Poirot."

"Amy," said Emily Carnaby, "you've been incredibly lucky. Think where you might be now."

"Wormwood Scrubbs - or is it Holloway?" murmured Amy Carnaby. "But that's all over now - isn't it, Augustus? No more walks to the Park with mother or mother's friends and a little pair of scissors."

A far away wistfulness came into her eyes. She sighed.

"Dear Augustus! It seems a pity. He's so clever... One can teach him anything."

Chapter 2

THE LERNEAN HYDRA

Hercule Poirot looked encouragingly at the man seated opposite him.

Dr Charles Oldfield was a man of perhaps forty. He had fair hair slightly grey at the temples and blue eyes that held a worried expression. He stooped a little and his manner was a trifle hesitant. Moreover, he seemed to find difficulty in coming to the point.

He said, stammering slightly: "I've come to you, M. Poirot, with rather an odd request. And now that I'm here, I'm inclined to funk the whole thing. Because, as I see very well now, it's the sort of thing that no one can possibly do anything about."

Hercule Poirot murmured: "As to that, you must let me judge."

Oldfield muttered: "I don't know why I thought that perhaps -"

He broke off.

Hercule Poirot finished the sentence.

"That perhaps I could help you? Eh bien, perhaps I can. Tell me your problem."

Oldfield straightened himself. Poirot noted anew how haggard the man looked.

Oldfield said, and his voice had a note of hopelessness in it: "You see, it isn't any good going to the police... They can't do anything. And yet - every day it's getting worse and worse. I - I don't know what to do..."

"What is getting worse?"

"The rumours... Oh, it's quite simple, M. Poirot. Just a little over a year ago, my wife died. She had been an invalid for some years. They are saying, everyone is saying, that I killed her - that I poisoned her!"

"Aha," said Poirot. "And did you poison her?"

"M. Poirot!" Dr Oldfield sprang to his feet.

"Calm yourself," said Hercule Poirot. "And sit down again. We will take it, then, that you did not poison your wife. But your practice, I imagine, is situated in a country district -"

"Yes. Market Loughborough - in Berkshire. I have always realised that it was the kind of place where people gossiped a good deal, but I never imagined that it could reach the lengths it has done." He drew his chair a little forward. "M. Poirot, you have no idea of what I have gone through. At first I had no inkling of what was going on. I did notice that people seemed less friendly, that there was a tendency to avoid me - but I put it down to - to the fact of my recent bereavement. Then it became more marked. In the street, even, people will cross the road to avoid speaking to me. My practice is falling off. Wherever I go I am conscious of lowered voices, of unfriendly eyes that watch me whilst malicious tongues whisper their deadly poison. I have had one or two letters - vile things."

He paused - and then went on:

"And - and I don't know what to do about it. I don't know how to fight this - this vile network of lies and suspicion. How can one refute what is never said openly to your face? I am powerless - trapped - and slowly and mercilessly being destroyed."

Poirot nodded his head thoughtfully.

He said: "Yes. Rumour is indeed the nine-headed Hydra of Lernea which cannot be exterminated because as fast as one head is cropped off two grow in its place."

Dr Oldfield said: "That's just it. There's nothing I can do - nothing! I came to you as a last resort - but I don't suppose for a minute that there is anything you can do either."

Hercule Poirot was silent for a minute or two. Then he said: "I am not so sure. Your problem interests me, Doctor Oldfield. I should like to try my hand at destroying the many-headed monster. First of all, tell me a little more about the circumstances which gave rise to this malicious gossip. Your wife died, you say, just over a year ago. What was the cause of death?"

"Gastric ulcer."

"Was there an autopsy?"

"No. She had been suffering from gastric trouble over a considerable period."

Poirot nodded. "And the symptoms of gastric inflammation and of arsenical poisoning are closely alike - a fact which everybody knows nowadays. Within the last ten years there have been at least four sensational murder cases in each of which the victim has been buried without suspicion with a certificate of gastric disorder. Was your wife older or younger than yourself?"

"She was five years older."

"How long had you been married?"

"Fifteen years."

"Did she leave any property?"

"Yes. She was a fairly well-to-do woman. She left, roughly, about thirty thousand pounds."

"A very useful sum. It was left to you?"

"Yes."

"Were you and your wife on good terms? "

"Certainly."

"No quarrels? No scenes?"

"Well -" Charles Oldfield hesitated. "My wife was what might be termed a difficult woman. She was an invalid and very concerned over her health and inclined, therefore, to be fretful and difficult to please. There were days when nothing I could do was right."

Poirot nodded. He said: "Ah yes, I know the type. She would complain, possibly, that she was neglected, unappreciated - that her husband was tired of her and would be glad when she was dead."

Oldfield's face registered the truth of Poirot's surmise.

He said with a wry smile: "You've got it exactly!"

Poirot went on: "Did she have a hospital nurse to attend on her? Or a companion? Or a devoted maid?"

"A nurse-companion. A very sensible and competent woman. I really don't think she would talk."

"Even the sensible and the competent have been given tongues by le bon Dieu - and they do not always employ their tongues wisely. I have no doubt that the nurse-companion talked, that the servants talked, that everyone talked! You have all the materials there for the starting of a very enjoyable village scandal. Now I will ask you one thing more. Who is the lady?"

"I don't understand." Dr Oldfield flushed angrily.

Poirot said gently: "I think you do. I am asking you who the lady is with whom your name has been coupled."

Dr Oldfield rose to his feet. His face was stiff and cold.

He said: "There is no 'lady in the case'. I'm sorry, M. Poirot, to have taken up so much of your time."

He went toward the door.

Hercule Poirot said: "I regret it also. Your case interests me. I would like to have helped you. But I cannot do anything unless I am told the whole truth."

"I have told you the truth."

"No."

Dr Oldfield stopped. He wheeled round.

"Why do you insist that there is a woman concerned in this?"

"Mon cher docteur! Do you not think I know the female mentality? The village gossip, it is based always, always on the relations of the sexes. If a man poisons his wife in order to travel to the North Pole or to enjoy the peace of a bachelor existence - it would not interest his fellow villagers for a minute! It is because they are convinced that the murder has been committed in order that the man may marry another woman that the talk grows and spreads. That is elemental psychology."

Oldfield said irritably: "I'm not responsible for what a pack of damned gossiping busy-bodies think!"

"Of course you are not." Poirot went on: "So you might as well come back and sit down and give me the answer to the question I asked you just now."

Slowly, almost reluctantly, Oldfield came back and resumed his seat.

He said, colouring up to his eyebrows: "I suppose it's possible that they've been saying things about Miss Moncrieffe. Jean Moncrieffe is my dispenser, a very fine girl indeed."

"How long has she worked for you?"

"For three years."

"Did your wife like her?"

"Er - well, no, not exactly."

"She was jealous?"

"It was absurd!"

Poirot smiled. He said: "The jealousy of wives is proverbial. But I will tell you something. In my experience jealousy, however far-fetched and extravagant it may seem, is nearly always based on reality. There is a saying, is there not, that the customer is always right? Well, the same is true of the jealous husband or wife. However little concrete evidence there may be, fundamentally they are always right."

Dr Oldfield said robustly: "Nonsense. I've never said anything to Jean Moncrieffe that my wife couldn't have overheard."

"That, perhaps. But it does not alter the truth of what I said." Hercule Poirot leaned forward. His voice was urgent, compelling. "Doctor Oldfield, I am going to do my utmost in this case. But I must have from you the most absolute frankness without regard to conventional

appearances or to your own feelings. It is true, is it not, that you had ceased to care for your wife for some time before she died?"

Oldfield was silent for a minute or two. Then he said: "This business is killing me. I must have hope. Somehow or other I feel that you will be able to do something for me. I will be honest with you, M. Poirot. I did not care deeply for my wife. I made her, I think, a good husband, but I was never really in love with her."

"And this girl, Jean?"

The perspiration came out in a fine dew on the doctor's forehead.

He said: "I - I should have asked her to marry me before now if it weren't for all this scandal and talk."

Poirot sat back in his chair.

He said: "Now at last we have come to the true facts! Eh bien, Doctor Oldfield, I will take up your case. But remember this - it is the truth that I shall seek out."

Oldfield said bitterly: "It isn't the truth that's going to hurt me!"

He hesitated and said: "You know, I've contemplated the possibility of an action for slander! If I could pin anyone down to a definite accusation - surely then I should be vindicated? At least, sometimes I think so... At other times I think it would only make things worse - give bigger publicity to the whole thing and have people saying: 'It mayn't have been proved but there's no smoke without fire'."

He looked at Poirot.

"Tell me, honestly, is there any way out of this nightmare?"

"There is always a way," said Hercule Poirot.

II

"We are going into the country, Georges," said Hercule Poirot to his valet.

"Indeed, sir?" said the imperturbable George.

"And the purpose of our journey is to destroy a monster with nine heads."

"Really, sir? Something after the style of the Loch Ness Monster?"

"Less tangible than that. I did not refer to a flesh and blood animal, Georges."

"I misunderstood you, sir."

"It would be easier if it were one. There is nothing so intangible, so difficult to pin down, as the source of a rumour."

"Oh yes, indeed, sir. It's difficult to know how a thing starts sometimes."

"Exactly."

Hercule Poirot did not put up at Dr Oldfield's house. He went instead to the local inn. The morning after his arrival, he had his first interview with Jean Moncrieffe.

She was a tall girl with copper-coloured hair and steady blue eyes. She had about her a watchful look, as of one who is upon her guard.

She said: "So Doctor Oldfield did go to you. I knew he was thinking about it."

There was a lack of enthusiasm in her tone.

Poirot said: "And you did not approve?"

Her eyes met his. She said coldly: "What can you do?"

Poirot said quietly: "There might be a way of tackling the situation."

"What way?" She threw the words at him scornfully. "Do you mean to go round to all the whispering old women and say 'Really, please, you must stop talking like this. It's so bad for poor Doctor Oldfield.' And they'd answer you and say: 'Of course, I have never believed the story!" That's the worst of the whole thing - they don't say: 'My dear, has it ever occurred to you that perhaps Mrs Oldfield's death wasn't

quite what it seemed?' No, they say: 'My dear, of course I don't believe that story about Doctor Oldfield and his wife. I'm sure he wouldn't do such a thing, though it's true that he did neglect her just a little perhaps and I don't think, really it's quite wise to have quite a young girl as his dispenser - of course, I'm not saying for a minute that there was anything wrong between them. Oh no, I'm sure it was quite all right...'" She stopped. Her face was flushed and her breath came rather fast.

Hercule Poirot said: "You seem to know very well just what is being said."

Her mouth closed sharply. She said bitterly: "I know all right!"

"And what is your own solution?"

Jean Moncrieffe said: "The best thing for him to do is to sell his practice and start again somewhere else."

"Don't you think the story might follow him?"

She shrugged her shoulders.

"He must risk that."

Poirot was silent for a minute or two. Then he said: "Are you going to marry Doctor Oldfield, Miss Moncrieffe?" She displayed no surprise at the question.

She said shortly: "He hasn't asked me to marry him."

"Why not?"

Her blue eyes met his and flickered for a second. Then she said: "Because I've choked him off."

"Ah, what a blessing to find someone who can be frank!"

"I will be as frank as you please. When I realised that people were saying that Charles had got rid of his wife in order to marry me, it seemed to me that if we did marry it would just put the lid on things. I hoped that if there appeared to be no question of marriage between us, the silly scandal might die down."

"But it hasn't?"

"No, it hasn't."

"Surely," said Hercule Poirot, "that is a little odd?"

Jean said bitterly: "They haven't got much to amuse them down here."

Poirot asked: "Do you want to marry Charles Oldfield?"

The girl answered coolly enough.

"Yes, I do. I wanted to almost as soon as I met him."

"Then his wife's death was very convenient for you?"

Jean Moncrieffe said: "Mrs Oldfield was a singularly unpleasant woman. Frankly, I was delighted when she died."

"Yes," said Poirot. "You are certainly frank!"

She gave the same scornful smile.

Poirot said: "I have a suggestion to make."

"Yes?"

"Drastic means are required here. I suggest that somebody - possibly yourself - might write to the Home Office."

"What on earth do you mean?"

"I mean that the best way of disposing of this story once and for all is to get the body exhumed and an autopsy performed."

She took a step back from him. Her lips opened, then shut again. Poirot watched her.

"Well, Mademoiselle?" he said at last.

Jean Moncrieffe said quietly: "I don't agree with you."

"But why not? Surely a verdict of death from natural causes would silence all tongues?"

"If you got that verdict, yes."

"Do you know what you are suggesting, Mademoiselle?"

Jean Moncrieffe said impatiently: "I know what I'm talking about. You're thinking of arsenic poisoning - you could prove that she was not poisoned by arsenic. But there are other poisons - the vegetable alkaloids. After a year, I doubt if you'd find any traces of them even if they had been used. And I know what these official analyst people are like. They might return a non-committal verdict saying that there was nothing to show what caused death - and then the tongues would wag faster than ever!"

Hercule Poirot was silent for a minute or two, then he said: "Who in your opinion is the most inveterate talker in the village?"

The girl considered. She said at last: "I really think old Miss Leatheran is the worst cat of the lot."

"Ah! Would it be possible for you to introduce me to Miss Leatheran - in a casual manner if possible?"

"Nothing could be easier. All the old tabbies are prowling about doing their shopping at this time of the morning. We've only got to walk down the main street."

As Jean had said, there was no difficulty about the procedure. Outside the post office, Jean stopped and spoke to a tall, thin middle-aged woman with a long nose and sharp inquisitive eyes.

"Good-morning, Miss Leatheran."

"Good-morning, Jean. Such a lovely day, is it not?"

The sharp eyes ranged inquisitively over Jean Moncrieffe's companion.

Jean said: "Let me introduce M. Poirot, who is staying down here for a few days."

III

Nibbling delicately at a scone and balancing a cup of tea on his knee, Hercule Poirot allowed himself to become confidential with his hostess. Miss Leatheran had been kind enough to ask him to tea and had thereupon made it her business to find out exactly what this exotic little foreigner was doing in their midst.

For some time he parried her thrusts with dexterity - thereby whetting her appetite. Then, when he judged the moment ripe, he leant forward:

"Ah, Miss Leatheran," he said. "I can see that you are too clever for me! You have guessed my secret. I am down here at the request of the Home Office. But please," he lowered his voice, "keep this information to yourself."

"Of course - of course -" Miss Leatheran was fluttered - thrilled to the core. "The Home Office - you don't mean - not poor Mrs Oldfield?"

Poirot nodded his head slowly several times.

"We-ell!" Miss Leatheran breathed into that one word a whole gamut of pleasurable emotion.

Poirot said: "It is a delicate matter, you understand. I have been ordered to report whether there is or is not a sufficient case for exhumation."

Miss Leatheran exclaimed: "You are going to dig the poor thing up. How terrible!"

If she had said "how splendid" instead of "how terrible" the words would have suited her tone of voice better.

"What is your own opinion, Miss Leatheran?"

"Well, of course, M. Poirot, there has been a lot of talk. But I never listen to talk. There is always so much unreliable gossip going about. There is no doubt that Doctor Oldfield has been very odd in his manner ever since it happened, but as I have said repeatedly we surely need not put that down to a guilty conscience. It might be just grief. Not, of course, that he and his wife were on really affectionate terms. That I do know - on first hand authority. Nurse Harrison, who was with Mrs Oldfield for three or four years up to the time of her death, has admitted that much. And I have always felt, you know, that Nurse

Harrison had her suspicions - not that she ever said anything, but one can tell, can't one, from a person's manner?"

Poirot said sadly: "One has so little to go upon."

"Yes, I know, but of course, M. Poirot, if the body is exhumed then you will know"

"Yes," said Poirot, "then we will know."

"There have been cases like it before, of course," said Miss Leatheran, her nose twitching with pleasurable excitement. "Armstrong, for instance, and that other man - I can't remember his name - and then Crippen, of course. I've always wondered if Ethel Le Neve was in it with him or not. Of course, Jean Moncrieffe is a very nice girl, I'm sure... I wouldn't like to say she led him on exactly - but men do get rather silly about girls, don't they? And, of course, they were thrown very much together!"

Poirot did not speak. He looked at her with an innocent expression of inquiry calculated to produce a further spate of conversation. Inwardly he amused himself by counting the number of times the words "of course" occurred.

"And, of course, with a postmortem and all that, so much would be bound to come out, wouldn't it? Servants and all that. Servants always know so much, don't they? And, of course, it's quite impossible to keep them from gossiping, isn't it? The Oldfields' Beatrice was dismissed almost immediately after the funeral - and I've always thought that was

odd - especially with the difficulty of getting maids nowadays. It looks as though Doctor Oldfield was afraid she might know something."

"It certainly seems as though there were grounds for an inquiry," said Poirot solemnly.

Miss Leatheran gave a little shiver of reluctance.

"One does so shrink from the idea," she said. "Our dear quiet little village - dragged into the newspapers - all the publicity!"

"It appals you?" asked Poirot.

"It does a little. I'm old-fashioned, you know."

"And, as you say, it is probably nothing but gossip!"

"Well - I wouldn't like conscientiously to say that. You know, I do think it's so true - the saying that there's no smoke without fire."

"I myself was thinking the same thing," said Poirot.

He rose.

"I can trust your discretion, Mademoiselle?"

"Oh, of course! I shall not say a word to anybody."

Poirot smiled and took his leave.

On the doorstep he said to the little maid who handed him his hat and coat:

"I am down here to inquire into the circumstances of Mrs Oldfield's death, but I shall be obliged if you will keep that strictly to yourself."

Miss Leatheran's Gladys nearly fell backward into the umbrella stand.

She breathed excitedly: "Oh sir, then the doctor did do her in?"

"You've thought so for some time, haven't you?"

"Well, sir, it wasn't me. It was Beatrice. She was up there when Mrs Oldfield died."

"And she thought there had been -" Poirot selected the melodramatic words deliberately -"'foul play'?"

Gladys nodded excitedly.

"Yes, she did. And she said so did Nurse that was up there. Nurse Harrison. Ever so fond of Mrs Oldfield Nurse was, and ever so distressed when she died, and Beatrice always said as how Nurse Harrison knew something about it because she turned right round against the doctor afterwards and she wouldn't of done that unless there was something wrong, would she?"

"Where is Nurse Harrison now?"

"She looks after old Miss Bristow - down at the end of the village. You can't miss it. It's got pillars and a porch."

IV

It was a very short time afterwards that Hercule Poirot found himself sitting opposite to the woman who certainly must know more about the circumstances that had given rise to the rumours than any one else.

Nurse Harrison was a still handsome woman nearing forty. She had the calm serene features of a Madonna with big sympathetic dark eyes. She listened to him patiently and attentively. Then she said slowly:

"Yes, I know that there are these unpleasant stories going about. I have done what I could to stop them, but it's hopeless. People like the excitement, you know."

Poirot said: "But there must have been something to give rise to these rumours?"

He noted that her expression of distress deepened. But she merely shook her head perplexedly.

"Perhaps," Poirot suggested, "Doctor Oldfield and his wife did not get on well together and it was that that started the rumour?"

Nurse Harrison shook her head decidedly.

"Oh no. Doctor Oldfield was always extremely kind and patient with his wife."

"He was really very fond of her?"

She hesitated.

"No - I would not quite say that. Mrs Oldfield was a very difficult woman, not easy to please and making constant demands for sympathy and attention which were not always justified."

"You mean," said Poirot, "that she exaggerated her condition?"

The nurse nodded.

"Yes - her bad health was largely a matter of her own imagination."

"And yet," said Poirot gravely, "she died..."

"Oh, I know - I know..."

He watched her for a minute or two; her troubled perplexity - her palpable uncertainty.

He said: "I think - I am sure - that you do know what first gave rise to all these stories."

Nurse Harrison flushed.

She said: "Well - I could, perhaps, make a guess. I believe it was the maid, Beatrice, who started all these rumours and I think I know what put it into her head."

"Yes?"

Nurse Harrison said rather incoherently: "You see, it was something I happened to overhear - a scrap of conversation between Doctor Oldfield and Miss Moncrieffe - and I'm pretty certain Beatrice overheard it too, only I don't suppose she'd ever admit it."

"What was this conversation?"

Nurse Harrison paused for a minute as though to test the accuracy of her own memory, then she said:

"It was about three weeks before the last attack that killed Mrs Oldfield. They were in the dining-room. I was coming down the stairs when I heard Jean Moncrieffe say:

"'How much longer will it be? I can't bear to wait much longer.'

"And the doctor answered her: 'Not much longer now, darling, I swear it.' And she said again:

"'I can't bear this waiting. You do think it will be all right, don't you?' And he said: 'Of course. Nothing can go wrong. This time next year we'll be married.'"

She paused.

"That was the very first inkling I'd had, M. Poirot, that there was anything between the doctor and Miss Moncrieffe. Of course I knew he admired her and that they were very good friends, but nothing more. I went back up the stairs again - it had given me quite a shock - but I did notice that the kitchen door was open and I've thought since that Beatrice must have been listening. And you can see, can't you, that the way they were talking could be taken two ways? It might just mean that the doctor knew his wife was very ill and couldn't live much longer - and I've no doubt that that was the way he meant it - but to any one like Beatrice it might sound differently - it might look as though the doctor and Jean Moncrieffe were - well - were definitely planning to do away with Mrs Oldfield."

"But you don't think so, yourself?"

"No - no, of course not..."

Poirot looked at her searchingly.

He said: "Nurse Harrison, is there something more that you know? Something that you haven't told me?"

She flushed and said violently: "No. No. Certainly not. What could there be?"

"I do not know. But I thought that there might be - something?"

She shook her head. The old troubled look had come back.

Hercule Poirot said: "It is possible that the Home Office may order an exhumation of Mrs Oldfield's body!"

"Oh, no!" Nurse Harrison was horrified. "What a horrible thing!"

"You think it would be a pity?"

"I think it would be dreadful! Think of the talk it would create! It would be terrible - quite terrible for poor Doctor Oldfield."

"You don't think that it might really be a good thing for him?"

"How do you mean?"

Poirot said: "If he is innocent - his innocence will be proved."

He broke off. He watched the thought take root in Nurse Harrison's mind, saw her frown perplexedly, and then saw her brow clear.

She took a deep breath and looked at him.

"I hadn't thought of that," she said simply. "Of course, it is the only thing to be done."

There were a series of thumps on the floor overhead. Nurse Harrison jumped up.

"It's my old lady, Miss Bristow. She's woken up from her rest. I must go and get her comfortable before her tea is brought to her and I go out for my walk. Yes, M. Poirot, I think you are quite right. An autopsy will settle the business once for all. It will settle the whole thing and all these dreadful rumours against poor Doctor Oldfield will die down."

She shook hands and hurried out of the room.

V

Hercule Poirot walked along to the post office and put through a call to London.

The voice at the other end was petulant.

"Must you go nosing out these things, my dear Poirot? Are you sure it's a case for us? You know what these country town rumours usually amount to - just nothing at all."

"This," said Hercule Poirot, "is a special case."

"Oh well - if you say so. You have such a tiresome habit of being right. But if it's all a mare's nest we shan't be pleased with you, you know."

Hercule Poirot smiled to himself.

He murmured: "No, I shall be the one who is pleased."

"What's that you say? Can't hear."

"Nothing. Nothing at all."

He rang off.

Emerging into the post office he leaned across the counter. He said in his most engaging tones:

"Can you by any chance tell me, Madame, where the maid who was formerly with Doctor Oldfield - Beatrice her Christian name was - now resides?"

"Beatrice King? She's had two places since then. She's with Mrs Marley over the Bank now."

Poirot thanked her, bought two postcards, a book of stamps and a piece of local pottery. During the purchase, he contrived to bring the death of the late Mrs Oldfield into the conversation. He was quick to note the peculiar furtive expression that stole across the post-mistress's face. She said:

"Very sudden, wasn't it? It's made a lot of talk as you may have heard."

A gleam of interest came into her eyes as she asked: "Maybe that's what you'd be wanting to see Beatrice King for? We all thought it odd the way she was got out of there all of a sudden. Somebody thought

she knew something - and maybe she did. She's dropped some pretty broad hints."

Beatrice King was a short rather sly-looking girl with adenoids. She presented an appearance of stolid stupidity but her eyes were more intelligent than her manner would have led one to expect. It seemed, however, that there was nothing to be got out of Beatrice King. She repeated:

"I don't know nothing about anything... It's not for me to say what went on up there... I don't know what you mean by overhearing a conversation between the doctor and Miss Moncrieffe. I'm not one to go listening to doors, and you've no right to say I did. I don't know nothing."

Poirot said: "Have you ever heard of poisoning by arsenic?"

A flicker of quick furtive interest came into the girl's sullen face.

She said: "So that's what it was in the medicine bottle?"

"What medicine bottle?"

Beatrice said: "One of the bottles of medicine what that Miss Moncrieffe made up for the Missus. Nurse was all upset - I could see that. Tasted it, she did, and smelt it, and then poured it away down the sink and filled up the bottle with plain water from the tap. It was white medicine like water, anyway. And once, when Miss Moncrieffe took up a pot of tea to the Missus, Nurse brought it down again and made it fresh - said it hadn't been made with boiling water but that was just my

eye, that was! I thought it was just the sort of fussing way nurses have at the time - but I dunno - it may have been more than that."

Poirot nodded.

He said: "Did you like Miss Moncrieffe, Beatrice?"

"I didn't mind her... A bit standoffish. Of course, I always knew as she was sweet on the doctor. You'd only to see the way she looked at him."

Again Poirot nodded his head.

He went back to the inn. There he gave certain instructions to George.

VI

Dr Alan Garcia, the Home Office Analyst, rubbed his hands and twinkled at Hercule Poirot. He said:

"Well, this suits you, M. Poirot, I suppose? The man who's always right."

Poirot said: "You are too kind."

"What put you on to it? Gossip?"

"As you say - 'Enter Rumour, painted full of tongues.'"

The following day Poirot once more took a train to Market Loughborough.

Market Loughborough was buzzing like a beehive. It had buzzed mildly ever since the exhumation proceedings. Now that the findings of the autopsy had leaked out, excitement had reached fever heat.

Poirot had been at the inn for about an hour and had just finished a hearty lunch of steak and kidney pudding washed down by beer when word was brought to him that a lady was waiting to see him.

It was Nurse Harrison. Her face was white and haggard.

She came straight to Poirot.

"Is this true? Is this really true, M. Poirot?"

He put her gently into a chair.

"Yes. More than sufficient arsenic to cause death has been found."

Nurse Harrison cried: "I never thought - I never for one moment thought -" and burst into tears.

Poirot said gently: "The truth had to come out, you know."

She sobbed. "Will they hang him?"

Poirot said: "A lot has to be proved still. Opportunity - access to poison - the vehicle in which it was administered."

"But supposing, M. Poirot, that he had nothing to do with it - nothing at all."

"In that case," Poirot shrugged his shoulders, "he will be acquitted."

Nurse Harrison said slowly: "There is something - something that, I suppose, I ought to have told you before - but I didn't think that there was really anything in it. It was just queer."

"I knew there was something," said Poirot. "You had better tell it to me now."

"It isn't much. It's just that one day when I went down to the dispensary for something, Jean Moncrieffe was doing something rather - odd."

"Yes?"

"It sounds so silly. It's only that she was filling up her powder compact - a pink enamel one -"

"Yes?"

"But she wasn't filling it up with powder - with face powder, I mean. She was tipping something into it from one of the bottles out of the poison cupboard. When she saw me she started and shut up the compact and whipped it into her bag - and put back the bottle quickly into the cupboard so that I couldn't see what it was. I daresay it doesn't

mean anything - but now that I know that Mrs Oldfield really was poisoned -" She broke off.

Poirot said: "You will excuse me?"

He went out and telephoned to Detective Sergeant Grey of the Berkshire Police.

Hercule Poirot came back and he and Nurse Harrison sat in silence.

Poirot was seeing the face of a girl with red hair and hearing a clear hard voice say: "I don't agree." Jean Moncrieffe had not wanted an autopsy. She had given a plausible enough excuse, but the fact remained. A competent girl - efficient - resolute. In love with a man who was tied to a complaining invalid wife, who might easily live for years since, according to Nurse Harrison, she had very little the matter with her.

Hercule Poirot sighed.

Nurse Harrison said: "What are you thinking of?"

Poirot answered: "The pity of things..."

Nurse Harrison said: "I don't believe for a minute he knew anything about it."

Poirot said: "No. I am sure he did not."

The door opened and Detective Sergeant Grey came in. He had something in his hand, wrapped in a silk handkerchief. He unwrapped it and set it carefully down. It was a bright rose pink enamel compact.

Nurse Harrison said: "That's the one I saw."

Grey said: "Found it pushed right to the back of Miss Moncrieffe's bureau drawer. Inside a handkerchief sachet. As far as I can see there are no fingerprints on it, but I'll be careful."

With the handkerchief over his hand he pressed the spring. The case flew open.

Grey said: "This stuff isn't face powder."

He dipped a finger and tasted it gingerly on the tip of his tongue.

"No particular taste."

Poirot said: "White arsenic does not taste."

Grey said: "It will be analysed at once." He looked at Nurse Harrison. "You can swear to this being the same case?"

"Yes. I'm positive. That's the case I saw Miss Moncrieffe with in the dispensary about a week before Mrs Oldfield's death."

Sergeant Grey sighed. He looked at Poirot and nodded.

The latter rang the bell.

"Send my servant here, please."

George, the perfect valet, discreet, unobtrusive, entered and looked inquiringly at his master.

Hercule Poirot said: "You have identified this powder compact, Miss Harrison, as one you saw in the possession of Miss Moncrieffe over a year ago. Would you be surprised to learn that this particular case was sold by Messrs. Woolworth only a few weeks ago and that, moreover, it is of a pattern and colour that has only been manufactured for the last three months?"

Nurse Harrison gasped. She stared at Poirot, her eyes round and dark.

Poirot said: "Have you seen this compact before, Georges?"

George stepped forward.

"Yes, sir. I observed this person, Nurse Harrison, purchase it at Woolworth's on Friday the 18th. Pursuant to your instructions I followed this lady whenever she went out. She took a bus over to Darnington on the day I have mentioned and purchased this compact. She took it home with her. Later, the same day, she came to the house in which Miss Moncrieffe lodges. Acting as by your instructions, I was already in the house. I observed her go into Miss Moncrieffe's bedroom and hide this in the back of the bureau drawer. I had a good view through the crack of the door. She then left the house believing herself unobserved. I may say that no one locks their front doors down here and it was dusk."

Poirot said to Nurse Harrison, and his voice was hard and venomous:

"Can you explain these facts, Nurse Harrison? I think not. There was no arsenic in that box when it left Messrs. Woolworth, but there was when it left Miss Bristow's house." He added softly, "It was unwise of you to keep a supply of arsenic in your possession."

Nurse Harrison buried her face in her hands.

She said in a low dull voice: "It's true - it's all true... I killed her. And all for nothing - nothing... I was mad..."

VII

Jean Moncrieffe said: "I must ask you to forgive me, M. Poirot. I have been so angry with you - so terribly angry with you. It seemed to me that you were making everything so much worse."

Poirot said with a smile: "So I was to begin with. It is like in the old legend of the Lernean Hydra. Every time a head was cut off, two heads grew in its place. So, to begin with, the rumours grew and multiplied. But you see my task, like that of my namesake Hercules, was to reach the first - the original head. Who had started this rumour? It did not take me long to discover that the originator of the story was Nurse Harrison. I went to see her. She appeared to be a very nice woman -

intelligent and sympathetic. But almost at once she made a bad mistake - she repeated to me a conversation which she had overheard taking place between you and the doctor, and that conversation, you see, was all wrong. It was psychologically most unlikely. If you and the doctor had planned together to kill Mrs Oldfield, you are both of you far too intelligent and level-headed to hold such a conversation in a room with an open door, easily overheard by someone on the stairs or someone in the kitchen. Moreover, the words attributed to you did not fit in at all with your mental make-up. They were the words of a much older woman and of one of a quite different type. They were words such as would be imagined by Nurse Harrison as being used by herself in like circumstances.

"I had, up to then, regarded the whole matter as fairly simple. Nurse Harrison, I realised, was a fairly young and still handsome woman - she had been thrown closely with Doctor Oldfield for nearly three years - the doctor had been very fond of her and grateful to her for her tact and sympathy. She had formed the impression that if Mrs Oldfield died, the doctor would probably ask her to marry him. Instead of that, after Mrs Oldfield's death, she learns that Doctor Oldfield is in love with you. Straightaway, driven by anger and jealousy, she starts spreading the rumour that Doctor Oldfield has poisoned his wife.

"That, as I say, was how I had visualised the position at first. It was a case of a jealous woman and a lying rumour. But the old trite phrase 'no smoke without fire' recurred to me significantly. I wondered if Nurse Harrison had done more than spread a rumour. Certain things she said rang strangely. She told me that Mrs Oldfield's illness was largely imaginary - that she did not really suffer much pain. But the doctor himself had been in no doubt about the reality of his wife's

suffering. He had not been surprised by her death. He had called in another doctor shortly before her death and the other doctor had realised the gravity of her condition. Tentatively I brought forward the suggestion of exhumation... Nurse Harrison was at first frightened out of her wits by the idea. Then, almost at once, her jealousy and hatred took command of her. Let them find arsenic - no suspicion would attach to her. It would be the doctor and Jean Moncrieffe who would suffer.

"There was only one hope. To make Nurse Harrison overreach herself. If there were a chance that Jean Moncrieffe would escape, I fancied that Nurse Harrison would strain every nerve to involve her in the crime. I gave instructions to my faithful Georges - the most unobtrusive of men whom she did not know by sight. He was to follow her closely. And so - all ended well."

Jean Moncrieffe said: "You've been wonderful."

Dr Oldfield chimed in. He said: "Yes, indeed. I can never thank you enough. What a blind fool I was!"

Poirot asked curiously: "Were you as blind, Mademoiselle?"

Jean Moncrieffe said slowly: "I have been terribly worried. You see, the arsenic in the poison cupboard didn't tally..."

Oldfield cried: "Jean - you didn't think -?"

"No, no - not you. What I did think was that Mrs Oldfield had somehow or other got hold of it - and that she was taking it so as to make herself

ill and get sympathy and that she had inadvertently taken too much. But I was afraid that if there was an autopsy and arsenic was found, they would never consider that theory and would leap to the conclusion that you'd done it. That's why I never said anything about the missing arsenic. I even cooked the poison book! But the last person I would ever have suspected was Nurse Harrison."

Oldfield said: "I too. She was such a gentle womanly creature. Like a Madonna."

Poirot said sadly: "Yes, she would have made, probably, a good wife and mother... Her emotions were just a little too strong for her." He sighed and murmured once more under his breath: "The pity of it."

Then he smiled at the happy-looking middle-aged man and the eager-faced girl opposite him. He said to himself:

"These two have come out of its shadow into the sun... and I - I have performed the second Labour of Hercules."

Chapter 3

THE ARCADIAN DEER

Hercule Poirot stamped his feet, seeking to warm them. He blew upon his fingers. Flakes of snow melted and dripped from the corners of his moustache.

There was a knock at the door and a chambermaid appeared. She was a slow-breathing thickset country girl and she stared with a good deal of curiosity at Hercule Poirot. It was possible that she had never seen anything quite like him before.

She asked: "Did you ring?"

"I did. Will you be so good as to light the fire?"

She went out and came back again immediately with paper and sticks. She knelt down in front of the big Victorian grate and began to lay a fire.

Hercule Poirot continued to stamp his feet, swing his arms and blow on his fingers.

He was annoyed. His car - an expensive Messarro Gratz - had not behaved with that mechanical perfection which he expected of a car. His chauffeur, a young man who enjoyed a handsome salary, had not succeeded in putting things right. The car had staged a final refusal in a secondary road a mile and a half from anywhere with a fall of snow beginning. Hercule Poirot, wearing his usual patent leather shoes, had been forced to walk that mile and a half to reach the riverside village of Hartly Dene - a village which, though showing every sign of animation in summertime, was completely moribund in winter. The Black Swan had registered something like dismay at the arrival of a guest. The landlord had been almost eloquent as he pointed out that the local garage could supply a car in which the gentleman could continue his journey.

Hercule Poirot repudiated the suggestion. His Latin thrift was offended. Hire a car? He already had a car - a large car - an expensive car. In that car and no other he proposed to continue his journey back to town. And in any case, even if repairs to it could be quickly effected, he was not going on in this snow until next morning. He demanded a room, a fire and a meal. Sighing, the landlord showed him to the room, sent the maid to supply the fire and then retired to discuss with his wife the problem of the meal.

An hour later, his feet stretched out towards the comforting blaze, Hercule Poirot reflected leniently on the dinner he had just eaten. True, the steak had been both tough and full of gristle, the Brussels sprouts had been large, pale, and definitely watery, the potatoes had had hearts of stone. Nor was there much to be said for the portion of stewed apple and custard which had followed. The cheese had been hard, and the biscuits soft. Nevertheless, thought Hercule Poirot, looking graciously at the leaping flames, and sipping delicately at a cup of liquid mud euphemistically called coffee, it was better to be full than empty, and after tramping snowbound lanes in patent leather shoes, to sit in front of a fire was Paradise!

There was a knock on the door and the chambermaid appeared.

"Please, sir, the man from the garage is here and would like to see you."

Hercule Poirot replied amiably: "Let him mount."

The girl giggled and retired. Poirot reflected kindly that her account of him to her friends would provide entertainment for many winter days to come.

There was another knock - a different knock - and Poirot called:

"Come in."

He looked up with approval at the young man who entered and stood there looking ill at ease, twisting his cap in his hands.

Here, he thought, was one of the handsomest specimens of humanity he had ever seen, a simple young man with the outward semblance of a Greek god.

The young man said in a low husky voice: "About the car, sir, we've brought it in. And we've got at the trouble. It's a matter of an hour's work or so."

Poirot said: "What is wrong with it?"

The young man plunged eagerly into technical details. Poirot nodded his head gently, but he was not listening. Perfect physique was a thing he admired greatly. There were, he considered, too many rats in spectacles about. He said to himself approvingly: "Yes, a Greek god - a young shepherd in Arcady."

The young man stopped abruptly. It was then that Hercule Poirot's brows knitted themselves for a second. His first reaction had been

aesthetic, his second mental. His eyes narrowed themselves curiously, as he looked up.

He said: "I comprehend. Yes, I comprehend." He paused and then added: "My chauffeur, he has already told me that which you have just said."

He saw the flush that came to the others cheek, saw the fingers grip the cap nervously.

The young man stammered: "Yes - er - yes, sir. I know."

Hercule Poirot went on smoothly: "But you thought that you would also come and tell me yourself?"

"Er - yes, sir, I thought I'd better."

"That," said Hercule Poirot, "was very conscientious of you. Thank you."

There was a faint but unmistakable note of dismissal in the last words but he did not expect the other to go and he was right. The young man did not move.

His fingers moved convulsively, crushing the tweed cap, and he said in a still lower embarrassed voice:

"Er - excuse me, sir - but it's true, isn't it, that you're the detective gentleman - you're Mr Hercules Pwarrit?" He said the name carefully.

Poirot said: "That is so."

Red crept up the young man's face.

He said: "I read a piece about you in the paper."

"Yes?"

The boy was now scarlet. There was distress in his eyes - distress and appeal. Hercule Poirot came to his aid.

He said gently: "Yes? What is it you want to ask me?"

The words came with a rush now.

"I'm afraid you may think it's awful cheek of me, sir. But your coming here by chance like this - well, it's too good to be missed. Having read about you and the clever things you've done. Anyway, I said as after all I might as well ask you. There's no harm in asking, is there?"

Hercule Poirot shook his head. He said: "You want my help in some way?"

The other nodded. He said, his voice husky and embarrassed: "It's - it's about a young lady. If - if you could find her for me."

"Find her? Has she disappeared, then?"

"That's right, sir."

Hercule Poirot sat up in his chair.

He said sharply: "I could help you, perhaps, yes. But the proper people for you to go to are the police. It is their job and they have far more resources at their disposal than I have."

The boy shuffled his feet.

He said awkwardly: "I couldn't do that, sir. It's not like that at all. It's all rather peculiar, so to speak."

Hercule Poirot stared at him. Then he indicated a chair.

"Eh bien, then, sit down - what is your name?"

"Williamson, sir, Ted Williamson."

"Sit down, Ted. And tell me all about it."

"Thank you, sir." He drew forward the chair and sat down carefully on the edge of it. His eyes had still that appealing dog-like look.

Hercule Poirot said gently: "Tell me."

Ted Williamson drew a deep breath.

"Well, you see, sir, it was like this. I never saw her but the once. And I don't know her right name nor anything. But it's queer like, the whole thing, and my letter coming back and everything."

"Start," said Hercule Poirot, "at the beginning. Do not hurry yourself. Just tell me everything that occurred."

"Yes, sir. Well, perhaps you know Grasslawn, sir, that big house down by the river past the bridge?"

"I know nothing at all."

"Belongs to Sir George Sanderfield, it does. He uses it in the summer-time for weekends and parties - rather a gay lot he has down as a rule. Actresses and that. Well, it was last June - and the wireless was out of order and they sent me up to see to it."

Poirot nodded.

"So I went along. The gentleman was out on the river with his guests and the cook was out and his manservant had gone along to serve the drinks and all that on the launch. There was only this girl in the house - she was the lady's-maid to one of the guests. She let me in and showed me where the set was, and stayed there while I was working on it. And so we got to talking and all that... Nita her name was, so she told me, and she was lady's-maid to a Russian dancer who was staying there."

"What nationality was she, English?"

"No, sir, she'd be French, I think. She'd a funny sort of accent. But she spoke English all right. She - she was friendly and after a bit I asked her if she could come out that night and go to the pictures, but she said her lady would be needing her. But then she said as how she could get off early in the afternoon because as how they wasn't going to be back

off the river till late. So the long and the short of it was that I took the afternoon off without asking (and nearly got the sack for it too) and we went for a walk along by the river."

He paused. A little smile hovered on his lips. His eyes were dreamy.

Poirot said gently: "And she was pretty, yes?"

"She was just the loveliest thing you ever saw. Her hair was like gold - it went up each side like wings - and she had a gay kind of way of tripping along. I - I - well, I fell for her right away, sir. I'm not pretending anything else."

Poirot nodded.

The young man went on: "She said as how her lady would be coming down again in a fortnight and we fixed up to meet again then." He paused. "But she never came. I waited for her at the spot she'd said, but not a sign of her, and at last I made bold to go up to the house and ask for her. The Russian lady was staying there all right and her maid too, they said. Sent for her, they did, but when she came, why, it wasn't Nita at all! Just a dark catty-looking girl - a bold lot if there ever was one. Marie, they called her. 'You want to see me?' she says, simpering all over. She must have seen I was took aback. I said was she the Russian lady's-maid and something about her not being the one I'd seen before, and then she laughed and said that the last maid had been sent away sudden. 'Sent away?' I said. 'What for?' She sort of shrugged her shoulders and stretched out her hands. 'How should I know?' she said. 'I was not there.'

"Well, sir, it took me aback. At the moment I couldn't think of anything to say. But afterwards I plucked up courage and I got to see this Marie again and asked her to get me Nita's address. I didn't let on to her that I didn't even know Nita's last name. I promised her a present if she did what I asked - she was the kind as wouldn't do anything for you for nothing. Well, she got it all right for me - an address in North London, it was, and I wrote to Nita there - but the letter came back after a bit - sent back through the post office with 'No longer at this address' scrawled on it."

Ted Williamson stopped. His eyes, those deep blue steady eyes, looked across at Poirot. He said:

"You see how it is, sir? It's not a case for the police. But I want to find her. And I don't know how to set about it. If - if you could find her for me." His colour deepened. "I've - I've a bit put by. I could manage five pounds - or even ten."

Poirot said gently: "We need not discuss the financial side for the moment. First reflect on this point - this girl, this Nita - she knew your name and where you worked?"

"Oh yes, sir."

"She could have communicated with you if she had wanted to?"

Ted said more slowly: "Yes, sir."

"Then do you not think - perhaps -"

Ted Williamson interrupted him.

"What you're meaning, sir, is that I fell for her but she didn't fall for me? Maybe that's true in a way... But she liked me - she did like me - it wasn't just a bit of fun to her... And I've been thinking, sir, as there might be a reason for all this. You see, sir, it was a funny crowd she was mixed up in. She might be in a bit of trouble, if you know what I mean."

"You mean she might have been going to have a child? Your child?"

"Not mine, sir." Ted flushed. "There wasn't nothing wrong between us."

Poirot looked at him thoughtfully.

He murmured: "And if what you suggest is true - you still want to find her?"

The colour surged up in Ted Williamson's face.

He said: "Yes, I do, and that's flat! I want to marry her if she'll have me. And that's no matter what kind of a jam she's in! If you'll only try and find her for me, sir?"

Hercule Poirot smiled. He said, murmuring to himself: "'Hair like wings of gold.' Yes, I think this is the third Labour of Hercules... If I remember rightly, that happened in Arcady..."

II

Hercule Poirot looked thoughtfully at the sheet of paper on which Ted Williamson had laboriously inscribed a name and address.

Miss Valetta, 17 Upper Renfrew Lane, N.15.

He wondered if he would learn anything at that address. Somehow he fancied not. But it was the only help Ted could give him.

No. 17 Upper Renfrew Lane was a dingy but respectable street. A stout woman with bleary eyes opened the door to Poirot's knock.

"Miss Valetta?"

"Gone away a long time ago, she has."

Poirot advanced a step into the doorway just as the door was about to close.

"You can give me, perhaps, her address?"

"Couldn't say, I'm sure. She didn't leave one."

"When did she go away?"

"Last summer it was."

"Can you tell me exactly when?"

A gentle clinking noise came from Poirot's right hand where two half-crowns jostled each other in friendly fashion.

The bleary-eyed woman softened in an almost magical manner. She became graciousness itself.

"Well, I'm sure I'd like to help you, sir. Let me see now. August, no, before that - July - yes, July it must have been. About the first week in July. Went off in a hurry, she did. Back to Italy, I believe."

"She was an Italian, then?"

"That's right, sir."

"And she was at one time lady's-maid to a Russian dancer, was she not?"

"That's right. Madame Semoulina or some such name. Danced at the Thespian in this Bally everyone's so wild about. One of the stars, she was."

Poirot said: "Do you know why Miss Valetta left her post?"

The woman hesitated a moment before saying: "I couldn't say, I'm sure."

"She was dismissed, was she not?"

"Well - I believe there was a bit of a dust up! But mind you, Miss Valetta didn't let on much about it. She wasn't one to give things away. But she looked wild about it. Wicked temper she had - real Eyetalian - her black eyes all snapping and looking as if she'd like to put a knife into you. I wouldn't have crossed her when she was in one of her moods!"

"And you are quite sure you do not know Miss Valetta's present address?"

The half-crowns clinked again encouragingly.

The answer rang true enough. "I wish I did, sir. I'd be only too glad to tell you. But there - she went off in a hurry and there it is!"

Poirot said to himself thoughtfully: "Yes, there it is..."

III

Ambrose Vandel, diverted from his enthusiastic account of the décor he was designing for a forthcoming ballet, supplied information easily enough.

"Sanderfield? George Sanderfield? Nasty fellow. Rolling in money but they say he's a crook. Dark horse! Affair with a dancer? But of course, my dear - he had an affair with Katrina. Katrina Samoushenka. You

must have seen her? Oh, my dear - too delicious. Lovely technique. The Swan of Tuolela - you must have seen that? My decor! And that other thing of Debussy or is it Mannine 'La Biche au Bois'? She danced it with Michael Novgin. He's so marvellous, isn't he?"

"And she was a friend of Sir George Sanderfield?"

"Yes, she used to weekend with him at his house on the river. Marvellous parties I believe he gives."

"Would it be possible, mon cher, for you to introduce me to Mademoiselle Samoushenka?"

"But, my dear, she isn't here any longer. She went to Paris or somewhere quite suddenly. You know, they do say that she was a Bolshevik spy or something - not that I believed it myself - you know people love saying things like that. Katrina always pretended that she was a White Russian - her father was a Prince or a Grand Duke - the usual thing! It goes down so much better." Vandel paused and returned to the absorbing subject of himself. "Now as I was saying, if you want to get the spirit of Bathsheba you've got to steep yourself in the Semitic tradition. I express it by -"

He continued happily.

IV

The interview that Hercule Poirot managed to arrange with Sir George Sanderfield did not start too auspiciously.

The "dark horse," as Ambrose Vandel had called him, was slightly ill at ease. Sir George was a short square man with dark coarse hair and a roll of fat in his neck.

He said: "Well, M. Poirot, what can I do for you? Er - we haven't met before, I think?"

"No, we have not met."

"Well, what is it? I confess, I'm quite curious."

"Oh, it is very simple - a mere matter of information."

The other gave an uneasy laugh.

"Want me to give you some inside dope, eh? Didn't know you were interested in finance."

"It is not a matter of les affaires. It is a question of a certain lady."

"Oh, a woman." Sir George Sanderfield leant back in his armchair. He seemed to relax. His voice held an easier note.

Poirot said: "You were acquainted, I think, with Mademoiselle Katrina Samoushenka?"

Sanderfield laughed. "Yes. An enchanting creature. Pity she's left London."

"Why did she leave London?"

"My dear fellow, I don't know. Row with the management, I believe. She was temperamental, you know - very Russian in her moods. I'm sorry that I can't help you but I haven't the least idea where she is now. I haven't kept up with her at all."

There was a note of dismissal in his voice as he rose to his feet.

Poirot said: "But it is not Mademoiselle Samoushenka that I am anxious to trace."

"It isn't?"

"No, it is a question of her maid."

"Her maid?" Sanderfield stared at him.

Poirot said: "Do you - perhaps - remember her maid?"

All Sanderfield's uneasiness had returned.

He said awkwardly: "Good Lord, no, how should I? I remember she had one, of course... Bit of a bad lot, too, I should say. Sneaking, prying sort of girl. If I were you I shouldn't put any faith in a word that girl says. She's the kind of girl who's a born liar."

Poirot murmured: "So actually, you remember quite a lot about her?"

Sanderfield said hastily: "Just an impression, that's all... Don't even remember her name. Let me see, Marie something or other - no, I'm afraid I can't help you to get hold of her. Sorry."

Poirot said gently: "I have already got the name of Marie Hellin from the Thespian Theatre - and her address. But I am speaking. Sir George, of the maid who was with Mademoiselle Samoushenka before Marie Hellin. I am speaking of Nita Valetta."

Sanderfield stared.

He said: "Don't remember her at all. Marie's the only one I remember. Little dark girl with a nasty look in her eye."

Poirot said: "The girl I mean was at your house Grasslawn last June."

Sanderfield said sulkily: "Well, all I can say is I don't remember her. Don't believe she had a maid with her. I think you're making a mistake."

Hercule Poirot shook his head. He did not think he was making a mistake.

V

Marie Hellin looked swiftly at Poirot out of small intelligent eyes and as swiftly looked away again. She said in smooth, even tones:

"But I remember perfectly. Monsieur. I was engaged by Madame Samoushenka the last week in June. Her former maid had departed in a hurry."

"Did you ever hear why that maid left?"

"She went - suddenly - that is all I know! It may have been illness - something of that kind. Madame did not say."

Poirot said: "Did you find your mistress easy to get on with?"

The girl shrugged her shoulders.

"She had great moods. She wept and laughed in turns. Sometimes she was so despondent she would not speak or eat. Sometimes she was wildly gay. They are like that, these dancers. It is temperament."

"And Sir George?"

The girl looked up alertly. An unpleasant gleam came into her eyes.

"Ah, Sir George Sanderfield? You would like to know about him? Perhaps it is that you really want to know? The other was only an excuse, eh? Ah, Sir George, I could tell you some curious things about him, I could tell you -"

Poirot interrupted: "It is not necessary."

She stared at him, her mouth open. Angry disappointment showed in her eyes.

VI

"I always say you know everything, Alexis Pavlovitch."

Hercule Poirot murmured the words with his most flattering intonation.

He was reflecting to himself that this third Labour of Hercules had necessitated more travelling and more interviews than could have been imagined possible. This little matter of a missing lady's-maid was proving one of the longest and most difficult problems he had ever tackled. Every clue, when examined, led exactly nowhere.

It had brought him this evening to the Samovar Restaurant in Paris whose proprietor, Count Alexis Pavlovitch, prided himself on knowing everything that went on in the artistic world.

He nodded now complacently:

"Yes, yes, my friend, I know - I always know. You ask me where she is gone - the little Samoushenka, the exquisite dancer? Ah! she was the real thing, that little one." He kissed his fingertips. "What fire - what

abandon! She would have gone far - she would have been the Premiere Ballerina of her day - and then suddenly it all ends - she creeps away - to the end of the world - and soon, ah! so soon, they forget her."

"Where is she then?" demanded Poirot.

"In Switzerland. At Vagray les Alpes. It is there that they go, those who have the little dry cough and who grow thinner and thinner. She will die, yes, she will die! She has a fatalistic nature. She will surely die."

Poirot coughed to break the tragic spell. He wanted information.

"You do not, by chance, remember a maid she had? A maid called Nita Valetta?"

"Valetta? Valetta? I remember seeing a maid once - at the station when I was seeing Katrina off to London. She was an Italian from Pisa, was she not? Yes, I am sure she was an Italian who came from Pisa."

Hercule Poirot groaned.

"In that case," he said, "I must now journey to Pisa."

VII

Hercule Poirot stood in the Campo Santo at Pisa and looked down on a grave.

So it was here that his quest had come to an end - here by this humble mound of earth. Underneath it lay the joyous creature who had stirred the heart and imagination of a simple English mechanic.

Was this perhaps the best end to that sudden strange romance? Now the girl would live always in the young man's memory as he had seen her for those few enchanted hours of a June afternoon. The clash of opposing nationalities, of different standards, the pain of disillusionment, all that was ruled out for ever.

Hercule Poirot shook his head sadly. His mind went back to his conversation with the Valetta family. The mother, with her broad peasant face, the upright grief-stricken father, the dark hard-lipped sister.

"It was sudden, Signore, it was very sudden. Though for many years she had had pains on and off... The doctor gave us no choice - he said there must be an operation immediately for the appendicitis. He took her off to the hospital then and there... Si, si, it was under the anaesthetic she died. She never recovered consciousness."

The mother sniffed, murmuring: "Bianca was always such a clever girl. It is terrible that she should have died so young..."

Hercule Poirot repeated to himself: "She died young..."

That was the message he must take back to the young man who had asked his help so confidingly.

"She is not for you, my friend. She died young."

His quest had ended - here where the leaning Tower was silhouetted against the sky and the first spring flowers were showing pale and creamy with their promise of life and joy to come.

Was it the stirring of spring that made him feel so rebelliously disinclined to accept this final verdict? Or was it something else? Something stirring at the back of his brain - words - a phrase - a name? Did not the whole thing finish too neatly - dovetail too obviously?

Hercule Poirot sighed. He must take one more journey to put things beyond any possible doubt. He must go to Vagray les Alpes.

VIII

Here, he thought, really was the world's end. This shelf of snow - these scattered huts and shelters in each of which lay a motionless human being fighting an insidious death.

So he came at last to Katrina Samoushenka. When he saw her, lying there with hollow cheeks in each of which was a vivid red stain, and long thin emaciated hands stretched out on the coverlet, a memory

stirred in him. He had not remembered her name, but he had seen her dance - had been carried away and fascinated by the supreme art that can make you forget art.

He remembered Michael Novgin, the Hunter, leaping and twirling in that outrageous and fantastic forest that the brain of Ambrose Vandel had conceived. And he remembered the lovely flying Hind, eternally pursued, eternally desirable - a golden beautiful creature with horns on her head and twinkling bronze feet. He remembered her final collapse, shot and wounded, and Michael Novgin standing bewildered, with the body of the slain Deer in his arms.

Katrina Samoushenka was looking at him with faint curiosity.

She said: "I have never seen you before, have I? What is it you want of me?"

Hercule Poirot made her a little bow.

"First, Madame, I wish to thank you - for your art which made for me once an evening of beauty."

She smiled faintly.

"But also I am here on a matter of business. I have been looking, Madame, for a long time for a certain maid of yours - her name was Nita."

"Nita?"

She stared at him. Her eyes were large and startled.

She said: "What do you know about - Nita?

"I will tell you."

He told her of the evening when his car had broken down and of Ted Williamson standing there twisting his cap between his fingers and stammering out his love and his pain. She listened with close attention.

She said when he had finished: "It is touching, that - yes, it is touching..."

Hercule Poirot nodded.

"Yes," he said. "It is a tale of Arcady, is it not? What can you tell me, Madame, of this girl?"

Katrina Samoushenka sighed.

"I had a maid - Juanita. She was lovely, yes - gay, light of heart. It happened to her what happens so often to those the gods favour. She died young."

They had been Poirot's own words - final words - irrevocable words - Now he heard them again - and yet he persisted.

He asked: "She is dead?"

"Yes, she is dead."

Hercule Poirot was silent a minute, then he said:

"Yet there is one thing I do not quite understand. I asked Sir George Sanderfield about this maid of yours and he seemed afraid. Why was that?"

There was a faint expression of disgust on the dancer's face.

"You just said a maid of mine. He thought you meant Marie - the girl who came to me after Juanita left. She tried to blackmail him, I believe, over something that she found out about him. She was an odious girl - inquisitive, always prying into letters and locked drawers."

Poirot murmured: "Then that explains that."

He paused a minute, then he went on, still persistent:

"Juanita's other name was Valetta and she died of an operation for appendicitis in Pisa. Is that correct?"

He noted the hesitation, hardly perceptible but nevertheless there, before the dancer bowed her head.

"Yes, that is right."

Poirot said meditatively: "And yet - there is still a little point - her people spoke of her, not as Juanita but as Bianca."

Katrina shrugged her thin shoulders.

She said: "Bianca - Juanita, does it matter? I suppose her real name was Bianca but she thought the name of Juanita was more romantic and so chose to call herself by it."

"Ah, you think that?" He paused and then, his voice changing, he said: "For me, there is another explanation."

"What is it?"

Poirot leaned forward.

He said: "The girl that Ted Williamson saw had hair that he described as being like wings of gold."

He leaned still a little further forward. His finger just touched the two springing waves of Katrina's hair.

"Wings of gold, horns of gold? It is as you look at it, it is whether one sees you as devil or as angel! You might be either. Or are they perhaps only the golden horns of the stricken deer?"

Katrina murmured: "The stricken deer..." and her voice was the voice of one without hope.

Poirot said: "All along Ted Williamson's description has worried me - it brought something to my mind - that something was you, dancing on your twinkling bronze feet through the forest. Shall I tell you what I think, Mademoiselle? I think there was a week when you had no maid, when you went down alone to Grasslawn, for Bianca Valetta had

returned to Italy and you had not yet engaged a new maid. Already you were feeling the illness which has since overtaken you, and you stayed in the house one day when the others went on an all day excursion on the river. There was a ring at the door and you went to it and you saw - shall I tell you what you saw? You saw a young man who was as simple as a child and as handsome as a god! And you invented for him a girl - not Juanita - but Incognita - and for a few hours you walked with him in Arcady..."

There was a long pause. Then Katrina said in a low hoarse voice:

"In one thing at least I have told you the truth. I have given you the right end to the story. Nita will die young."

"Ah non!" Hercule Poirot was transformed. He struck his hand on the table. He was suddenly prosaic, mundane, practical.

He said: "It is quite unnecessary! You need not die. You can fight for your life, can you not, as well as another?"

She shook her head - sadly, hopelessly.

"What life is there for me?"

"Not the life of the stage, bien entendu! But think, there is another life. Come now, Mademoiselle, be honest, was your father really a Prince or a Grand Duke, or even a General?"

She laughed suddenly.

She said: "He drove a lorry in Leningrad!"

"Very good! And why should you not be the wife of a garage hand in a country village? And have children as beautiful as gods, and with feet, perhaps, that will dance as you once danced."

Katrina caught her breath.

"But the whole idea is fantastic!"

"Nevertheless," said Hercule Poirot with great self-satisfaction, "I believe it is going to come true!"

Chapter 4

THE ERYMANTHIAN BOAR

The accomplishment of the third Labour of Hercules having brought him to Switzerland, Hercule Poirot decided that being there, he might take advantage of the fact and visit certain places which were up to now unknown to him.

He passed an agreeable couple of days at Chamonix, lingered a day or two at Montreux and then went on to Aldermatt, a spot which he had heard various friends praise highly.

Aldermatt, however, affected him unpleasantly. It was at the end of a valley with towering snow-peaked mountains shutting it in. He felt, unreasonably, that it was difficult to breathe.

"Impossible to remain here," said Hercule Poirot to himself. It was at that moment that he caught sight of a funicular railway. "Decidedly, I must mount."

The funicular, he discovered, ascended first to Les Avines, then to Caurouchet and finally to Rochers Neiges, ten thousand feet above sea level.

Poirot did not propose mounting as high as all that. Les Avines, he thought, would be quite sufficiently his affair.

But here he reckoned without that element of chance which plays so large a part in life. The funicular had started when the conductor approached Poirot and demanded his ticket. After he had inspected it and punched it with a fearsome pair of clippers, he returned it with a bow. At the same time Poirot felt a small wad of paper pressed into his hand with the ticket.

The eyebrows of Hercule Poirot rose a little on his forehead. Presently, unostentatiously, without hurrying himself, he smoothed out the wad of paper. It proved to be a hurriedly scribbled note written in pencil.

Impossible (it ran) to mistake those moustaches! I salute you, my dear colleague. If you are willing, you can be of great assistance to me. You

have doubtless read of the affaire Salley? The killer - Marrascaud - is believed to have a rendezvous with some members of his gang at Rochers Neiges - of all places in the world! Of course the whole thing may be a blague - but our information is reliable - there is always someone who squeals, is there not? So keep your eyes open, my friend. Get in touch with Inspector Drouet who is on the spot. He is a sound man - but he cannot pretend to the brilliance of Hercule Poirot. It is important, my friend, that Marrascaud should be taken - and taken alive. He is not a man - he is a wild boar - one of the most dangerous killers alive today. I did not risk speaking to you at Aldermatt as I might have been observed and you will have a freer hand if you are thought to be a mere tourist. Good hunting! Your old friend - Lementeuil.

Thoughtfully, Hercule Poirot caressed his moustaches. Yes, indeed, impossible to mistake the moustaches of Hercule Poirot. Now what was all this? He had read in the papers the details of the affaire Salley - the cold-blooded murder of a well-known Parisian bookmaker. The identity of the murderer was known. Marrascaud was a member of a well-known race-course gang. He had been suspected of many other killings - but this time his guilt was proved up to the hilt. He had got away, out of France it was thought, and the police in every country in Europe were on the look out for him.

So Marrascaud was said to have a rendezvous at Rochers Neiges...

Hercule Poirot shook his head slowly. He was puzzled. For Rochers Neiges was above the snow line. There was a hotel there, but it communicated with the world only by the funicular, standing as it did

on a long narrow ledge overhanging the valley. The hotel opened in June, but there was seldom any one there until July and August. It was a place ill-supplied with entrances and exits - if a man were tracked there, he was caught in a trap. It seemed a fantastic place to choose as the rendezvous of a gang of criminals.

And yet, if Lementeuil said his information was reliable, then Lementeuil was probably right. Hercule Poirot respected the Swiss Commissaire of Police. He knew him as a sound and dependable man.

Some reason unknown was bringing Marrascaud to this meeting-place far above civilisation.

Hercule Poirot sighed. To hunt down a ruthless killer was not his idea of a pleasant holiday. Brain work from an armchair, he reflected, was more in his line. Not to ensnare a wild boar upon a mountainside.

A wild boar - that was the term Lementeuil had used. It was certainly an odd coincidence...

He murmured to himself: "The fourth Labour of Hercules. The Erymanthian Boar?"

Quietly, without ostentation, he took careful stock of his fellow passengers.

On the seat opposite him was an American tourist. The pattern of his clothes, of his overcoat, the grip he carried, down to his hopeful friendliness and his naïve absorption in the scenery, even the guide book in his hand, all gave him away and proclaimed him a small town

American seeing Europe for the first time. In another minute or two, Poirot judged, he would break into speech. His wistful dog-like expression could not be mistaken.

On the other side of the carriage a tall, rather distinguished looking man with greyish hair and a big curved nose was reading a German book. He had the strong mobile fingers of a musician or a surgeon.

Farther away still were three men all of the same type. Men with bowed legs and an indescribable suggestion of horsiness about them. They were playing cards. Presently, perhaps, they would suggest a stranger cutting in on the game. At first the stranger would win. Afterwards, the luck would run the other way.

Nothing very unusual about the three men. The only thing that was unusual was the place where they were.

One might have seen them in any train on the way to a race meeting - or on an unimportant liner. But in an almost empty funicular - no!

There was one other occupant of the carriage - a woman. She was tall and dark. It was a beautiful face - a face that might have expressed a whole gamut of emotion - but which instead was frozen into a strange inexpressiveness. She looked at no one, staring out at the valley below.

Presently, as Poirot had expected, the American began to talk. His name, he said, was Schwartz. It was his first visit to Europe. The scenery, he said, was just grand. He'd been very deeply impressed by the Castle of Chillon. He didn't think much of Paris as a city - overrated

- he'd been to the Folies Bergeres and the Louvre and Notre Dame - and he'd noticed that none of these restaurants and cafés could play hot jazz properly. The Champs Elysees, he thought, was pretty good, and he liked the fountains especially when they were floodlit.

Nobody got out at Les Avines or at Caurouchet. It was clear that everyone in the funicular was going up to Rochers Neiges.

Mr Schwartz explained his own reasons. He had always wished, he said, to be high up among snow mountains. Ten thousand feet was pretty good - he'd heard that you couldn't boil an egg properly when you were as high up as that.

In the innocent friendliness of his heart, Mr Schwartz endeavoured to draw the tall, grey-haired man on the other side of the carriage into the conversation, but the latter merely stared at him coldly over his pince-nez and returned to the perusal of his book.

Mr Schwartz then offered to exchange places with the dark lady - she would get a better view, he explained.

It was doubtful whether she understood English. Anyway, she merely shook her head and shrank closer into the fur collar of her coat.

Mr Schwartz murmured to Poirot: "Seems kind of wrong to see a woman travelling about alone with no one to see to things for her. A woman needs a lot of looking after when she's travelling."

Remembering certain American women he had met on the Continent, Hercule Poirot agreed.

Mr Schwartz sighed. He found the world unfriendly. And surely, his brown eyes said expressively, there's no harm in a little friendliness all round?

II

To be received by a hotel manager correctly garbed in frock coat and patent leather shoes seemed somehow ludicrous in this out of the world, or rather above-the-world, spot.

The manager was a big handsome man, with an important manner. He was very apologetic.

So early in the season... The hot-water system was out of order... things were hardly in running order... Naturally, he would do everything he could... Not a full staff yet... He was quite confused by the unexpected number of visitors.

It all came rolling out with professional urbanity and yet it seemed to Poirot that behind the urbane façade he caught a glimpse of some poignant anxiety. This man, for all his easy manner, was not at ease. He was worried about something.

Lunch was served in a long room overlooking the valley far below. The solitary waiter, addressed as Gustave, was skillful and adroit. He

darted here and there, advising on the menu, whipping out his wine list. The three horsy men sat at a table together. They laughed and talked in French, their voices rising.

"Good old Joseph! - What about the little Denise, mon vieux? - Do you remember that sacré pig of a horse that let us all down at Auteuil?"

It was all very hearty, very much in character - and incongruously out of place!

The woman with the beautiful face sat alone at a table in the corner. She looked at no one.

Afterwards, as Poirot was sitting in the lounge, the manager came to him and was confidential.

Monsieur must not judge the hotel too hardly. It was out of the season. No one came here till the end of July. That lady, Monsieur had noticed her, perhaps? She came at this time every year. Her husband had been killed climbing three years ago. It was very sad. They had been very devoted. She came here always before the season commenced - so as to be quiet. It was a sacred pilgrimage. The elderly gentleman was a famous doctor. Dr Karl Lutz, from Vienna. He had come here, so he said, for quiet and repose.

"It is peaceful, yes," agreed Hercule Poirot. "And ces Messieurs there?" He indicated the three horsy men. "Do they also seek repose do you think?"

The manager shrugged his shoulders. Again there appeared in his eyes that worried look. He said vaguely:

"Ah, the tourists, they wish always a new experience... The altitude - that alone is a new sensation."

It was not, Poirot thought, a very pleasant sensation. He was conscious of his own rapidly beating heart. The lines of a nursery rhyme ran idiotically through his mind. "Up above the world so high. Like a tea tray in the sky."

Schwartz came into the lounge. His eyes brightened when he saw Poirot. He came over to him at once.

"I've been talking to that Doctor. He speaks English after a fashion. He's a Jew - been turned out of Austria by the Nazis. Say, I guess those people are just crazy! This Doctor Lutz was quite a big man, I gather - nerve specialist - psychoanalysis - that kind of stuff."

His eyes went to where the tall woman was looking out of a window at remorseless mountains. He lowered his voice.

"I got her name from the waiter. She's a Madame Grandier. Her husband was killed climbing. That's why she comes here. I sort of feel, don't you, that we ought to do something about it - try to take her out of herself?"

Hercule Poirot said: "If I were you I should not attempt it."

But the friendliness of Mr Schwartz was indefatigable.

Poirot saw him make his overtures, saw the remorseless way in which they were rebuffed. The two stood together for a minute silhouetted against the light. The woman was taller than Schwartz. Her head was thrown back and her expression was cold and forbidding. He did not hear what she said, but Schwartz came back looking crestfallen.

"Nothing doing," he said. He added wistfully: "Seems to me that as we're all human beings together there's no reason we shouldn't be friendly to one another. Don't you agree, Mr - You know, I don't know your name?"

"My name," said Poirot, "is Poirier." He added: "I am a silk merchant from Lyons."

"I'd like to give you my card, M. Poirier, and if ever you come to Fountain Springs you'll be sure of a welcome."

Poirot accepted the card, clapped his hand to his own pocket, murmured:

"Alas, I have not a card on me at the moment..."

That night, when he went to bed, Poirot read through Lementeuil's letter carefully before replacing it, neatly folded, in his wallet. As he got into bed he said to himself:

"It is curious - I wonder if..."

III

Gustave the waiter brought Hercule Poirot his breakfast of coffee and rolls. He was apologetic over the coffee.

"Monsieur comprehends, does he not, that at this altitude it is impossible to have the coffee really hot? Lamentably, it boils too soon."

Poirot murmured: "One must accept these vagaries of Nature's with fortitude."

Gustave murmured: "Monsieur is a philosopher."

He went to the door, but instead of leaving the room, he took one quick look outside, then shut the door again and returned to the bedside.

He said: "M. Hercule Poirot? I am Drouet, Inspector of Police."

"Ah," said Poirot, "I had already suspected as much."

Drouet lowered his voice.

"M. Poirot, something very grave has occurred. There has been an accident to the funicular!"

"An accident?" Poirot sat up. "What kind of an accident?"

"Nobody has been injured. It happened in the night. It was occasioned, perhaps, by natural causes - a small avalanche that swept down boulders and rocks. But it is possible that there was human agency at work. One does not know. In any case the result is that it will take many days to repair and that in the meantime we are cut off up here. So early in the season, when the snow is still heavy, it is impossible to communicate with the valley below."

Hercule Poirot sat up in bed.

He said softly: "That is very interesting."

The inspector nodded.

"Yes," he said. "It shows that our commissaire's information was correct. Marrascaud has a rendezvous here, and he has made sure that that rendezvous shall not be interrupted."

Hercule Poirot cried impatiently: "But it is fantastic!"

"I agree." Inspector Drouet threw up his hands. "It does not make the common sense - but there it is. This Marrascaud, you know, is a fantastic creature! Myself," he nodded, "I think he is mad."

Poirot said: "A madman and a murderer!"

Drouet said dryly: "It is not amusing, I agree."

Poirot said slowly: "But if he has a rendezvous here, on this ledge of snow high above the world, then it also follows that Marrascaud himself is here already, since communications are now cut."

Drouet said quietly: "I know."

Both men were silent for a minute or two. Then Poirot asked:

"Dr Lutz? Can he be Marrascaud?"

Drouet shook his head.

"I do not think so. There is a real Dr Lutz - I have seen his pictures in the papers - a distinguished and well-known man. This man resembles these photographs closely."

Poirot murmured: "If Marrascaud is an artist in disguise, he might play the part successfully."

"Yes, but is he? I never heard of him as an expert in disguise. He has not the guile and cunning of the serpent. He is a wild boar, ferocious, terrible, who charges in blind fury."

Poirot said: "All the same..."

Drouet agreed quickly.

"Ah yes, he is a fugitive from justice. Therefore he is forced to dissemble. So he may - in fact he must be - more or less disguised."

"You have his description?"

The other shrugged his shoulders.

"Roughly only. The official Bertillon photograph and measurements were to have been sent up to me today. I know only that he is a man of thirty odd, of a little over medium height and of dark complexion. No distinguishing marks."

Poirot shrugged his shoulders.

"That could apply to anybody. What about the American, Schwartz?"

"I was going to ask you that. You have spoken with him, and you have lived, I think, much with the English and the Americans. To a casual glance he appears to be the normal travelling American. His passport is in order. It is perhaps strange that he should elect to come here - but Americans when travelling are quite incalculable. What do you think yourself?"

Hercule Poirot shook his head in perplexity.

He said: "On the surface, at any rate, he appears to be a harmless slightly over-friendly, man. He might be a bore, but it seems difficult to regard him as a danger." He went on: "But there are three more visitors here."

The Inspector nodded, his face suddenly eager.

"Yes, and they are the type we are looking for. I'll take my oath, M. Poirot, that those three men are at any rate members of Marrascaud's gang. They're race-course toughs if I ever saw them! and one of the three may be Marrascaud himself."

Hercule Poirot reflected. He recalled the three faces.

One was a broad face with overhanging brows and a fat jowl - a hoggish, bestial face. One was lean and thin with a sharp narrow face and cold eyes. The third man was a pasty-faced fellow with a slight dandiacal air.

Yes, one of the three might well be Marrascaud, but if so, the question came insistently, why? Why should Marrascaud and two members of his gang journey together and ascend into a rat-trap on a mountain side? A meeting surely could be arranged in safer and less fantastic surroundings - in a café - in a railway station - in a crowded cinema - in a public park - somewhere where there were exits in plenty - not here far above the world in a wilderness of snow.

Something of this he tried to convey to Inspector Drouet and the latter agreed readily enough.

"But yes, it is fantastic, it does not make sense."

"If it is a rendezvous, why do they travel together? No, indeed, it does not make sense."

Drouet said, his face worried: "In that case, we have to examine a second supposition. These three men are members of Marrascaud's

gang and they have come here to meet Marrascaud himself. Who then is Marrascaud?"

Poirot asked: "What about the staff of the hotel?"

Drouet shrugged his shoulders.

"There is no staff to speak of. There is an old woman who cooks, there is her old husband Jacques - they have been here for fifty years I should think. There is the waiter whose place I have taken, that is all."

Poirot said: "The manager, he knows of course who you are?"

"Naturally. It needed his cooperation."

"Has it struck you," said Hercule Poirot, "that he looks worried?"

The remark seemed to strike Drouet.

He said thoughtfully: "Yes, that is true."

"It may be that it is merely the anxiety of being involved in police proceedings."

"But you think it may be more than that? You think that he may - know something?"

"It occurred to me, that is all."

Drouet said sombrely: "I wonder."

He paused and then went on: "Could one get it out of him, do you think?"

Poirot shook his head doubtfully.

He said: "It would be better, I think, not to let him know of our suspicions. Keep your eye on him, that is all."

Drouet nodded. He turned towards the door.

"You've no suggestions, M. Poirot? I - I know your reputation. We have heard of you in this country of ours."

Poirot said perplexedly: "For the moment I can suggest nothing. It is the reason which escapes me - the reason for a rendezvous in this place. In fact, the reason for a rendezvous at all?"

"Money," said Drouet succinctly.

"He was robbed, then, as well as murdered, this poor fellow Salley?"

"Yes, he had a very large sum of money on him which has disappeared."

"And the rendezvous is for the purpose of sharing out, you think?"

"It is the most obvious idea."

Poirot shook his head in a dissatisfied manner.

"Yes, but why here?" He went on slowly: "The worst place possible for a rendezvous of criminals. But it is a place, this, where one might come to meet a woman..."

Drouet took a step forward eagerly.

He said excitedly: "You think -?"

"I think," said Poirot, "that Madame Grandier is a very beautiful woman. I think that anyone might well mount ten thousand feet for her sake - that is, if she had suggested such a thing."

"You know," said Drouet, "that's interesting. I never thought of her in connection with the case. After all, she's been to this place several years running."

Poirot said gently: "Yes - and therefore her presence would not cause comment. It would be a reason, would it not, why Rochers Neiges should have been the spot selected?"

Drouet said excitedly: "You've had an idea, M. Poirot. I'll look into that angle."

IV

The day passed without incident. Fortunately the hotel was well provisioned. The manager explained that there need be no anxiety. Supplies were assured.

Hercule Poirot endeavoured to get into conversation with Dr Karl Lutz and was rebuffed. The doctor intimated plainly that psychology was his professional preoccupation and that he was not going to discuss it with amateurs. He sat in a corner reading a large German tome on the subconscious and making copious notes and annotations.

Hercule Poirot went outside and wandered aimlessly round to the kitchen premises. There he entered into conversation with the old man Jacques, who was surly and suspicious. His wife, the cook, was more forthcoming. Fortunately, she explained to Poirot, there was a large reserve of tinned food - but she herself thought little of food in tins. It was wickedly expensive and what nourishment could there be in it? The good God had never intended people to live out of tins.

The conversation came round to the subject of the hotel staff. Early in July the chambermaids and the extra waiters arrived. But for the next three weeks, there would be nobody or next to nobody. Mostly people who came up and had lunch and then went back again. She and Jacques and one waiter could manage that easily.

Poirot asked: "There was already a waiter here before Gustave came, was there not?"

"But yes, indeed, a poor kind of a waiter. No skill, no experience. No class at all."

"How long was he here before Gustave replaced him?"

"A few days only - the inside of a week. Naturally he was dismissed. We were not surprised. It was bound to come."

Poirot murmured: "He did not complain unduly?"

"Ah no, he went quietly enough. After all, what could he expect? This is a hotel of good class. One must have proper service here."

Poirot nodded.

He asked: "Where did he go?"

"That Robert, you mean?" She shrugged her shoulders. "Doubtless back to the obscure café he came from."

"He went down in the funicular?"

She looked at him curiously.

"Naturally, Monsieur. What other way is there to go?"

Poirot asked: "Did anyone see him go?"

They both stared at him.

"Ah! do you think it likely that one goes to see off an animal like that - that one gives him the grand farewell? One has one's own affairs to occupy one."

"Precisely," said Hercule Poirot.

He walked slowly away, staring up as he did so at the building above him. A large hotel - with only one wing open at present. In the other wings were many rooms, closed and shuttered where no one was likely to enter.

He came round the corner of the hotel and nearly ran into one of the three card-playing men. It was the one with the pasty face and pale eyes. The eyes looked at Poirot without expression. Only the lips curled back a little showing the teeth like a vicious horse.

Poirot passed him and went on. There was a figure ahead of him - the tall graceful figure of Madame Grandier.

He hastened his pace a little and caught her up.

He said: "This accident to the funicular, it is distressing. I hope, Madame, that it has not inconvenienced you?"

She said: "It is a matter of indifference to me."

Her voice was very deep - a full contralto. She did not look at Poirot. She swerved aside and went into the hotel by a small side door.

V

Hercule Poirot went to bed early. He was awakened some time after midnight.

Someone was fumbling with the lock of the door.

He sat up, putting on the light. At the same moment the lock yielded to manipulation and the door swung open. Three men stood there, the three card-playing men. They were, Poirot thought, slightly drunk. Their faces were foolish and yet malevolent. He saw the gleam of a razor blade.

The big thickset man advanced. He spoke in a growling voice.

"Sacred pig of a detective! Bah!"

He burst into a torrent of profanity. The three of them advanced purposefully on the defenceless man in the bed.

"We'll carve him up, boys. Eh, little horses? We'll slash Monsieur Detective's face open for him. He won't be the first one tonight."

They came on, steady, purposeful - the razor blades flashed.

And then, startling in its crisp transatlantic tones, a voice said:

"Stick'em up."

They swerved round. Schwartz, dressed in a peculiarly vivid set of striped pyjamas stood in the doorway. In his hand he held an automatic.

"Stick 'em up, guys. I'm pretty good at shooting."

He pressed the trigger - and a bullet sang past the big man's ear and buried itself in the woodwork of the window.

Three pairs of hands were raised rapidly.

Schwartz said: "Can I trouble you, M. Poirier?"

Hercule Poirot was out of bed in a flash. He collected the gleaming weapons and passed his hands over the three men's bodies to make sure they were not armed.

Schwartz said: "Now then, march! There's a big cupboard just along the corridor. No window in it. Just the thing."

He marched them into it and turned the key on them. He swung round to Poirot, his voice breaking with pleasurable emotion.

"If that doesn't just show? Do you know, M. Poirier, there were folks in Fountain Springs who laughed at me because I said I was going to take a gun abroad with me. 'Where do you think you're going?' they asked. 'Into the jungle?' Well, sir. I'd say the laugh is with me. Did you ever see such an ugly bunch of toughs?"

Poirot said: "My dear Mr Schwartz, you appeared in the nick of time. It might have been a drama on the stage! I am very much in your debt."

"That's nothing. Where do we go from here? We ought to turn these boys over to the police and that's just what we can't do! It's a knotty problem. Maybe we'd better consult the manager."

Hercule Poirot said: "Ah, the manager. I think first we will consult the waiter - Gustave - alias Inspector Drouet. But yes - the waiter Gustave is really a detective."

Schwartz stared at him.

"So that's why they did it!"

"That is why who did what?"

"This bunch of crooks got to you second on the list. They'd already carved up Gustave."

"What?"

"Come with me. The doc's busy on him now."

Drouet's room was a small one on the top floor. Dr Lutz, in a dressing-gown, was busy bandaging the injured man's face.

He turned his head as they entered.

"Ah! It is you, Mr Schwartz? A nasty business, this. What butchers! What inhuman monsters!"

Drouet lay still, moaning faintly.

Schwartz asked: "Is he in danger?"

"He will not die if that is what you mean. But he must not speak - there must be no excitement. I have dressed the wounds - there will be no risk of septicaemia."

The three men left the room together.

Schwartz said to Poirot: "Did you say Gustave was a police officer?"

Hercule Poirot nodded.

"But what was he doing up at Rochers Neiges?"

"He was engaged in tracking down a very dangerous criminal."

In a few words Poirot explained the situation.

Dr Lutz said: "Marrascaud? I read about the case in the paper. I should much like to meet that man. There is some deep abnormality there! I should like to know the particulars of his childhood."

"For myself," said Hercule Poirot, "I should like to know exactly where he is at this minute."

Schwartz said: "Isn't he one of the three we locked in the cupboard?"

Poirot said in a dissatisfied voice: "It is possible - yes, but me, I am not sure... I have an idea -"

He broke off, staring down at the carpet. It was of a light buff colour and there were marks on it of a deep rusty brown.

Hercule Poirot said: "Footsteps - footsteps that have trodden, I think, in blood and they lead from the unused wing of the hotel. Come - we must be quick!"

They followed him, through a swing door and along a dim, dusty corridor. They turned the corner of it, still following the marks on the carpet until the tracks led them to a half-open doorway.

Poirot pushed the door open and entered.

He uttered a sharp, horrified exclamation.

The room was a bedroom. The bed had been slept in and there was a tray of food on the table.

In the middle of the floor lay the body of a man. He was of just over middle height and he had been attacked with savage and unbelievable ferocity. There were a dozen wounds on his arms and chest and his head and face had been battered almost to a pulp.

Schwartz gave a half-stifled exclamation and turned away looking as though he might be sick.

Dr Lutz uttered a horrified exclamation in German.

Schwartz said faintly: "Who is this guy? Does anyone know?"

"I fancy," said Poirot, "that he was known here as Robert, a rather unskilful waiter."

Lutz had gone nearer, bending over the body. He pointed with a finger.

There was a paper pinned to the dead man's breast. It had some words scrawled on it in ink.

Marrascaud will kill no more - nor will he rob his friends!

Schwartz ejaculated: "Marrascaud? So this is Marrascaud! But what brought him up here to this out of the way spot? And why do you say his name is Robert?"

Poirot said: "He was here masquerading as a waiter - and by all accounts he was a very bad waiter. So bad that no one was surprised when he was given the sack. He left - presumably to return to Andermatt. But nobody saw him go."

Lutz said in his low rumbling voice: "So - and what do you think happened?"

Poirot replied: "I think we have here the explanation of a certain worried expression on the hotel manager's face. Marrascaud must

have offered him a big bribe to allow him to remain hidden in the unused part of the hotel..."

He added thoughtfully: "But the manager was not happy about it. Oh no, he was not happy at all."

"And Marrascaud continued to live in this unused wing with no one but the manager knowing about it?"

"So it seems. It would be quite possible, you know."

Dr Lutz said: "And why was he killed? And who killed him?"

Schwartz cried: "That's easy. He was to share out the money with his gang. He didn't. He double-crossed them. He came here, to this out of the way place, to lie low for a while. He thought it was the last place in the world they'd ever think of. He was wrong. Somehow or other they got wise to it and followed him." He touched the dead body with the tip of his shoe. "And they settled his account - like this."

Hercule Poirot murmured: "Yes, it was not quite the kind of rendezvous we thought."

Dr Lutz said irritably: "These hows and whys may be very interesting, but I am concerned with our present position. Here we have a dead man. I have a sick man on my hands and a limited amount of medical supplies. And we are cut off from the world! For how long?"

Schwartz added: "And we've got three murderers locked in a cupboard! It's what I'd call kind of an interesting situation."

Dr Lutz said: "What do we do?"

Poirot said: "First, we get hold of the manager. He is not a criminal, that one, only a man who was greedy for money. He is a coward, too. He will do everything we tell him. My good friend Jacques, or his wife, will perhaps provide some cord. Our three miscreants must be placed where we can guard them in safety until the day when help comes. I think that Mr Schwartz's automatic will be effective in carrying out any plans we may make."

Dr Lutz said: "And I? What do I do?"

"You, doctor?" said Poirot gravely, "will do all you can for your patient. The rest of us will employ ceaseless vigilance - and wait. There is nothing else we can do."

VI

It was three days later that a little party of men appeared in front of the hotel in the early hours of the morning.

It was Hercule Poirot who opened the front door to them with a flourish.

"Welcome, mon vieux."

Monsieur Lementeuil, Commissaire of Police, seized Poirot by both hands.

"Ah, my friend, with what emotion I greet you! What stupendous events - what emotions you have passed through! And we below, our anxiety, our fears - knowing nothing - fearing everything. No wireless - no means of communication. To heliograph, that was indeed a stroke of genius on your part."

"No, no," Poirot endeavoured to look modest. "After all, when the inventions of man fail, one falls back upon nature. There is always the sun in the sky."

The little party filed into the hotel.

Lementeuil said: "We are not expected?" His smile was somewhat grim.

Poirot smiled also. He said: "But no! It is believed that the funicular is not nearly repaired yet."

Lementeuil said with emotion: "Ah, this is a great day. There is no doubt, you think? It is really Marrascaud?"

"It is Marrascaud all right. Come with me."

They went up the stairs. A door opened and Schwartz came out in his dressing-gown. He stared when he saw the men.

"I heard voices," he explained. "Why, what's this?"

Hercule Poirot said grandiloquently: "Help has come! Accompany us, monsieur. This is a great moment."

He started up the next flight of stairs.

Schwartz said: "Are you going up to Drouet? How is he, by the way?"

"Dr Lutz reported him going well last night."

They came to the door of Drouet's room. Poirot flung it open. He announced:

"Here is your wild boar, gentlemen. Take him alive and see to it that he does not cheat the guillotine."

The man in the bed, his face still bandaged, started up. But the police officers had him by the arms before he could move.

Schwartz cried bewildered: "But that's Gustave the waiter - that's Inspector Drouet."

"It is Gustave, yes - but it is not Drouet. Drouet was the first waiter, the waiter Robert who was imprisoned in the unused part of the hotel and whom Marrascaud killed the same night as the attack was made on me."

VII

Over breakfast, Poirot explained gently to the bewildered American.

"You comprehend, there are certain things one knows - knows quite certainly in the course of one's profession. One knows, for instance, the difference between a detective and a murderer! Gustave was no waiter - that I suspected at once - but equally he was not a policeman. I have dealt with policemen all my life and I know. He could pass as a detective to an outsider - but not to a man who was a policeman himself.

"And so, at once, I was suspicious. That evening, I did not drink my coffee. I poured it away. And I was wise. Late that evening a man came into my room, came in with the easy confidence of one who knows that the man whose room he is searching is drugged. He looked through my affairs and he found the letter in my wallet - where I had left it for him to find! The next morning Gustave comes into my room with my coffee. He greets me by name and acts his part with complete assurance. But he is anxious - horribly anxious - for somehow or other the police have got on his track! They have learnt where he is and that is for him a terrible disaster. It upsets all his plans. He is caught up here like a rat in a trap."

Schwartz said: "The damn fool thing was ever to come here! Why did he?"

Poirot said gravely: "It is not so foolish as you think. He had need, urgent need, of a retired spot, away from the world, where he could meet a certain person, and where a certain happening could take place."

"What person?"

"Dr Lutz."

"Dr Lutz? Is he a crook too?"

"Dr Lutz is really Dr Lutz - but he is not a nerve specialist - not a psychoanalyst. He is a surgeon, my friend, a surgeon who specialises in facial surgery. That is why he was to meet Marrascaud here. He is poor now, turned out of his country. He was offered a huge fee to meet a man here and change that man's appearance by means of his surgical skill. He may have guessed that that man was a criminal, but if so, he shut his eyes to the fact. Realise this, they dared not risk a nursing home in some foreign country. No, up here, where no one ever comes so early in the season except for an odd visit, where the manager is a man in need of money who can be bribed, was an ideal spot.

"But, as I say, matters went wrong. Marrascaud was betrayed. The three men, his bodyguard, who were to meet him here and look after him had not yet arrived, but Marrascaud acts at once. The police officer who is pretending to be a waiter is kidnapped and Marrascaud takes his place. The gang arrange for the funicular to be wrecked. It is a matter of time. The following evening Drouet is killed and a paper is pinned on the dead body. It is hoped that by the time that

communications are established with the world Drouet's body may have been buried as that of Marrascaud. Dr Lutz performs his operation without delay. But one man must be silenced - Hercule Poirot. So the gang are sent to attack me. Thanks to you, my friend -"

Hercule Poirot bowed gracefully to Schwartz who said:

"So you're really Hercule Poirot?"

"Precisely."

"And you were never fooled by that body for a minute? You knew all along that it wasn't Marrascaud?"

"Certainly."

"Why didn't you say so?"

Hercule Poirot's face was suddenly stern.

"Because I wanted to be quite sure of handing the real Marrascaud over to the police."

He murmured below his breath: "To capture alive the wild boar of Erymanthea..."

Chapter 5

THE AUGEAN STABLES

The situation is an extremely delicate one, M. Poirot."

A faint smile flitted across Hercule Poirot's lips. He almost replied: "It always is!"

Instead, he composed his face and put on what might be described as a bedside manner of extreme discretion.

Sir George Conway proceeded weightily. Phrases fell easily from his lips - the extreme delicacy of the Government's position - the interests of the public - the solidarity of the Party - the necessity of presenting a united front - the power of the Press - the welfare of the Country...

It all sounded well - and meant nothing. Hercule Poirot felt that familiar aching of the jaw when one longs to yawn and politeness forbids. He had felt the same sometimes when reading the parliamentary debates. But on those occasions there had been no need to restrain his yawns.

He steeled himself to endure patiently. He felt, at the same time, a sympathy for Sir George Conway. The man obviously wanted to tell him something - and as obviously had lost the art of simple narration. Words had become to him a means of obscuring facts - not of revealing them. He was an adept in the art of the useful phrase - that is to say the phrase that falls soothingly on the ear and is quite empty of meaning.

The words rolled on - poor Sir George became quite red in the face. He shot a desperate glance at the other man sitting at the head of the table, and that other man responded.

Edward Ferrier said: "All right, George. I'll tell him."

Hercule Poirot shifted his gaze from the Home Secretary to the Prime Minister. He felt a keen interest in Edward Ferrier - an interest aroused by a chance phrase from an old man of eighty-two. Professor Fergus MacLeod, after disposing of a chemical difficulty in the conviction of a murderer, had touched for a moment on politics. On the retirement of the famous and beloved John Hammett (now Lord Cornworthy) his son-in-law, Edward Ferrier, had been asked to form a Cabinet. As politicians go he was a young man - under fifty. Professor MacLeod had said: "Ferrier was once one of my students. He's a sound man."

That was all, but to Hercule Poirot it represented a good deal. If MacLeod called a man sound it was a testimonial to character compared with which no popular or press enthusiasm counted at all.

It coincided, it was true, with the popular estimate. Edward Ferrier was considered sound - just that - not brilliant, not great, not a particularly eloquent orator, not a man of deep learning. He was a sound man - a man bred in the tradition - a man who had married John Hammett's daughter - who had been John Hammett's right hand man and who could be trusted to carry on the government of the country in the John Hammett tradition.

For John Hammett was particularly dear to the people and Press of England. He represented every quality which was dear to Englishmen. People said of him: "One does feel that Hammett's honest." Anecdotes were told of his simple home life, of his fondness for gardening. Corresponding to Baldwin's pipe and Chamberlain's umbrella, there was John Hammett's raincoat. He always carried it - a weatherworn garment. It stood as a symbol - of the English climate, of the prudent forethought of the English race, of their attachment to old possessions. Moreover, in his bluff British way, John Hammett was an orator. His speeches, quietly and earnestly delivered, contained those simple sentimental cliches which are so deeply rooted in the English heart. Foreigners sometimes criticise them as being both hypocritical and unbearably noble. John Hammett did not in the least mind being noble - in a sporting, public school, deprecating fashion.

Moreover, he was a man of fine presence, tall, upstanding, with fair colouring and very bright blue eyes. His mother had been a Dane and he himself had been for many years First Lord of the Admiralty, which gave rise to his nickname of "the Viking". When at last ill-health forced him to give up the reins of office, deep uneasiness was felt. Who would succeed him? The brilliant Lord Charles Delafield? (Too brilliant - England didn't need brilliance.) Evan Whittler? (Clever - but perhaps a little unscrupulous.) John Potter? (The sort of man who might fancy himself as Dictator - and we didn't want any dictators in this country, thank you very much.) So a sigh of relief went up when the quiet Edward Ferrier assumed office. Ferrier was all right. He had been trained by the Old Man, he had married the Old Man's daughter. In the classic British phrase, Ferrier would "carry on".

Hercule Poirot studied the quiet dark-faced man with the low pleasant voice. Lean and dark and tired-looking.

Edward Ferrier was saying: "Perhaps, M. Poirot, you are acquainted with a weekly periodical called the X-ray News?"

"I have glanced at it," admitted Poirot, blushing slightly.

The Prime Minister said: "Then you know more or less of what it consists. Semi-libellous matter. Snappy paragraphs hinting at sensational secret history. Some of them true, some of them harmless - but all served up in a spicy manner. Occasionally -"

He paused and then said, his voice altering a little: "Occasionally something more."

Hercule Poirot did not speak.

Ferrier went on: "For two weeks now there have been hints of impending disclosures of a first-class scandal in 'the highest political circles'. 'Astonishing revelations of corruption and jobbery.'"

Hercule Poirot said, shrugging his shoulders: "A common trick. When the actual revelations come they usually disappoint the cravers after sensation badly."

Ferrier said dryly: "These will not disappoint them."

Hercule Poirot asked: "You know then, what these revelations are going to be?"

"With a fair amount of accuracy."

Edward Ferrier paused a minute, then he began speaking. Carefully, methodically, he outlined the story.

It was not an edifying story. Accusations of shameless chicanery, of share juggling, of a gross misuse of Party Funds. The charges were levelled against the late Prime Minister, John Hammett. They showed him to be a dishonest rascal, a gigantic confidence trickster, who had used his position to amass for himself a vast private fortune.

The Prime Minister's quiet voice stopped at last.

The Home Secretary groaned. He spluttered out: "It's monstrous - monstrous! This fellow, Perry, who edits the rag, ought to be shot!"

Hercule Poirot said: "These so-called revelations are to appear in the X-ray News?"

"Yes."

"What steps do you propose to take about them?"

Ferrier said slowly: "They constitute a private attack on John Hammett. It is open to him to sue the paper for libel."

"Will he do that?"

"No."

"Why not?"

Ferrier said: "It is probable that there is nothing the X-ray News would like better. The publicity given them would be enormous. Their defence would be fair comment and that the statements complained of were true. The whole business would be exhaustively held up to view in a blaze of limelight."

"Still, if the case went against them, the damages would be extremely heavy."

Ferrier said slowly: "It might not go against them."

"Why?"

Sir George said primly, "I really think that -"

But Edward Ferrier was already speaking.

"Because what they intend to print is - the truth."

A groan burst from Sir George Conway, outraged at such un-Parliamentary frankness. He cried out:

"Edward, my dear fellow. We don't admit, surely -"

The ghost of a smile passed over Edward Ferrier's tired face. He said:

"Unfortunately, George, there are times when the stark truth has got to be told. This is one of them."

Sir George exclaimed: "You understand, M. Poirot, all this is strictly in confidence. Not one word -"

Ferrier interrupted him. He said: "M. Poirot understands that." He went on slowly, "What he may not understand is this: the whole future of the People's Party is at stake. John Hammett, M. Poirot, was the People's Party. He stood for what it represents to the people of England - he stood for Decency and Honesty. No one has ever thought us brilliant. We have muddled and blundered. But we have stood for the tradition of doing one's best - and we have stood, too, for fundamental honesty. Our disaster is this - that the man who was our figure-head, the Honest Man of the People, par excellence - turns out to have been one of the worst crooks of this generation."

Another groan burst from Sir George.

Poirot asked: "You knew nothing of all this?"

Again the smile flashed across the weary face. Ferrier said: "You may not believe me, M. Poirot, but like everyone else, I was completely deceived. I never understood my wife's curious attitude of reserve towards her father. I understand it now. She knew his essential character."

He paused and then said: "When the truth began to leak out, I was horrified, incredulous. We insisted on my father-in-law's resignation on

the grounds of ill-health and we set to work to - to clean up the mess, shall I say?"

Sir George groaned. "The Augean Stables!"

Poirot started.

Ferrier said: "It will prove, I fear, too Herculean a task for us. Once the facts become public, there will be a wave of reaction all over the country. The Government will fall. There will be a General Election and in all probability Everhard and his party will be returned to power. You know Everhard's policy."

Sir George spluttered. "A firebrand - a complete firebrand."

Ferrier said gravely: "Everhard has ability - but he is reckless, belligerent and utterly tactless. His supporters are inept and vacillating - it would be practically a Dictatorship."

Hercule Poirot nodded.

Sir George bleated out: "If only the whole thing can be hushed up..."

Slowly, the Premier shook his head. It was a movement of defeat.

Poirot said: "You do not believe that it can be hushed up?"

Ferrier said: "I sent for you, M. Poirot, as a last hope. In my opinion this business is too big, too many people know about it, for it to be successfully concealed. The only two methods open to us which are,

to put it bluntly, the use of force, or the adoption of bribery - cannot really hope to succeed. The Home Secretary compared our troubles with the cleansing of the Augean Stables. It needs, M. Poirot, the violence of a river in spate, the disruption of the great natural forces of Nature - nothing less, in fact, than a miracle."

"It needs, in fact, a Hercules," said Poirot, nodding his head with a pleased expression.

He added: "My name, remember, is Hercule..."

Edward Ferrier said: "Can you perform miracles, M. Poirot?"

"It is why you sent for me, is it not? Because you thought that I might?"

"That is true... I realised that if salvation was to be achieved, it could only come through some fantastic and completely unorthodox suggestion."

He paused a minute, then he said: "But perhaps, M. Poirot, you take an ethical view of the situation? John Hammett was a crook, the legend of John Hammett must be exploded. Can one build an honest house on dishonest foundations? I do not know. But I do know that I want to try." He smiled with a sudden sharp bitterness. "The politician wants to remain in office - as usual from the highest motives."

Hercule Poirot rose.

He said: "Monsieur, my experience in the police force has not, perhaps, allowed me to think very highly of politicians. If John

Hammett were in office - I would not lift a finger - no, not a little finger. But I know something about you. I have been told, by a man who is really great, one of the greatest scientists and brains of the day, that you are - a sound man. I will do what I can."

He bowed and left the room.

Sir George burst out: "Well, of all the damned cheek -"

But Edward Ferrier still smiling said: "It was a compliment."

II

On his way downstairs, Hercule Poirot was intercepted by a tall, fair-haired woman.

She said: "Please come into my sitting-room, M. Poirot."

He bowed and followed her.

She shut the door, motioned him to a chair, and offered him a cigarette. She sat down opposite him. She said quietly:

"You have just seen my husband - and he has told you - about my father."

Poirot looked at her with attention. He saw a tall woman, still handsome, with character and intelligence in her face. Mrs Ferrier was a popular figure. As the wife of the Prime Minister she naturally came in for a good share of the limelight. As the daughter of her father, her popularity was even greater. Dagmar Perrier represented the popular ideal of English womanhood.

She was a devoted wife, a fond mother, she shared her husband's love of country life. She interested herself in just those aspects of public life which were generally felt to be proper spheres of womanly activity. She dressed well, but never in an ostentatiously fashionable manner. She devoted much of her time and activity to large-scale charities, she had inaugurated special schemes for the relief of the wives of unemployed men. She was looked up to by the whole nation and was a most valuable asset to the Party.

Hercule Poirot said: "You must be terribly worried, Madame."

"Oh, I am - you don't know how much. For years I have been dreading - something."

Poirot said: "You had no idea of what was going on actually?"

She shook her head. "No - not in the least. I only knew that my father was not - was not what everyone thought him. I realised, from the time that I was a child, that he was a - a humbug."

Her voice was deep and bitter. She said: "It is through marrying me that Edward - that Edward will lose everything."

Poirot said in a quiet voice: "Have you any enemies, Madame?"

She looked up at him, surprised.

"Enemies? I don't think so."

Poirot said thoughtfully: "I think you have..." He went on: "Have you courage, Madame? There is a great campaign afoot - against your husband - and against yourself. You must prepare to defend yourself."

She cried: "But it doesn't matter about me. Only about Edward!"

Poirot said: "The one includes the other. Remember, Madame, you are Caesar's wife."

He saw her colour ebb. She leaned forward.

She said: "What is it you are trying to tell me?"

III

Percy Perry, editor of the X-ray News, sat behind his desk smoking.

He was a small man with a face like a weasel.

He was saying in a soft, oily voice: "We'll give 'em the dirt, all right. Lovely - lovely! Oh boy!"

His second-in-command, a thin, spectacled youth, said uneasily: "You're not nervous?"

"Expecting strong arm stuff? Not them. Haven't got the nerve. Wouldn't do them any good, either. Not the way we've got it farmed out - in this country and on the Continent and America."

The other said: "They must be in a pretty good stew. Won't they do anything?"

"They'll send someone to talk pretty -"

A buzzer sounded. Percy Perry picked up a receiver.

He said: "Who do you say? Right, send him up."

He put the receiver down - grinned.

"They've got that high-toned Belgian dick on to it. He's coming up now to do his stuff. Wants to know if we'll play ball."

Hercule Poirot came in. He was immaculately dressed - a white camellia in his buttonhole.

Percy Perry said: "Pleased to meet you, M. Poirot. On your way to the Royal Enclosure at Ascot? No? My mistake."

Hercule Poirot said: "I am flattered. One hopes to present a good appearance. It is even more important," his eyes roamed innocently over the editor's face and somewhat slovenly attire, "when one has few natural advantages."

Perry said shortly: "What do you want to see me about?"

Poirot leaned forward, tapped him on the knee, and said with a beaming smile: "Blackmail."

"What the devil do you mean, blackmail?"

"I have heard - the little bird has told me - that on occasions you have been on the point of publishing certain very damaging statements in your so spirituel paper - then, there has been a pleasant little increase in your bank balance - and after all, those statements have not been published."

Poirot leaned back and nodded his head in a satisfied sort of way.

"Do you realise that what you're suggesting amounts to slander?"

Poirot smiled confidently.

"I am sure you will not take offence."

"I do take offence! As to blackmail there is no evidence of my ever having blackmailed anybody."

"No, no, I am quite sure of that. You misunderstand me. I was not threatening you. I was leading up to a simple question. How much?"

"I don't know what you're talking about," said Percy Perry.

"A matter of national importance, M. Perry."

They exchanged a significant glance.

Percy Perry said: "I'm a reformer, M. Poirot. I want to see politics cleaned up. I'm opposed to corruption. Do you know what the state of politics is in this country? The Augean Stables, no more, no less."

"Tiens!" said Hercule Poirot. "You, too, use that phrase."

"And what is needed," went on the editor, "to cleanse those stables is the great purifying flood of Public Opinion."

Hercule Poirot got up. He said: "I applaud your sentiments."

He added: "It is a pity that you do not feel in need of money."

Percy Perry said hurriedly: "Here, wait a sec - I didn't say that exactly..."

But Hercule Poirot had gone through the door.

His excuse for later events is that he does not like blackmailers.

IV

Everett Dashwood, the cheery young man on the staff of The Branch, clapped Hercule Poirot affectionately on the back.

He said: "There's dirt and dirt, my boy. My dirt's clean dirt - that's all."

"I was not suggesting that you were on a par with Percy Perry."

"Damned little bloodsucker. He's a blot on our profession. We'd all down him if we could."

"It happens," said Hercule Poirot, "that I am engaged at the moment on a little matter of clearing up a political scandal."

"Cleaning out the Augean Stables, eh?" said Dashwood. "Too much for you, my boy. Only hope is to divert the Thames and wash away the Houses of Parliament."

"You are cynical," said Hercule Poirot, shaking his head.

"I know the world, that's all."

Poirot said: "You, I think, are just the man I seek. You have a reckless disposition, you are the good sport, you like something that is out of the usual."

"And granting all that?"

"I have a little scheme to put into action. If my ideas are right, there is a sensational plot to unmask. That, my friend, shall be a scoop for your paper."

"Can do," said Dashwood cheerfully.

"It will concern a scurrilous plot against a woman."

"Better and better. Sex stuff always goes."

"Then sit down and listen."

V

People were talking.

In the Goose and Feathers at Little Wimplington.

"Well, I don't believe it. John Hammett, he was always an honest man, he wasn't like some of these political folk."

"That's what they say about all swindlers before they're found out."

"Thousands, they say he made, out of that Palestine Oil business. Just a crook deal, it was."

"Whole lot of 'em tarred with the same brush. Dirty crooks, every one of 'em."

"You wouldn't find Everhard doing that. He's one of the old school."

"Eh, but I can't believe as John Hammett was a wrong 'un. You can't believe all these papers say."

"Ferrier's wife was 'is daughter. Have you seen what it says about her?"

They poured over a much-thumped copy of the X-ray News.

Caesar's wife? We hear that a certain highly-placed political lady was seen in very strange surroundings the other day. Complete with her gigolo. Oh Dagmar, Dagmar, how could you be so naughty?

A rustic voice said slowly: "Mrs Ferrier's not that kind. Gigolo? That's one of these dago skunks."

Another voice said: "You never can tell with women. The whole bunch of 'em wrong 'uns if you ask me."

VI

People were talking.

"But, darling, I believe it's absolutely true. Naomi had it from Paul and he had it from Andy. She's absolutely depraved."

"But she was always so terribly dowdy and proper and opening Bazaars."

"Just camouflage, darling. They say she's a nymphomaniac. Well, I mean! It's all in the X-ray News. Oh, not right out, but you can read between the lines. I don't know how they get hold of these things."

"What do you think of all this political scandal touch? They say her father embezzled the Party funds."

VII

People were talking.

"I don't like to think of it, and that's a fact, Mrs Rogers. I mean, I always thought Mrs Ferrier was a really nice woman."

"Do you think all these awful things are true?"

"As I say, I don't like to think it of her. Why, she opened a Bazaar in Pelchester only last June. I was as near to her as I am to that sofa. And she had such a pleasant smile."

"Yes, but what I say is there's no smoke without fire."

"Well, of course that's true. Oh dear, it seems as though you can't believe in anyone!"

VIII

Edward Ferrier, his face white and strained, said to Poirot: "These attacks on my wife! They're scurrilous - absolutely scurrilous! I'm bringing an action against that vile rag."

Hercule Poirot said: "I do not advise you to do so."

"But these damned lies have got to be stopped."

"Are you sure they are lies?"

"God damn you, yes!"

Poirot said, his head held a little on one side: "What does your wife say?"

For a moment Ferrier looked taken aback.

"She says it is best to take no notice... But I can't do that - everybody is talking."

Hercule Poirot said: "Yes, everybody is talking."

IX

And then came the small bald announcement in all the papers: Mrs Ferrier has had a slight nervous breakdown. She has gone to Scotland to recuperate.

Conjectures, rumours - positive information that Mrs Ferrier was not in Scotland, had never been to Scotland.

Stories, scandalous stories, of where Mrs Ferrier really was...

And again, people talking.

"I tell you Andy saw her. At that frightful place! She was drunk or doped and with an awful Argentine gigolo - Ramon. You know!"

More talking.

Mrs Ferrier had gone off with an Argentine dancer. She had been seen in Paris, doped. She had been taking drugs for years. She drank like a fish.

Slowly the righteous mind of England, at first unbelieving, had hardened against Mrs Ferrier. Seemed as though there must be something in it! That wasn't the sort of woman to be the Prime Minister's wife. "A Jezebel, that's what she is, nothing better than a Jezebel!"

And then came the camera records.

Mrs Ferrier, photographed in Paris - lying back in a Night Club, her arm twined familiarly over the shoulder of a dark, olive-skinned vicious-looking young man.

Other snapshots - half-naked on a beach - her head on the lounge lizard's shoulder.

And underneath: "Mrs Ferrier has a good time..."

Two days later an action for libel was brought against the X-ray News.

X

The case for the prosecution was opened by Sir Mortimer Inglewood, KC. He was dignified and full of righteous indignation. Mrs Ferrier was the victim of an infamous plot - a plot only to be equalled by the famous case of the Queen's Necklace familiar to readers of Alexandre Dumas. That plot had been engineered to lower Queen Marie Antoinette in the eyes of the populace. This plot, also, had been engineered to discredit a noble and virtuous lady who was in this country in the position of Caesar's wife. Sir Mortimer spoke with bitter disparagement of Fascists and Communists both of whom sought to undermine Democracy by every unfair machination known. He then proceeded to call witnesses.

The first was the Bishop of Northumbria.

Dr Henderson, the Bishop of Northumbria was one of the best-known figures in the English church, a man of great saintliness and integrity of character. He was broadminded, tolerant, and a fine preacher. He was loved and revered by all who knew him.

He went into the box and swore that between the dates mentioned Mrs Edward Ferrier had been staying in the Palace with himself and his wife. Worn out by her activities in good works, she had been recommended a thorough rest. Her visit had been kept a secret so as to obviate any worry from the Press.

An eminent doctor followed the Bishop and deposed to having ordered Mrs Ferrier rest and complete absence from worry.

A local general practitioner gave evidence to the effect that he had attended Mrs Ferrier at the Palace.

The next witness called was Thelma Andersen.

A thrill went round the Court when she entered the witness-box. Everyone realised at once what a strong resemblance the woman bore to Mrs Edward Ferrier.

"Your name is Thelma Andersen?"

"Yes."

"You are a Danish subject?"

"Yes. Copenhagen is my home."

"And you formerly worked at a café there?"

"Yes, sir."

"Please tell us in your own words what happened on the 18th March last."

"There is a gentleman who comes to my table there - an English gentleman. He tells me he works for an English paper - the X-ray News."

"You are sure he mentioned that name - X-ray News?"

"Yes, I am sure - because, you see, I think at first it must be a medical paper. But no, it seems not so. Then he tells me there is an English film

actress who wants to find a 'stand-in', and that I am just the type. I do not go to the pictures much, and I do not recognise the name he says, but he tells me, yes, she is very famous, and that she has not been well and so she wants someone to appear as her in public places, and for that she will pay very much money."

"How much money did this gentleman offer you?"

"Five hundred pounds in English money. I do not at first believe - I think it is some trick, but he pays me at once half the money. So then, I give in my notice where I work."

The tale went on. She had been taken to Paris, supplied with smart clothes, and had been provided with an "escort". "A very nice Argentinian gentleman - very respectful, very polite."

It was clear that the woman had thoroughly enjoyed herself. She had flown over to London and been taken there to certain "Night Clubs" by her olive-skinned cavalier. She had been photographed in Paris with him. Some of the places to which she had gone were not, she admitted, quite nice... Indeed, they were not respectable! And some of the photographs taken, they too, had not been very nice. But these things, they had told her, were necessary for "advertisement" - and Señor Ramon himself had always been most respectful.

In answer to questioning she declared that the name of Mrs Ferrier had never been mentioned and that she had had no idea that it was that lady she was supposed to be understudying. She had meant no harm. She identified certain photographs which were shown to her as having been taken of her in Paris and on the Riviera.

There was the hallmark of absolute honesty about Thelma Andersen. She was quite clearly a pleasant, but slightly stupid woman. Her distress at the whole thing, now that she understood it, was patent to everyone.

The defence was unconvincing. A frenzied denial of having any dealings with the woman Andersen. The photos in question had been brought to the London office and had been believed to be genuine. Sir Mortimer's closing speech roused enthusiasm. He described the whole thing as a dastardly political plot, formed to discredit the Prime Minister and his wife. All sympathy would be extended to the unfortunate Mrs Ferrier.

The verdict, a foregone conclusion, was given amidst unparallelled scenes. Damages were assessed at an enormous figure. As Mrs Ferrier and her husband and father left the court they were greeted by the appreciative roars of a vast crowd.

XI

Edward Ferrier grasped Poirot warmly by the hand.

He said: "I thank you, M. Poirot, a thousand times. Well, that finishes the X-ray News. Dirty little rag. They're wiped out completely. Serves them right for cooking up such a scurrilous plot. Against Dagmar, too,

the kindliest creature in the world. Thank goodness you managed to expose the whole thing for the wicked ramp it was... What put you on to the idea that they might be using a double?"

"It is not a new idea," Poirot reminded him. "It was employed successfully in the case of Jeanne de la Motte when she impersonated Marie Antoinette."

"I know. I must re-read The Queen's Necklace. But how did you actually find the woman they were employing?"

"I looked for her in Denmark, and I found her there."

"But why Denmark?"

"Because Mrs Ferrier's grandmother was a Dane, and she herself is a markedly Danish type. And there were other reasons."

"The resemblance is certainly striking. What a devilish idea! I wonder how the little rat came to think of it?"

Poirot smiled.

"But he did not."

He tapped himself on the chest.

"I thought of it!"

Edward Ferrier stared. "I don't understand. What do you mean?"

Poirot said: "We must go back to an older story than that of The Queen's Necklace - to the cleansing of the Augean Stables. What Hercules used was a river - that is to say one of the great forces of Nature. Modernise that! What is a great force of Nature? Sex, is it not? It is the sex angle that sells stories, that makes news. Give people scandal allied to sex and it appeals far more than any mere political chicanery or fraud.

"Eh bien, that was my task! First to put my own hands in the mud like Hercules to build up a dam that should turn the course of that river. A journalistic friend of mine aided me. He searched Denmark until he found a suitable person to attempt the impersonation. He approached her, casually mentioned the X-ray News to her, hoping she would remember it. She did.

"And so, what happened? Mud - a great deal of mud! Caesar's wife is bespattered with it. Far more interesting to everybody than any political scandal. And the result - the denouement? Why, Reaction! Virtue vindicated! The pure woman cleared! A great tide of Romance and Sentiment sweeping through the Augean Stables.

"If all the newspapers in the country publish the news of John Hammett's defalcations now, no one will believe it. It will be put down as another political plot to discredit the Government."

Edward Ferrier took a deep breath. For a moment Hercule Poirot came nearer to being physically assaulted than at any other time in his career.

"My wife! You dared to use her -"

Fortunately, perhaps, Mrs Ferrier herself entered the room at this moment.

"Well," she said. "That went off very well."

"Dagmar, did you - know all along?"

"Of course, dear," said Dagmar Ferrier.

And she smiled, the gentle, maternal smile of a devoted wife.

"And you never told me!"

"But, Edward, you would never have let M. Poirot do it."

"Indeed I would not!"

Dagmar smiled. "That's what we thought."

"We?"

"I and M. Poirot."

She smiled at Hercule Poirot and at her husband.

She added: "I had a very restful time with the dear Bishop - I feel full of energy now. They want me to christen the new battleship at Liverpool next month - I think it would be a popular thing to do."

Chapter 6

THE STYMPHALEAN BIRDS

Harold Waring noticed them first walking up the path from the lake. He was sitting outside the hotel on the terrace. The day was fine, the lake was blue, and the sun shone. Harold was smoking a pipe and feeling that the world was a pretty good place.

His political career was shaping well. An under-secretary-ship at the age of thirty was something to be justly proud of. It had been reported that the Prime Minister had said to someone that "young Waring would go far". Harold was, not unnaturally, elated. Life presented itself to him in rosy colours. He was young, sufficiently good-looking, in first-class condition, and quite unencumbered with romantic ties.

He had decided to take a holiday in Herzoslovakia so as to get right off the beaten track and have a real rest from everyone and everything. The hotel at Lake Stempka, though small, was comfortable and not overcrowded. The few people there were mostly foreigners. So far the only other English people were an elderly woman, Mrs Rice, and her married daughter, Mrs Clayton. Harold liked them both. Elsie Clayton was pretty in a rather old-fashioned style. She made up very little, if at all, and was gentle and rather shy. Mrs Rice was what is called a woman of character. She was tall, with a deep voice and a masterful

manner, but she had a sense of humour and was good company. Her life was clearly bound up in that of her daughter.

Harold had spent some pleasant hours in the company of mother and daughter, but they did not attempt to monopolise him and relations remained friendly and unexacting between them.

The other people in the hotel had not aroused Harold's notice. Usually they were hikers, or members of a motorcoach tour. They stayed a night or two and then went on. He had hardly noticed any one else - until this afternoon.

They came up the path from the lake very slowly and it just happened that at the moment when Harold's attention was attracted to them, a cloud came over the sun. He shivered a little.

Then he stared. Surely there was something odd about these two women? They had long, curved noses, like birds, and their faces, which were curiously alike, were quite immobile. Over their shoulders they wore loose cloaks that flapped in the wind like the wings of two big birds.

Harold thought to himself. "They are like birds." He added almost without volition, "birds of ill omen."

The women came straight up on the terrace and passed close by him. They were not young - perhaps nearer fifty than forty, and the resemblance between them was so close that they were obviously sisters. Their expression was forbidding. As they passed Harold the

eyes of both of them rested on him for a minute. It was a curious, appraising glance - almost inhuman.

Harold's impression of evil grew stronger. He noticed the hand of one of the two sisters, a long claw-like hand... Although the sun had come out, he shivered once again.

He thought: "Horrible creatures. Like birds of prey..."

He was distracted from these imaginings by the emergence of Mrs Rice from the hotel. He jumped up and drew forward a chair. With a word of thanks she sat down and, as usual, began to knit vigorously.

Harold asked: "Did you see those two women who just went into the hotel?"

"With cloaks on? Yes, I passed them."

"Extraordinary creatures, didn't you think?"

"Well - yes, perhaps they are rather odd. They only arrived yesterday, I think. Very alike - they must be twins."

Harold said: "I may be fanciful, but I distinctly felt there was something evil about them."

"How curious. I must look at them more closely and see if I agree with you."

She added: "We'll find out from the concierge who they are. Not English, I imagine?"

"Oh no."

Mrs Rice glanced at her watch.

She said: "Tea-time. I wonder if you'd mind going in and ringing the bell, Mr Waring?"

"Certainly, Mrs Rice."

He did so and then as he returned to his seat he asked:

"Where's your daughter this afternoon?"

"Elsie? We went for a walk together. Part of the way round the lake and then back through the pinewoods. It really was lovely."

A waiter came out and received orders for tea. Mrs Rice went on, her needles flying vigorously:

"Elsie had a letter from her husband. She mayn't come down to tea."

"Her husband?" Harold was surprised. "Do you know, I always thought she was a widow."

Mrs Rice shot him a sharp glance.

She said dryly: "Oh no, Elsie isn't a widow." She added with emphasis: "Unfortunately!"

Harold was startled.

Mrs Rice, nodding her head grimly, said: "Drink is responsible for a lot of unhappiness, Mr Waring."

"Does he drink?"

"Yes. And a good many other things as well. He's insanely jealous and has a singularly violent temper." She sighed. "It's a difficult world, Mr Waring. I'm devoted to Elsie, she's my only child - and to see her unhappy isn't an easy thing to bear."

Harold said with real emotion: "She's such a gentle creature."

"A little too gentle, perhaps."

"You mean -"

Mrs Rice said slowly: "A happy creature is more arrogant. Elsie's gentleness comes, I think, from a sense of defeat. Life has been too much for her."

Harold said with some slight hesitation: "How - did she come to marry this husband of hers?"

Mrs Rice answered: "Philip Clayton was a very attractive person. He had (still has) great charm, he had a certain amount of money - and

there was no one to advise us of his real character. I had been a widow for many years. Two women, living alone, are not the best judges of a man's character."

Harold said thoughtfully: "No, that's true."

He felt a wave of indignation and pity sweep over him. Elsie Clayton could not be more than twenty-five at the most. He recalled the clear friendliness of her blue eyes, the soft droop of her mouth. He realised, suddenly, that his interest in her went a little beyond friendship.

And she was tied to a brute...

II

That evening, Harold joined mother and daughter after dinner. Elsie Clayton was wearing a soft dull pink dress. Her eyelids, he noticed, were red. She had been crying.

Mrs Rice said briskly: "I've found out who your two harpies are, Mr Waring. Polish ladies - of very good family, so the concierge says."

Harold looked across the room to where the Polish ladies were sitting.

Elsie said with interest: "Those two women over there? With the henna-dyed hair? They look rather horrible somehow - I don't know why."

Harold said triumphantly: "That's just what I thought."

Mrs Rice said with a laugh: "I think you are both being absurd. You can't possibly tell what people are like just by looking at them."

Elsie laughed.

She said: "I suppose one can't. All the same I think they're vultures!"

"Picking out dead men's eyes!" said Harold.

"Oh, don't," cried Elsie.

Harold said quickly: "Sorry."

Mrs Rice said with a smile: "Anyway they're not likely to cross our path."

Elsie said: "We haven't got any guilty secrets!"

"Perhaps Mr Waring has," said Mrs Rice with a twinkle.

Harold laughed, throwing his head back.

He said: "Not a secret in the world. My life's an open book." And it flashed across his mind: "What fools people are who leave the straight

path. A clear conscience - that's all one needs in life. With that you can face the world and tell everyone who interferes with you to go to the devil!"

He felt suddenly very much alive - very strong - very much master of his fate!

III

Harold Waring, like many other Englishmen, was a bad linguist. His French was halting and decidedly British in intonation. Of German and Italian he knew nothing.

Up to now, these linguistic disabilities had not worried him. In most hotels on the Continent, he had always found, everyone spoke English, so why worry?

But in this out-of-the-way spot, where the native language was a form of Slovak and even the concierge only spoke German it was sometimes galling to Harold when one of his two women friends acted as interpreter for him. Mrs Rice, who was fond of languages, could even speak a little Slovak.

Harold determined that he would set about learning German. He decided to buy some text books and spend a couple of hours each morning in mastering the language.

The morning was fine and after writing some letters, Harold looked at his watch and saw there was still time for an hour's stroll before lunch. He went down towards the lake and then turned aside into the pine woods. He had walked there for perhaps five minutes when he heard an unmistakable sound. Somewhere not far away a woman was sobbing her heart out.

Harold paused a minute, then he went in the direction of the sound. The woman was Elsie Clayton and was she sitting on a fallen tree with her face buried in her hands and her shoulders quivering with the violence of her grief.

Harold hesitated a minute, then he came up to her.

He said gently: "Mrs Clayton - Elsie?"

She started violently and looked up at him. Harold sat down beside her.

He said with real sympathy: "Is there anything I can do? Anything at all?"

She shook her head.

"No - no - you're very kind. But there's nothing any one can do for me."

Harold said rather diffidently: "Is it to do with - your husband?"

She nodded. Then she wiped her eyes and took out her powder compact, struggling to regain command of herself.

She said in a quavering voice: "I didn't want Mother to worry. She's so upset when she sees me unhappy. So I came out here to have a good cry. It's silly, I know. Crying doesn't help. But - sometimes - one just feels that life is quite unbearable."

Harold said: "I'm terribly sorry."

She threw him a grateful glance. Then she said hurriedly: "It's my own fault, of course. I married Philip of my own free will. It - it's turned out badly, I've only myself to blame."

Harold said: "It's very plucky of you to put it like that."

Elsie shook her head. "No, I'm not plucky. I'm not brave at all. I'm an awful coward. That's partly the trouble with Philip. I'm terrified of him - absolutely terrified - when he gets in one of his rages."

Harold said with feeling: "You ought to leave him!"

"I daren't. He - he wouldn't let me."

"Nonsense! What about a divorce?"

She shook her head slowly. "I've no grounds." She straightened her shoulders. "No, I've got to carry on. I spend a fair amount of time with Mother, you know. Philip doesn't mind that. Especially when we go somewhere off the beaten track like this."

She added, the colour rising in her cheeks, "You see, part of the trouble is that he's insanely jealous. If - if I so much as speak to another man he makes the most frightful scenes."

Harold's indignation rose. He had heard many women complain of the jealousy of a husband, and whilst professing sympathy, had been secretly of the opinion that the husband was amply justified. But Elsie Clayton wasn't one of those women. She had never thrown him so much as a flirtatious glance.

Elsie drew away from him with a slight shiver. She glanced up at the sky.

"The sun's gone in. It's quite cold. We'd better get back to the hotel. It must be nearly lunch time."

They got up and turned in the direction of the hotel. They had walked for perhaps a minute when they overtook a figure going in the same direction. They recognised her by the flapping cloak she wore. It was one of the Polish sisters.

They passed her, Harold bowing slightly. She made no response but her eyes rested on them both for a minute and there was a certain appraising quality in the glance which made Harold feel suddenly hot. He wondered if the woman had seen him sitting by Elsie on the tree trunk. If so, she probably thought...

Well, she looked as though she thought... A wave of indignation overwhelmed him! What foul minds some women had!

Odd that the sun had gone in and that they should both have shivered - perhaps just at the moment that that woman was watching them...

Somehow, Harold felt a little uneasy.

IV

That evening, Harold went to his room a little after ten. The English mail had arrived and he had received a number of letters, some of which needed immediate answers.

He got into his pyjamas and a dressing-gown and sat down at the desk to deal with his correspondence. He had written three letters and was just starting on the fourth when the door was suddenly flung open and Elsie Clayton staggered into the room.

Harold jumped up, startled. Elsie had pushed the door to behind her and was standing clutching at the chest of drawers. Her breath was coming in great gasps, her face was the colour of chalk. She looked frightened to death.

She gasped out: "It's my husband! He arrived unexpectedly. I - I think he'll kill me. He's mad - quite mad. I came to you. Don't - don't let him find me."

She took a step or two forward, swaying so much that she almost fell. Harold put out an arm to support her.

As he did so, the door was flung open and a man stood in the doorway. He was of medium height with thick eyebrows and a sleek, dark head. In his hand he carried a heavy car spanner. His voice rose high and shook with rage. He almost screamed the words.

"So that Polish woman was right! You are carrying on with this fellow!"

Elsie cried: "No, no, Philip. It's not true. You're wrong."

Harold thrust the girl swiftly behind him, as Philip Clayton advanced on them both. The latter cried:

"Wrong, am I? When I find you here in his room? You she-devil. I'll kill you for this."

With a swift, sideways movement he dodged Harold's arm. Elsie, with a cry, ran round the other side of Harold, who swung round to fend the other off.

But Philip Clayton had only one idea, to get at his wife. He swerved round again. Elsie, terrified, rushed out of the room. Philip Clayton dashed after her, and Harold, with not a moment's hesitation, followed him.

Elsie had darted back into her own bedroom at the end of the corridor. Harold could hear the sound of the key turning in the lock, but it did not turn in time. Before the lock could catch Philip Clayton wrenched the

door open. He disappeared into the room and Harold heard Elsie's frightened cry. In another minute Harold burst in after them.

Elsie was standing at bay against the curtains of the window. As Harold entered Philip Clayton rushed at her brandishing the spanner. She gave a terrified cry, then snatching up a heavy paper-weight from the desk beside her, she flung it at him.

Clayton went down like a log. Elsie screamed. Harold stopped petrified in the doorway. The girl fell on her knees beside her husband. He lay quite still where he had fallen.

Outside in the passage, there was the sound of the bolt of one of the doors being drawn back. Elsie jumped up and ran to Harold.

"Please - please -" Her voice was low and breathless. "Go back to your room. They'll come - they'll find you here."

Harold nodded. He took in the situation like lightning. For the moment, Philip Clayton was hors de combat. But Elsie's scream might have been heard. If he were found in her room it could only cause embarrassment and misunderstanding. Both for her sake and his own there must be no scandal.

As noiselessly as possible, he sprinted down the passage and back into his room. Just as he reached it, he heard the sound of an opening door.

He sat in his room for nearly half an hour, waiting. He dared not go out. Sooner or later, he felt sure, Elsie would come.

There was a light tap on his door. Harold jumped up to open it.

It was not Elsie who came in but her mother and Harold was aghast at her appearance. She looked suddenly years older. Her grey hair was dishevelled and there were deep black circles under her eyes.

He sprang up and helped her to a chair. She sat down, her breath coming painfully.

Harold said quickly: "You look all in, Mrs Rice. Can I get you something?"

She shook her head. "No. Never mind me. I'm all right, really. It's only the shock. Mr Waring, a terrible thing has happened."

Harold asked: "Is Clayton seriously injured?"

She caught her breath. "Worse than that. He's dead..."

V

The room spun round.

A feeling as of icy water trickling down his spine rendered Harold incapable of speech for a moment or two.

He repeated dully: "Dead?"

Mrs Rice nodded.

She said, and her voice had the flat level tones of complete exhaustion: "The corner of that marble paperweight caught him right on the temple and he fell back with his head on the iron fender. I don't know which it was that killed him - but he is certainly dead. I have seen death often enough to know."

Disaster - that was the word that rang insistently in Harold's brain. Disaster, disaster, disaster...

He said vehemently: "It was an accident... I saw it happen."

Mrs Rice said sharply: "Of course it was an accident. I know that. But - but - is any one else going to think so? I'm - frankly, I'm frightened, Harold! This isn't England."

Harold said slowly: "I can confirm Elsie's story."

Mrs Rice said: "Yes, and she can confirm yours. That - that is just it!"

Harold's brain, naturally a keen and cautious one, saw her point. He reviewed the whole thing and appreciated the weakness of their position.

He and Elsie had spent a good deal of their time together. Then there was the fact that they had been seen together in the pinewoods by one

of the Polish women under rather compromising circumstances. The Polish ladies apparently spoke no English, but they might nevertheless understand it a little. The woman might have known the meaning of words like "jealously" and "husband" if she had chanced to overhear their conversation. Anyway it was clear that it was something she had said to Clayton that had aroused his jealousy. And now - his death. When Clayton had died, he, Harold, had been in Elsie Clayton's room. There was nothing to show that he had not deliberately assaulted Philip Clayton with the paperweight. Nothing to show that the jealous husband had not actually found them together. There was only his word and Elsie's. Would they be believed?

A cold fear gripped him.

He did not imagine - no, he really did not imagine - that either he or Elsie was in danger of being condemned to death for a murder they had not committed. Surely, in any case, it could only be a charge of manslaughter brought against them. (Did they have manslaughter in these foreign countries?) But even if they were acquitted of blame there would have to be an inquiry - it would be reported in all the papers. An English man and woman accused - jealous husband - rising politician. Yes, it would mean the end of his political career. It would never survive a scandal like that.

He said on an impulse: "Can't we get rid of the body somehow? Plant it somewhere?"

Mrs Rice's astonished and scornful look made him blush.

She said incisively: "My dear Harold, this isn't a detective story! To attempt a thing like that would be quite crazy."

"I suppose it would." He groaned. "What can we do? My God, what can we do?"

Mrs Rice shook her head despairingly. She was frowning, her mind working painfully.

Harold demanded: "Isn't there anything we can do? Anything to avoid this frightful disaster?"

There, it was out - disaster! Terrible - unforeseen - utterly damning.

They stared at each other.

Mrs Rice said hoarsely: "Elsie - my little girl. I'd do anything... It will kill her if she has to go through a thing like this." And she added: "You too, your career - everything."

Harold managed to say: "Never mind me."

But he did not really mean it.

Mrs Rice went on bitterly: "And all so unfair - so utterly untrue! It's not as though there had ever been anything between you. I know that well enough."

Harold suggested, catching at a straw: "You'll be able to say that at least - that it was all perfectly all right."

Mrs Rice said bitterly: "Yes, if they believe me. But you know what these people out here are like!"

Harold agreed gloomily. To the Continental mind, there would undoubtedly be a guilty connection between himself and Elsie, and all Mrs Rice's denials would be taken as a mother lying herself black in the face for her daughter.

Harold said gloomily: "Yes, we're not in England, worse luck."

"Ah!" Mrs Rice lifted her head. "That's true... It's not England. I wonder now if something could be done -"

"Yes?" Harold looked at her eagerly.

Mrs Rice said abruptly: "How much money have you got?"

"Not much with me." He added: "I could wire for money, of course."

Mrs Rice said grimly: "We may need a good deal. But I think it's worth trying."

Harold felt a faint lifting of despair.

He said: "What is your idea?"

Mrs Rice spoke decisively. "We haven't a chance of concealing the death ourselves, but I do think there's just a chance of hushing it up officially!"

"You really think so?" Harold was hopeful but slightly incredulous.

"Yes, for one thing the manager of the hotel will be on our side. He'd much rather have the thing hushed up. It's my opinion that in these out of the way curious little Balkan countries you can bribe anyone and everyone - and the police are probably more corrupt than anyone else!"

Harold said slowly: "Do you know, I believe you're right."

Mrs Rice went on: "Fortunately, I don't think anyone in the hotel heard anything."

"Who has the room next to Elsie's on the other side from yours?"

"The two Polish ladies. They didn't hear anything. They'd have come out into the passage if they had. Philip arrived late, nobody saw him but the night porter. Do you know, Harold, I believe it will be possible to hush the whole thing up - and get Philip's death certified as due to natural causes! It's just a question of bribing high enough - and finding the right man - probably the Chief of Police!"

Harold smiled faintly. He said: "It's rather Comic Opera, isn't it? Well, after all, we can but try."

VI

Mrs Rice was energy personified. First the manager was summoned. Harold remained in his room, keeping out of it. He and Mrs Rice had agreed that the story told had better be that of a quarrel between husband and wife. Elsie's youth and prettiness would command more sympathy.

On the following morning various police officials arrived and were shown up to Mrs Rice's bedroom. They left at midday. Harold had wired for money but otherwise had taken no part in the proceedings - indeed he would have been unable to do so since none of these official personages spoke English.

At twelve o'clock Mrs Rice came to his room. She looked white and tired, but the relief on her face told its own story.

She said simply: "It's worked!"

"Thank heaven! You've really been marvellous! It seems incredible!"

Mrs Rice said thoughtfully: "By the ease with which it went, you might almost think it was quite normal. They practically held out their hands right away. It's - it's rather disgusting, really!"

Harold said dryly: "This isn't the moment to quarrel with the corruption of the public services. How much?"

"The tariff's rather high."

She read out a list of figures.

The Chief of Police.

The Commissaire.

The Agent.

The Doctor.

The Hotel Manager.

The Night Porter.

Harold's comment was merely: "The night porter doesn't get much, does he? I suppose it's mostly a question of gold lace."

Mrs Rice explained: "The manager stipulated that the death should not have taken place in his hotel at all. The official story will be that Philip had a heart attack in the train. He went along the corridor for air - you know how they always leave those doors open - and he fell out on the line. It's wonderful what the police can do when they try!"

"Well," said Harold. "Thank God our police force isn't like that."

And in a British and superior mood he went down to lunch.

VII

After lunch Harold usually joined Mrs Rice and her daughter for coffee. He decided to make no change in his usual behaviour.

This was the first time he had seen Elsie since the night before. She was very pale and was obviously still suffering from shock, but she made a gallant endeavour to behave as usual, uttering small commonplaces about the weather and the scenery.

They commented on a new guest who had just arrived, trying to guess his nationality. Harold thought a moustache like that must be French - Elsie said German - and Mrs Rice thought he might be Spanish.

There was no one else but themselves on the terrace with the exception of the two Polish ladies who were sitting at the extreme end, both doing fancywork.

As always when he saw them, Harold felt a queer shiver of apprehension pass over him. Those still faces, those curved beaks of noses, those long claw-like hands...

A page boy approached and told Mrs Rice she was wanted. She rose and followed him. At the entrance to the hotel they saw her encounter a police official in full uniform.

Elsie caught her breath.

"You don't think - anything's gone wrong?"

Harold reassured her quickly. "Oh no, no, nothing of that kind."

But he himself knew a sudden pang of fear.

He said: "Your mother's been wonderful!"

"I know. Mother is a great fighter. She'll never sit down under defeat." Elsie shivered. "But it is all horrible, isn't it?"

"Now, don't dwell on it. It's all over and done with."

Elsie said in a low voice: "I can't forget that - that it was I who killed him."

Harold said urgently: "Don't think of it that way. It was an accident. You know that really."

Her face grew a little happier.

Harold added: "And anyway it's past. The past is the past. Try never to think of it again."

Mrs Rice came back. By the expression on her face they saw that all was well.

"It gave me quite a fright," she said almost gaily. "But it was only a formality about some papers. Everything's all right, my children. We're out of the shadow. I think we might order ourselves a liqueur on the strength of it."

The liqueur was ordered and came. They raised their glasses.

Mrs Rice said: "To the Future!"

Harold smiled at Elsie and said: "To your happiness!"

She smiled back at him and said as she lifted her glass: "And to you - to your success! I'm sure you're going to be a very great man."

With the reaction from fear they felt gay, almost light-headed. The shadow had lifted! All was well...

From the far end of the terrace the two bird-like women rose. They rolled up their work carefully. They came across the stone flags.

With little bows they sat down by Mrs Rice. One of them began to speak. The other one let her eyes rest on Elsie and Harold. There was a little smile on her lips. It was not, Harold thought, a nice smile...

He looked over at Mrs Rice. She was listening to the Polish woman and though he couldn't understand a word, the expression on Mrs Rice's face was clear enough. All the old anguish and despair came back. She listened and occasionally spoke a brief word.

Presently the two sisters rose, and with stiff little bows went into the hotel.

Harold leaned forward.

He said hoarsely: "What is it?"

Mrs Rice answered him in the quiet hopeless tones of despair.

"Those women are going to blackmail us. They heard everything last night. And now we've tried to hush it up, it makes the whole thing a thousand times worse..."

VIII

Harold Waring was down by the lake. He had been walking feverishly for over an hour, trying by sheer physical energy to still the clamour of despair that had attacked him.

He came at last to the spot where he had first noticed the two grim women who held his life and Elsie's in their evil talons. He said aloud:

"Curse them! Damn them for a pair of devilish blood-sucking harpies!"

A slight cough made him spin round. He found himself facing the luxuriantly moustached stranger who had just come out from the shade of the trees.

Harold found it difficult to know what to say. This little man must have almost certainly overheard what he had just said.

Harold, at a loss, said somewhat ridiculously: "Oh - er - good-afternoon."

In perfect English the other replied: "But for you, I fear, it is not a good afternoon?"

"Well - er - I -" Harold was in difficulties again.

The little man said: "You are, I think, in trouble, Monsieur? Can I be of any assistance to you?"

"Oh no thanks, no thanks! Just blowing off steam, you know."

The other said gently: "But I think, you know, that I could help you. I am correct, am I not, in connecting your troubles with two ladies who were sitting on the terrace just now?" Harold stared at him.

"Do you know anything about them?" He added: "Who are you, anyway?"

As though confessing to royal birth the little man said modestly: "I am Hercule Poirot. Shall we walk a little way into the wood and you shall tell me your story? As I say, I think I can aid you."

To this day, Harold is not quite certain what made him suddenly pour out the whole story to a man to whom he had only spoken a few minutes before. Perhaps it was over-strain. Anyway, it happened. He told Hercule Poirot the whole story.

The latter listened in silence. Once or twice he nodded his head gravely. When Harold came to a stop the other spoke dreamily.

"The Stymphalean Birds, with iron beaks, who feed on human flesh and who dwell by the Stymphalean Lake... Yes, it accords very well."

"I beg your pardon," said Harold staring.

Perhaps, he thought, this curious-looking little man was mad!

Hercule Poirot smiled. "I reflect, that is all. I have my own way of looking at things, you understand. Now as to this business of yours. You are very unpleasantly placed."

Harold said impatiently: "I don't need you to tell me that!"

Hercule Poirot went on: "It is a serious business, blackmail. These harpies will force you to pay - and pay - and pay again! And if you defy them, well, what happens?"

Harold said bitterly: "The whole thing comes out. My career's ruined, and a wretched girl who's never done anyone any harm will be put through hell, and God knows what the end of it all will be!"

"Therefore," said Hercule Poirot, "something must be done!"

Harold said baldly: "What?"

Hercule Poirot leaned back, half-closing his eyes. He said (and again a doubt of his sanity crossed Harold's mind):

"It is the moment for the castanets of bronze."

Harold said: "Are you quite mad?"

The other shook his head. He said: "Mais non! I strive only to follow the example of my great predecessor, Hercules. Have a few hours' patience, my friend. By tomorrow I may be able to deliver you from your persecutors."

IX

Harold Waring came down the following morning to find Hercule Poirot sitting alone on the terrace. In spite of himself Harold had been impressed by Hercule Poirot's promises.

He came up to him now and asked anxiously: "Well?"

Hercule Poirot beamed upon him. "It is well."

"What do you mean?"

"Everything has settled itself satisfactorily."

"But what has happened?"

Hercule Poirot replied dreamily: "I have employed the castanets of bronze. Or, in modern parlance, I have caused metal wires to hum - in short I have employed the telegraph! Your Stymphalean Birds, Monsieur, have been removed to where they will be unable to exercise their ingenuity for some time to come."

"They were wanted by the police? They have been arrested?"

"Precisely."

Harold drew a deep breath. "How marvellous! I never thought of that."

He got up. "I must find Mrs Rice and Elsie and tell them."

"They know."

"Oh good." Harold sat down again. "Tell me just what -"

He broke off.

Coming up the path from the lake were two figures with flapping cloaks and profiles like birds.

He exclaimed: "I thought you said they had been taken away!"

Hercule Poirot followed his glance.

"Oh, those ladies? They are very harmless, Polish ladies of good family, as the porter told you. Their appearance is, perhaps, not very pleasing but that is all."

"But I don't understand!"

"No, you do not understand! It is the other ladies who were wanted by the police - the resourceful Mrs Rice and the lachrymose Mrs Clayton! It is they who are well-known birds of prey. Those two, they make their living by blackmail, mon cher."

Harold had a sensation of the world spinning round him.

He said faintly: "But the man - the man who was killed?"

"No one was killed. There was no man!"

"But I saw him!"

"Oh no. The tall deep-voiced Mrs Rice is a very successful male impersonator. It was she who played the part of the husband - without her grey wig and suitably made up for the part."

He leaned forward and tapped the other on the knee.

"You must not go through life being too credulous, my friend. The police of a country are not so easily bribed - they are probably not to

be bribed at all - certainly not when it is a question of murder! These women trade on the average Englishman's ignorance of foreign languages. Because she speaks French or German, it is always this Mrs Rice who interviews the manager and takes charge of the affair. The police arrive and go to her room, yes! But what actually passes? You do not know. Perhaps she says she has lost a brooch - something of that kind. Any excuse to arrange for the police to come so that you shall see them. For the rest, what actually happens? You wire for money, a lot of money, and you hand it over to Mrs Rice who is in charge of all the negotiations! And that is that! But they are greedy, these birds of prey. They have seen that you have taken an unreasonable aversion to these two unfortunate Polish ladies. The ladies in question come and hold a perfectly innocent conversation with Mrs Rice and she cannot resist repeating the game. She knows you cannot understand what is being said.

"So you will have to send for more money which Mrs Rice will pretend to distribute to a fresh set of people."

Harold drew a deep breath. He said: "And Elsie - Elsie?"

Hercule Poirot averted his eyes.

"She played her part very well. She always does. A most accomplished little actress. Everything is very pure - very innocent. She appeals, not to sex, but to chivalry."

Hercule Poirot added dreamily: "That is always successful with Englishmen."

Harold Waring drew a deep breath. He said crisply: "I'm going to set to work and learn every European language there is! Nobody's going to make a fool of me a second time!"

Chapter 7

THE CRETAN BULL

Hercule Poirot looked thoughtfully at his visitor.

He saw a pale face with a determined-looking chin, eyes that were more grey than blue, and hair that was of that real blue-black shade so seldom seen - the hyacinthine locks of ancient Greece.

He noted the well-cut, but also well-worn, country tweeds, the shabby handbag, and the unconscious arrogance of manner that lay behind the girl's obvious nervousness. He thought to himself:

"Ah yes, she is 'the County' - but no money! And it must be something quite out of the way that would bring her to me."

Diana Maberly said, and her voice shook a little:

"I - I don't know whether you can help me or not, M. Poirot. It's - it's a very extraordinary position."

Poirot said: "But yes? Tell me?"

Diana Maberly said: "I've come to you because I don't know what to do! I don't even know if there is anything to do!"

"Will you let me be the judge of that?"

The colour surged suddenly into the girl's face.

She said rapidly and breathlessly: "I've come to you because the man I've been engaged to for over a year has broken off our engagement."

She stopped and eyed him defiantly.

"You must think," she said, "that I'm completely mental."

Slowly, Hercule Poirot shook his head.

"On the contrary. Mademoiselle, I have no doubt whatever but that you are extremely intelligent. It is certainly not my metier in life to patch up the lovers' quarrels, and I know very well that you are quite aware of that. It is, therefore, that there is something unusual about the breaking of this engagement. That is so, is it not?"

The girl nodded. She said in a clear, precise voice. "Hugh broke off our engagement because he thinks he is going mad. He thinks people who are mad should not marry."

Hercule Poirot's eyebrows rose a little.

"And do you not agree?"

"I don't know... What is being mad, after all? Everyone is a little mad."

"It has been said so," Poirot agreed cautiously.

"It's only when you begin thinking you're a poached egg or something that they have to shut you up."

"And your fiancé has not reached that stage?"

Diana Maberly said: "I can't see that there's anything wrong with Hugh at all. He's, oh, he's the sanest person I know. Sound - dependable -"

"Then why does he think he is going mad?"

Poirot paused a moment before going on.

"Is there, perhaps, madness in his family?"

Reluctantly Diana jerked her head in assent.

She said: "His grandfather was mental, I believe - and some great-aunt or other. But what I say is, that every family has got someone queer in it. You know, a bit half-witted or extra clever or something!"

Her eyes were appealing.

Hercule Poirot shook his head sadly.

He said: "I am very sorry for you. Mademoiselle."

Her chin shot out. She cried: "I don't want you to be sorry for me! I want you to do something!"

"What do you want me to do?"

"I don't know - but there's something wrong."

"Will you tell me Mademoiselle, all about your fiancé?"

Diana spoke rapidly: "His name's Hugh Chandler. He's twenty-four. His father is Admiral Chandler. They live at Lyde Manor. It's been in the Chandler family since the time of Elizabeth. Hugh's the only son. He went into the Navy - all the Chandlers are sailors - it's a sort of tradition - ever since Sir Gilbert Chandler sailed with Sir Walter Raleigh in fifteen-something-or-other. Hugh went into the Navy as a matter of course. His father wouldn't have heard of anything else. And yet - and yet, it was his father who insisted on getting him out of it!"

"When was that?"

"Nearly a year ago. Quite suddenly."

"Was Hugh Chandler happy in his profession?"

"Absolutely."

"There was no scandal of any kind?"

"About Hugh? Absolutely nothing. He was getting on splendidly. He - he couldn't understand his father."

"What reason did Admiral Chandler himself give?"

Diana said slowly: "He never really gave a reason. Oh! he said it was necessary Hugh should learn to manage the estate - but - but that was only a pretext. Even George Frobisher realised that."

"Who is George Frobisher?"

"Colonel Frobisher. He's Admiral Chandler's oldest friend and Hugh's godfather. He spends most of his time down at the Manor."

"And what did Colonel Frobisher think of Admiral Chandler's determination that his son should leave the Navy?"

"He was dumbfounded. He couldn't understand it at all. Nobody could."

"Not even Hugh Chandler himself?"

Diana did not answer at once.

Poirot waited a minute, then he went on: "At the time, perhaps, he, too, was astonished. But now? Has he said nothing - nothing at all?"

Diana murmured reluctantly: "He said - about a week ago - that - that his father was right - that it was the only thing to be done."

"Did you ask him why?"

"Of course. But he wouldn't tell me."

Hercule Poirot reflected for a minute or two. Then he said: "Have there been any unusual occurrences in your part of the world? Starting, perhaps, about a year ago? Something that has given rise to a lot of local talk and surmise?"

She flashed out: "I don't know what you mean!"

Poirot said quietly, but with authority in his voice: "You had better tell me."

"There wasn't anything - nothing of the kind you mean."

"Of what kind then?"

"I think you're simply odious! Queer things often happen on farms. It's revenge - or the village idiot or somebody."

"What happened?"

She said reluctantly: "There was a fuss about some sheep... Their throats were cut. Oh! it was horrid! But they all belonged to one farmer and he's a very hard man. The police thought it was some kind of spite against him."

"But they didn't catch the person who had done it?"

"No."

She added fiercely. "But if you think -"

Poirot held up his hand. He said: "You do not know in the least what I think. Tell me this, has your fiancé consulted a doctor?"

"No, I'm sure he hasn't."

"Wouldn't that be the simplest thing for him to do?"

Diana said slowly: "He won't. He - he hates doctors."

"And his father?"

"I don't think the Admiral believes much in doctors either. Says they're a lot of humbug merchants."

"How does the Admiral seem himself? Is he well? Happy?"

Diana said in a low voice: "He's aged terribly in - in -"

"In the last year?"

"Yes. He's a wreck - a sort of shadow of what he used to be."

Poirot nodded thoughtfully. Then he said: "Did he approve of his son's engagement?"

"Oh yes. You see, my people's land adjoins his. We've been there for generations. He was frightfully pleased when Hugh and I fixed it up."

"And now? What does he say to your engagement being broken off?"

The girl's voice shook a little. She said: "I met him yesterday morning. He was looking ghastly. He took my hand in both of his. He said: 'It's hard on you, my girl. But the boy's doing the right thing - the only thing he can do.'"

"And so," said Hercule Poirot, "you came to me?"

She nodded. She asked: "Can you do anything?"

Hercule Poirot replied: "I do not know. But I can at least come down and see for myself."

II

It was Hugh Chandler's magnificent physique that impressed Hercule Poirot more than anything else. Tall, magnificently proportioned, with a terrific chest and shoulders, and a tawny head of hair. There was a tremendous air of strength and virility about him.

On their arrival at Diana's house, she had at once rung up Admiral Chandler, and they had forthwith gone over to Lyde Manor where they

had found tea waiting on the long terrace. And with the tea, three men. There was Admiral Chandler, white haired, looking older than his years, his shoulders bowed as though by an over-heavy burden, and his eyes dark and brooding. A contrast to him was his friend Colonel Frobisher, a dried-up, tough, little man with reddish hair turning grey at the temples. A restless, irascible, snappy, little man, rather like a terrier - but the possessor of a pair of extremely shrewd eyes. He had a habit of drawing down his brows over his eyes and lowering his head, thrusting it forward, whilst those same shrewd little eyes studied you piercingly. The third man was Hugh.

"Fine specimen, eh?" said Colonel Frobisher.

He spoke in a low voice, having noted Poirot's close scrutiny of the young man.

Hercule Poirot nodded his head. He and Frobisher were sitting close together. The other three had their chairs on the far side of the tea-table and were chatting together in an animated but slightly artificial manner.

Poirot murmured: "Yes, he is magnificent - magnificent. He is the young Bull - yes, one might say the Bull dedicated to Poseidon... A perfect specimen of healthy manhood."

"Looks fit enough, doesn't he?"

Frobisher sighed. His shrewd little eyes stole sideways, considering Hercule Poirot.

Presently he said: "I know who you are, you know."

"Ah that, it is no secret!"

Poirot waved a royal hand. He was not incognito, the gesture seemed to say. He was travelling as himself.

After a minute or two Frobisher asked: "Did the girl get you down - over this business?"

"The business -?"

"The business of young Hugh... Yes, I see you know all about it. But I can't quite see why she went to you... Shouldn't have thought this sort of thing was in your line - meantersay it's more a medical show."

"All kinds of things are in my line... You would be surprised."

"I mean I can't see quite what she expected you could do."

"Miss Maberly," said Poirot, "is a fighter."

Colonel Frobisher nodded a warm assent.

"Yes, she's a fighter all right. She's a fine kid. She won't give up. All the same, you know, there are some things that you can't fight..."

His face looked suddenly old and tired.

Poirot dropped his voice still lower. He murmured discreetly: "There is - insanity, I understand, in the family?"

Frobisher nodded.

"Only crops up now and again," he murmured. "Skips a generation or two. Hugh's grandfather was the last."

Poirot threw a quick glance in the direction of the other three. Diana was holding the conversation well, laughing and bantering Hugh. You would have said that the three of them had not a care in the world.

"What form did the madness take?" Poirot asked softly.

"The old boy became pretty violent in the end. He was perfectly all right up to thirty - normal as could be. Then he began to go a bit queer. It was some time before people noticed it. Then a lot of rumours began going around. People started talking properly. Things happened that were hushed up. But - well," he raised his shoulders "ended up as mad as a hatter, poor devil! Homicidal! Had to be certified."

He paused for a moment and then added:

"He lived to be quite an old man, I believe... That's what Hugh is afraid of, of course. That's why he doesn't want to see a doctor. He's afraid of being shut up and living shut up for years. Can't say I blame him. I'd feel the same."

"And Admiral Chandler, how does he feel?"

"It's broken him up completely," Frobisher spoke shortly.

"He is very fond of his son?"

"Wrapped up in the boy. You see, his wife was drowned in a boating accident when the boy was only ten years old. Since then he's lived for nothing but the child."

"Was he very devoted to his wife?"

"Worshipped her. Everybody worshipped her. She was - she was one of the loveliest women I've ever known." He paused a moment and then said jerkily, "Care to see her portrait?"

"I should like to see it very much."

Frobisher pushed back his chair and rose.

Aloud he said: "Going to show M. Poirot one or two things, Charles. He's a bit of a connoisseur."

The Admiral raised a vague hand. Frobisher tramped along the terrace and Poirot followed him. For a moment Diana's face dropped its mask of gaiety and looked an agonised question. Hugh, too, raised his head, and looked steadily at the small man with the big black moustache.

Poirot followed Frobisher into the house. It was so dim at first coming in out of the sunlight that he could hardly distinguish one article from another. But he realised that the house was full of old and beautiful things.

Colonel Frobisher led the way to the Picture Gallery. On the panelled walls hung portraits of dead and gone Chandlers. Faces stern and gay, men in court dress or in Naval uniform. Women in satin and pearls.

Finally Frobisher stopped under a portrait at the end of the gallery.

"Painted by Orpen," he said gruffly.

They stood looking up at a tall woman, her hand on a greyhound's collar. A woman with auburn hair and an expression of radiant vitality.

"Boy's the spitting image of her," said Frobisher. "Don't you think so?"

"In some things, yes."

"He hasn't got her delicacy - her femininity, of course. He's a masculine edition - but in all the essential things -" He broke off. "Pity he inherited from the Chandlers the one thing he could well have done without..."

They were silent. There was melancholy in the air all around them - as though dead and gone Chandlers sighed for the taint that lay in their blood and which, remorselessly, from time to time, they passed on.

Hercule Poirot turned his head to look at his companion. George Frobisher was still gazing up at the beautiful woman on the wall above him.

Poirot said softly: "You knew her well..."

Frobisher spoke jerkily.

"We were boy and girl together. I went off as a subaltern to India when she was sixteen... When I got back - she was married to Charles Chandler."

"You knew him well also?"

"Charles is one of my oldest friends. He's my best friend - always has been."

"Did you see much of them - after the marriage?"

"Used to spend most of my leaves here. Like a second home to me, this place. Charles and Caroline always kept my room here - ready and waiting..." He squared his shoulders, suddenly thrust his head forward pugnaciously. "That's why I'm here now - to stand by in case I'm wanted. If Charles needs me - I'm here."

Again the shadow of tragedy crept over them.

"And what do you think - about all this?" Poirot asked.

Frobisher stood stiffly. His brows came down over his eyes.

"What I think is, the least said the better. And to be frank, I don't see what you're doing in the business, M. Poirot. I don't see why Diana roped you in and got you down here."

"You are aware that Diana Maberly's engagement to Hugh Chandler has been broken off?"

"Yes, I know that."

"And you know the reason for it?"

Frobisher replied stiffly: "I don't know anything about that. Young people manage these things between them. Not my business to butt in."

Poirot said: "Hugh Chandler told Diana that it was not right that they should marry, because he was going out of his mind."

He saw the beads of perspiration break out on Frobisher's forehead.

Frobisher said: "Have we got to talk about the damned thing? What do you think you can do? Hugh's done the right thing, poor devil. It's not his fault, it's heredity - germ plasm - brain cells... But once he knew, well, what else could he do but break the engagement? It's one of those things that just has to be done."

"If I could be convinced of that -"

"You can take it from me."

"But you have told me nothing."

"I tell you I don't want to talk about it."

"Why did Admiral Chandler force his son to leave the Navy?"

"Because it was the only thing to be done."

"Why?"

Frobisher shook an obstinate head.

Poirot murmured softly: "Was it to do with some sheep being killed?"

The other man said angrily: "So you've heard about that?"

"Diana told me."

"That girl had far better keep her mouth shut."

"She did not think it was conclusive."

"She doesn't know."

"What doesn't she know?"

Unwillingly, jerkily, angrily, Frobisher spoke:

"Oh well, if you must have it... Chandler heard a noise that night. Thought it might be someone got in the house. Went out to investigate. Light in the boy's room. Chandler went in. Hugh asleep on bed - dead asleep - in his clothes. Blood on the clothes. Basin in the room full of blood. His father couldn't wake him. Next morning heard about sheep being found with their throats cut. Questioned Hugh. Boy didn't know

anything about it. Didn't remember going out - and his shoes found by the side door caked in mud. Couldn't explain the blood in the basin. Couldn't explain anything. Poor devil didn't know, you understand.

"Charles came to me, talked it over. What was the best thing to be done? Then it happened again - three nights later. After that - well, you can see for yourself. The boy had got to leave the service. If he was here, under Charles' eye, Charles could watch over him. Couldn't afford to have a scandal in the Navy. Yes, it was the only thing to be done."

Poirot asked: "And since then?"

Frobisher said fiercely, "I'm not answering any more questions. Don't you think Hugh knows his own business best?"

Hercule Poirot did not answer. He was always loath to admit that anyone could know better than Hercule Poirot.

III

As they came into the hall, they met Admiral Chandler coming in. He stood for a moment, a dark figure silhouetted against the bright light outside.

He said in a low, gruff voice: "Oh there you both are. M. Poirot, I would like a word with you. Come into my study."

Frobisher went out through the open door, and Poirot followed the Admiral. He had rather the feeling of having been summoned to the quarter-deck to give an account of himself.

The Admiral motioned Poirot to take one of the big easy chairs and himself sat down in the other. Poirot, whilst with Frobisher, had been impressed by the other's restlessness, nervousness and irritability - all the signs of intense mental strain. With Admiral Chandler he felt a sense of hopelessness, of quiet, deep despair...

With a deep sigh. Chandler said: "I can't help being sorry Diana has brought you into this... Poor child, I know how hard it is for her. But - well - it is our own private tragedy, and I think you will understand, M. Poirot, that we don't want outsiders."

"I can understand your feeling, certainly."

"Diana, poor child, can't believe it... I couldn't at first. Probably wouldn't believe it now if I didn't know -"

He paused.

"Know what?"

"That it's in the blood. The taint, I mean."

"And yet you agreed to the engagement?"

Admiral Chandler flushed.

"You mean, I should have put my foot down then? But at the time I'd no idea. Hugh takes after his mother - nothing about him to remind you of the Chandlers. I hoped he'd taken after her in every way. From his childhood upwards, there's never been a trace of abnormality about him until now. I couldn't know that - dash it all, there's a trace of insanity in nearly every old family!"

Poirot said softly: "You have not consulted a doctor?"

Chandler roared: "No, and I'm not going to! The boy's safe enough here with me to look after him. They shan't shut him up between four walls like a wild beast..."

"He is safe here, you say. But are others safe?"

"What do you mean by that?"

Poirot did not reply. He looked steadily into Admiral Chandler's sad, dark eyes.

The Admiral said bitterly: "Each man to his trade. You're looking for a criminal! My boy's not a criminal, M. Poirot."

"Not yet."

"What do you mean by 'not yet'?"

"These things increase... Those sheep -"

"Who told you about the sheep?"

"Diana Maberly. And also your friend, Colonel Frobisher."

"George would have done better to keep his mouth shut."

"He is a very old friend of yours, is he not?"

"My best friend," the Admiral said gruffly.

"And he was a friend of - your wife's, too?"

Chandler smiled.

"Yes. George was in love with Caroline, I believe. When she was very young. He's never married. I believe that's the reason. Ah well, I was the lucky one - or so I thought. I carried her off - only to lose her."

He sighed and his shoulders sagged.

Poirot said: "Colonel Frobisher was with you when your wife was - drowned?"

Chandler nodded.

"Yes, he was with us down in Cornwall when it happened. She and I were out in the boat together - he happened to stay at home that day. I've never understood how that boat came to capsize... Must have

sprung a sudden leak. We were right out in the bay - strong tide running. I held her up as long as I could..." His voice broke. "Her body was washed up two days later. Thank the Lord we hadn't taken little Hugh out with us! At least, that's what I thought at the time. Now - well - better for Hugh, poor devil, perhaps, if he had been with us. If it had all been finished and done for then..."

Again there came that deep, hopeless sigh.

"We're the last of the Chandlers, M. Poirot. There will be no more Chandlers at Lyde after we're gone. When Hugh got engaged to Diana, I hoped - well, it's no good talking of that. Thank God, they didn't marry. That's all I can say!"

IV

Hercule Poirot sat on a seat in the rose garden. Beside him sat Hugh Chandler. Diana Maberly had just left them.

The young man turned a handsome, tortured face towards his companion.

He said: "You've got to make her understand, M. Poirot."

He paused for a minute and then went on: "You see, Di's a fighter. She won't give in. She won't accept what she's darned well got to accept. She - she will go on believing that I'm - sane."

"While you yourself are quite certain that you are - pardon me - insane?"

The young man winced. He said: "I'm not actually hopelessly off my head yet - but it's getting worse. Diana doesn't know, bless her. She's only seen me when I am - all right."

"And when you are - all wrong, what happens?"

Hugh Chandler took a long breath. Then he said: "For one thing - I dream. And when I dream, I am mad. Last night, for instance - I wasn't a man any longer. I was first of all a bull - a mad bull - racing about in blazing sunlight - tasting dust and blood in my mouth - dust and blood... And then I was a dog - a great slavering dog. I had hydrophobia - children scattered and fled as I came - men tried to shoot me - someone set down a great bowl of water for me and I couldn't drink. I couldn't drink..."

He paused. "I woke up. And I knew it was true. I went over to the wash-stand. My mouth was parched - horribly parched - and dry. I was thirsty. But I couldn't drink, M. Poirot... I couldn't swallow... Oh, my God, I wasn't able to drink..."

Hercule Poirot made a gentle murmur. Hugh Chandler went on. His hands were clenched on his knees. His face was thrust forward, his

eyes were half closed as though he saw something coming towards him.

"And there are things that aren't dreams. Things that I see when I'm wide awake. Spectres, frightful shapes. They leer at me. And sometimes I'm able to fly, to leave my bed, and fly through the air, to ride the winds - and fiends bear me company!"

"Tcha, tcha," said Hercule Poirot.

It was a gentle, deprecating little noise.

Hugh Chandler turned to him.

"Oh, there isn't any doubt. It's in my blood. It's my family heritage. I can't escape. Thank God I found it out in time! Before I'd married Diana. Suppose we'd had a child and handed on this frightful thing to him!"

He laid a hand on Poirot's arm.

"You must make her understand. You must tell her. She's got to forget. She's got to. There will be someone else someday. There's young Steve Graham - he's crazy about her and he's an awfully good chap. She'd be happy with him - and safe. I want her - to be happy. Graham's hard up, of course, and so are her people, but when I'm gone they'll be all right."

Hercule's voice interrupted him.

"Why will they be 'all right' when you are gone?"

Hugh Chandler smiled. It was a gentle, lovable smile.

He said: "There's my mother's money. She was an heiress, you know. It came to me. I've left it all to Diana."

Hercule Poirot sat back in his chair. He said: "Ah!"

Then he said: "But you may live to be quite an old man, Mr Chandler."

Hugh Chandler shook his head.

He said sharply: "No, M. Poirot. I am not going to live to be an old man."

Then he drew back with a sudden shudder.

"My God! Look!" He stared over Poirot's shoulder. "There - standing by you... it's a skeleton - its bones are shaking. It's calling to me - beckoning-"

His eyes, the pupils widely dilated, stared into the sunshine. He leaned suddenly sideways as though collapsing.

Then, turning to Poirot, he said in an almost childlike voice: "You didn't see - anything?"

Slowly, Hercule Poirot shook his head.

Hugh Chandler said hoarsely: "I don't mind this so much - seeing things. It's the blood I'm frightened of. The blood in my room - on my clothes... We had a parrot. One morning it was there in my room with its throat cut - and I was lying on the bed with the razor in my hand wet with its blood!"

He leant closer to Poirot.

"Even just lately things have been killed," he whispered. "All around - in the village - out on the downs. Sheep, young lambs - a collie dog. Father locks me in at night, but sometimes - sometimes - the door's open in the morning. I must have a key hidden somewhere but I don't know where I've hidden it. I don't know. It isn't I who do these things - it's someone else who comes into me - who takes possession of me - who turns me from a man into a raving monster who wants blood and who can't drink water..."

Suddenly he buried his face in his hands.

After a minute or two, Poirot asked: "I still do not understand why you have not seen a doctor?"

Hugh Chandler shook his head. He said: "Don't you really understand? Physically I'm strong. I'm as strong as a bull. I might live for years - years - shut up between four walls! That I can't face! It would be better to go out altogether... There are ways, you know. An accident, cleaning a gun... that sort of thing. Diana will understand... I'd rather take my own way out!"

He looked defiantly at Poirot, but Poirot did not respond to the challenge. Instead he asked mildly:

"What do you eat and drink?"

Hugh Chandler flung his head back. He roared with laughter.

"Nightmares after indigestion? Is that your idea?"

Poirot merely repeated gently: "What do you eat and drink?"

"Just what everybody else eats and drinks."

"No special medicine? Cachets? Pills?"

"Good Lord, no. Do you really think patent pills would cure my trouble?" He quoted derisively: "'Canst though then minister to a mind diseased?'"

Hercule Poirot said dryly: "I am trying to. Does anyone in this house suffer with eye trouble?"

Hugh Chandler stared at him. He said: "Father's eyes give him a good deal of trouble. He has to go to an oculist fairly often."

"Ah!" Poirot meditated for a moment or two. Then he said: "Colonel Frobisher, I suppose, has spent much of his life in India?"

"Yes, he was in the Indian Army. He's very keen on India - talks about it a lot - native traditions - and all that."

Poirot murmured "Ah!" again.

Then he remarked: "I see that you have cut your chin."

Hugh put his hand up.

"Yes, quite a nasty gash. Father startled me one day when I was shaving. I'm a bit nervy these days, you know. And I've had a bit of a rash over my chin and neck. Makes shaving difficult."

Poirot said: "You should use a soothing cream."

"Oh, I do. Uncle George gave me one."

He gave a sudden laugh.

"We're talking like a woman's beauty parlour. Lotions, soothing creams, patent pills, eye trouble. What does it all amount to? What are you getting at, M. Poirot?"

Poirot said quietly: "I am trying to do the best I can for Diana Maberly."

Hugh's mood changed. His face sobered. He laid a hand on Poirot's arm.

"Yes, do what you can for her. Tell her she's got to forget. Tell her that it's no good hoping... Tell her some of the things I've told you... Tell her - oh, tell her for God's sake to keep away from me! That's the only thing she can do for me now. Keep away - and try to forget!"

V

"Have you courage. Mademoiselle? Great courage? You will need it."

Diana cried sharply: "Then it's true. It's true? He is mad?"

Hercule Poirot said: "I am not an alienist. Mademoiselle. It is not I who can say, 'This man is mad. This man is sane.'"

She came closer to him.

"Admiral Chandler thinks Hugh is mad. George Frobisher thinks he is mad. Hugh himself thinks he is mad -"

Poirot was watching her.

"And you, Mademoiselle?"

"I? I say he isn't mad! That's why -" She stopped.

"That is why you came to me?"

"Yes. I couldn't have had any other reason for coming to you, could I?"

"That," said Hercule Poirot, "is exactly what I have been asking myself, Mademoiselle!"

"I don't understand you."

"Who is Stephen Graham?"

She stared. "Stephen Graham? Oh, he's - he's just someone."

She caught him by the arm.

"What's in your mind? What are you thinking about? You just stand there - behind that great moustache of yours - blinking your eyes in the sunlight, and you don't tell me anything. You're making me afraid - horribly afraid. Why are you making me afraid?"

"Perhaps," said Poirot, "because I am afraid myself."

The deep grey eyes opened wide, stared up at him. She said in a whisper:

"What are you afraid of?"

Hercule Poirot sighed - a deep sigh.

He said: "It is much easier to catch a murderer than it is to prevent a murder."

She cried out: "Murder? Don't use that word."

"Nevertheless," said Hercule Poirot, "I do use it."

He altered his tone, speaking quickly and authoritatively.

"Mademoiselle, it is necessary that both you and I should pass the night at Lyde Manor. I look to you to arrange the matter. You can do that?"

"I - yes - I suppose so. But why -?"

"Because there is no time to lose. You have told me that you have courage. Prove that courage now. Do what I ask and make no questions about it."

She nodded without a word and turned away.

Poirot followed her into the house after the lapse of a moment or two. He heard her voice in the library and the voices of three men. He passed up the broad staircase. There was no one on the upper floor.

He found Hugh Chandler's room easily enough. In the corner of the room was a fitted washbasin with hot and cold water. Over it, on a glass shelf, were various tubes and pots and bottles.

Hercule Poirot went quickly and dexterously to work...

What he had to do did not take him long. He was downstairs again in the hall when Diana came out of the library, looking flushed and rebellious.

"It's all right," she said.

Admiral Chandler drew Poirot into the library and closed the door. He said: "Look here, M. Poirot, I don't like this."

"What don't you like, Admiral Chandler?"

"Diana has been insisting that you and she should both spend the night here. I don't want to be inhospitable -"

"It is not a question of hospitality."

"As I say, I don't like being inhospitable - but frankly, I don't like it, M. Poirot. I - I don't want it. And I don't understand the reason for it. What good can it possibly do?"

"Shall we say that it is an experiment I am trying?"

"What kind of an experiment?"

"That, you will pardon me, is my business..."

"Now look here, M. Poirot, I didn't ask you to come here in the first place -"

Poirot interrupted.

"Believe me, Admiral Chandler, I quite understand and appreciate your point of view. I am here simply and solely because of the obstinacy of a girl in love. You have told me certain things. Colonel

Frobisher has told me certain things. Hugh himself has told me certain things. Now - I want to see for myself."

"Yes, but see what? I tell you, there's nothing to see! I lock Hugh into his room every night and that's that."

"And yet - sometimes - he tells me that the door is not locked in the morning?"

"What's that?"

"Have you not found the door unlocked yourself?"

Chandler was frowning.

"I always imagined George had unlocked - what do you mean?"

"Where do you leave the key - in the lock?"

"No, I lay it on the chest outside. I, or George, or Withers, the valet, take it from there in the morning. We've told Withers it's because Hugh walks in his sleep... I daresay he knows more - but he's a faithful fellow, been with me for years."

"Is there another key?"

"Not that I know of."

"One could have been made."

"But who -"

"Your son thinks that he himself has one hidden somewhere, although he is unaware of it in his waking state."

Colonel Frobisher, speaking from the far end of the room, said: "I don't like it, Charles... The girl -"

Admiral Chandler said quickly: "Just what I was thinking. The girl mustn't come back with you. Come back yourself, if you like."

Poirot said: "Why don't you want Miss Maberly here tonight?"

Frobisher said in a low voice: "It's too risky. In these cases -"

He stopped.

Poirot said: "Hugh is devoted to her..."

Chandler cried: "That's just why! Damn it all, man, everything's topsy-turvy where a madman's concerned. Hugh knows that himself. Diana mustn't come here."

"As to that," said Poirot, "Diana must decide for herself."

He went out of the library. Diana was waiting outside in the car. She called out, "We'll get what we want for the night and be back in time for dinner."

As they drove down the long drive, Poirot repeated to her the conversation he had just held with the Admiral and Colonel Frobisher. She laughed scornfully.

"Do they think Hugh would hurt me?"

By way of reply, Poirot asked her if she would mind stopping at the chemist's in the village. He had forgotten, he said, to pack a toothbrush.

The chemist's shop was in the middle of the peaceful village street. Diana waited outside in the car. It struck her that Hercule Poirot was a long time choosing a toothbrush...

VI

In the big bedroom with the heavy Elizabethan oak furniture, Hercule Poirot sat and waited. There was nothing to do but wait. All his arrangements were made.

It was towards early morning that the summons came.

At the sound of footsteps outside, Poirot drew back the bolt and opened the door. There were two men in the passage outside - two middle-aged men who looked older than their years. The Admiral was stern-faced and grim. Colonel Frobisher twitched and trembled.

Chandler said simply: "Will you come with us, M. Poirot?"

There was a huddled figure lying outside Diana Maberly's bedroom door. The light fell on a rumpled, tawny head. Hugh Chandler lay there breathing stertorously. He was in his dressing-gown and slippers. In his right hand was a sharply-curved, shining knife. Not all of it was shining - here and there it was obscured by red glistening patches.

Hercule Poirot exclaimed softly: "Mon Dieu!"

Frobisher said sharply: "She's all right. He hasn't touched her."

He raised his voice and called: "Diana! It's us! Let us in!"

Poirot heard the Admiral groan and mutter under his breath: "My boy. My poor boy."

There was a sound of bolts being drawn. The door opened and Diana stood there. Her face was dead white.

She faltered out: "What's happened? There was someone - trying to get in - I heard them - feeling the door - the handle - scratching on the panels - Oh! it was awful... like an animal..."

Frobisher said sharply: "Thank God your door was locked!"

"M. Poirot told me to lock it."

Poirot said: "Lift him up and bring him inside."

The two men stooped and raised the unconscious man. Diana caught her breath with a little gasp as they passed her.

"Hugh? Is it Hugh? What's that - on his hands?"

Hugh Chandler's hands were sticky and wet with a brownish, red stain.

Diana breathed: "Is that blood?"

Poirot looked inquiringly at the two men.

The Admiral nodded. He said: "Not human, thank God! A cat! I found it downstairs in the hall. Throat cut. Afterwards he must have come up here -"

"Here?" Diana's voice was low with horror. "To me?"

The man on the chair stirred - muttered. They watched him, fascinated. Hugh Chandler sat up. He blinked.

"Hullo," his voice was dazed - hoarse. "What's happened? Why am I -?"

He stopped. He was staring at the knife which he held still clasped in his hand.

He said in a slow, thick voice: "What have I done?"

His eyes went from one to the other. They rested at last on Diana shrinking back against the wall.

He said quietly: "Did I attack Diana?"

His father shook his head.

Hugh said: "Tell me what has happened? I've got to know!"

They told him - told him unwillingly - haltingly. His quiet perseverance drew it out of them.

Outside the window the sun was coming up. Hercule Poirot drew a curtain aside. The radiance of the dawn came into the room.

Hugh Chandler's face was composed, his voice was steady.

He said: "I see."

Then he got up. He smiled and stretched himself. His voice was quite natural as he said:

"Beautiful morning, what? Think I'll go out in the woods and try to get a rabbit."

He went out of the room and left them staring after him.

Then the Admiral started forward. Frobisher caught him by the arm.

"No, Charles, no. It's the best way - for him, poor devil, if for nobody else."

Diana had thrown herself sobbing on the bed.

Admiral Chandler said, his voice coming unevenly: "You're right, George - you're right, I know. The boy's got guts..."

Frobisher said, and his voice, too, was broken: "He's a man..."

There was a moment's silence and then Chandler said:

"Damn it, where's that cursed foreigner?"

VII

In the gun-room, Hugh Chandler had lifted his gun from the rack and was in the act of loading it when Hercule Poirot's hand fell on his shoulder.

Hercule Poirot's voice said one word and said it with a strange authority.

He said: "No !"

Hugh Chandler stared at him.

He said in a thick, angry voice: "Take your hands off me. Don't interfere. There's going to be an accident, I tell you. It's the only way out."

Again Hercule Poirot repeated that one word: "No."

"Don't you realise that if it hadn't been for the accident of her door being locked, I would have cut Diana's throat - Diana's! - with that knife?"

"I realise nothing of the kind. You would not have killed Miss Maberly."

"I killed the cat, didn't I?"

"No, you did not kill the cat. You did not kill the parrot. You did not kill the sheep."

Hugh stared at him. He demanded: "Are you mad, or am I?"

Hercule Poirot replied: "Neither of us is mad."

It was at that moment that Admiral Chandler and Colonel Frobisher came in. Behind them came Diana.

Hugh Chandler said in a weak, dazed voice: "This chap says I'm not mad..."

Hercule Poirot said: "I am happy to tell you that you are entirely and completely sane."

Hugh laughed. It was a laugh such as a lunatic might popularly be supposed to give.

"That's damned funny! It's sane, is it, to cut the throats of sheep and other animals? I was sane, was I, when I killed that parrot? And the cat tonight?"

"I tell you you did not kill the sheep - or the parrot - or the cat."

"Then who did?"

"Someone who has had at heart the sole object of proving you insane. On each occasion you were given a heavy soporific and a blood-stained knife or razor was planted by you. It was someone else whose bloody hands were washed in your basin."

"But why?"

"In order that you should do what you were just about to do when I stopped you."

Hugh stared. Poirot turned to Colonel Frobisher.

"Colonel Frobisher, you lived for many years in India. Did you never come across cases where persons were deliberately driven mad by the administration of drugs?"

Colonel Frobisher's face lit up.

He said: "Never came across a case myself, but I've heard of them often enough. Datura poisoning. It ends by driving a person insane."

"Exactly. Well, the active principle of the datura is very closely allied to, if it is not actually, the alkaloid atropine - which is also obtained from belladonna or deadly nightshade. Belladonna preparations are fairly common and atropine sulphate itself is prescribed freely for eye treatments. By duplicating a prescription and getting it made up in different places a large quantity of the poison could be obtained without arousing suspicion. The alkaloid could be extracted from it and then introduced into, say - a soothing shaving cream. Applied externally it would cause a rash, this would soon lead to abrasions in shaving and thus the drug would be continually entering the system. It would produce certain symptoms - dryness of the mouth and throat, difficulty in swallowing, hallucinations, double vision - all the symptoms, in fact, which Mr Chandler has experienced."

He turned to the young man.

"And to remove the last doubt from your mind, I will tell you that that is not a supposition but a fact. Your shaving cream was heavily impregnated with atropine sulphate. I took a sample and had it tested."

White, shaking, Hugh asked: "Who did it?"

Hercule Poirot said: "That is what I have been studying ever since I arrived here. I have been looking for a motive for murder. Diana Maberly gained financially by your death, but I did not consider her seriously -"

Hugh Chandler flashed out: "I should hope not!"

"I envisaged another possible motive. The eternal triangle; two men and a woman. Colonel Frobisher had been in love with your mother. Admiral Chandler married her."

Admiral Chandler cried out: "George? George! I won't believe it."

Hugh said in an incredulous voice: "Do you mean that hatred could go on - to a son?"

Hercule Poirot said: "Under certain circumstances, yes."

Frobisher cried out: "It's a damned lie! Don't believe him, Charles."

Chandler shrank away from him. He muttered to himself:

"The datura... India - yes, I see... And we'd never suspect poison - not with madness in the family already..."

"Mais oui!" Hercule Poirot's voice rose high and shrill. "Madness in the family. A madman - bent on revenge - cunning - as madmen are, concealing his madness for years." He whirled round on Frobisher. "Mon Dieu, you must have known, you must have suspected, that Hugh was your son? Why did you never tell him so?"

Frobisher stammered, gulped.

"I didn't know. I couldn't be sure... You see, Caroline came to me once - she was frightened of something - in great trouble. I don't know, I

never have known, what it was all about. She - I - we lost our heads. Afterwards I went away at once - it was the only thing to be done, we both knew we'd got to play the game. I - well, I wondered, but I couldn't be sure. Caroline never said anything that led me to think Hugh was my son. And then when this - this streak of madness appeared, it settled things definitely, I thought."

Poirot said: "Yes, it settled things! You could not see the way the boy has of thrusting out his face and bringing down his brows - a trick he inherited from you. But Charles Chandler saw it. Saw it years ago - and learnt the truth from his wife. I think she was afraid of him - he'd begun to show her the mad streak - that was what drove her into your arms - you whom she had always loved. Charles Chandler planned his revenge. His wife died in a boating accident. He and she were out in the boat alone and he knows how that accident came about. Then he settled down to feed his concentrated hatred against the boy who bore his name but who was not his son. Your Indian stories put the idea of datura poisoning into his head. Hugh should be slowly driven mad. Driven to the stage where he would take his own life in despair. The blood lust was Admiral Chandler's, not Hugh's. It was Charles Chandler who was driven to cut the throats of sheep in lonely fields. But it was Hugh who was to pay the penalty!

"Do you know when I suspected? When Admiral Chandler was so averse to his son seeing a doctor. For Hugh to object was natural enough. But the father! There might be treatment which would save his son - there were a hundred reasons why he should seek to have a doctor's opinion. But no, a doctor must not be allowed to see Hugh Chandler - in case a doctor should discover that Hugh was sane!"

Hugh said very quietly: "Sane... I am sane?"

He took a step towards Diana.

Frobisher said in a gruff voice: "You're sane enough. There's no taint in our family."

Diana said: "Hugh..."

Admiral Chandler picked up Hugh's gun.

He said: "All a lot of nonsense! Think I'll go and see if I can get a rabbit -"

Frobisher started forward, but the hand of Hercule Poirot restrained him.

Poirot said: "You said yourself - just now - that it was the best way..."

Hugh and Diana had gone from the room.

The two men, the Englishman and the Belgian, watched the last of the Chandlers cross the Park and go up into the woods.

Presently, they heard a shot...

Chapter 8

THE HORSES OF DIOMEDES

The telephone rang.

"Hullo, Poirot, is that you?"

Hercule Poirot recognised the voice as that of young Dr Stoddart. He liked Michael Stoddart, liked the shy friendliness of his grin, was amused by his naïve interest in crime, and respected him as a hard-working and shrewd man in his chosen profession.

"I don't like bothering you -" the voice went on and hesitated.

"But something is bothering you -" suggested Hercule Poirot acutely.

"Exactly." Michael Stoddart's voice sounded relieved. "Hit it in one!"

"Eh bien, what can I do for you, my friend?"

Stoddart sounded diffident. He stammered a little when he answered.

"I suppose it would be awful c-c-cheek if I asked you to come round at this time of night... B-b-but I'm in a bit of a j-j-jam."

"Certainly I will come. To your house?"

"No - as a matter of fact I'm at the Mews that runs along behind. Conningby Mews. The number is 17. Could you really come? I'd be no end grateful."

"I arrive immediately," replied Hercule Poirot.

II

Hercule Poirot walked along the dark Mews looking up at the numbers. It was past one o'clock in the morning and for the most part the Mews appeared to have gone to bed, though there were still lights in one or two windows.

As he reached 17, its door opened and Dr Stoddart stood looking out.

"Good man!" he said. "Come up, will you?"

A small ladder-like stairway led to the upper floor. Here, on the right, was a fairly big room, furnished with divans, rugs, triangular silver cushions and large numbers of bottles and glasses.

Everything was more or less in confusion, cigarette ends were everywhere and there were many broken glasses.

"Ha!" said Hercule Poirot. "Mon cher Watson, I deduce that there has been here a party!"

"There's been a party all right," said Stoddart grimly. "Some party, I should say!"

"You did not, then, attend it yourself?"

"No, I'm here strictly in my professional capacity."

"What happened?"

Stoddart said: "This place belongs to a woman called Patience Grace - Mrs Patience Grace."

"It sounds," said Poirot, "a charming old-world name."

"There's nothing charming or old-world about Mrs Grace. She's good-looking in a tough sort of way. She's got through a couple of husbands, and now she's got a boy friend whom she suspects of trying to run out on her. They started this party on drink and they finished it on dope - cocaine, to be exact. Cocaine is stuff that starts off making you feel just grand and with everything in the garden lovely. It peps you up and you feel you can do twice as much as you usually do. Take too much of it and you get violent mental excitement, delusions and delirium. Airs. Grace had a violent quarrel with her boy friend, an unpleasant person by the name of Hawker. Result, he walked out on her then and there, and she leaned out of the window and took a pot-shot at him with a brand-new revolver that someone had been fool enough to give her."

Hercule Poirot's eyebrows rose.

"Did she hit him?"

"Not she! Bullet went several yards wide, I should say. What she did hit was a miserable loafer who was creeping along the Mews looking in the dustbins. Got him through the fleshy part of the arm. He raised Hell, of course, and the crowd hustled him in here quick, got the wind up with all the blood that was spilling out of him and came round and got me."

"Yes?"

"I patched him up all right. It wasn't serious. Then one or two of the men got busy on him and in the end he consented to accept a couple of five pound notes and say no more about it. Suited him all right, poor devil. Marvellous stroke of luck."

"And you?"

"I had a bit more work to do. Mrs Grace herself was in raving hysterics by that time. I gave her a shot of something and packed her off to bed. There was another girl who'd more or less passed out - quite young she was, and I attended to her too. By that time everyone was slinking off as fast as they could leave."

He paused.

"And then," said Poirot, "you had time to think over the situation."

"Exactly," said Stoddart. "If it was an ordinary drunken binge, well, that would be the end of it. But dope's different."

"You are quite sure of your facts?"

"Oh, absolutely. No mistaking it. It's cocaine all right. I found some in a lacquer box - they snuff it up, you know. Question is, where does it come from? I remembered that you'd been talking the other day about a big, new wave of drug-taking and the increase of drug addicts."

Hercule Poirot nodded. He said: "The police will be interested in this party tonight."

Michael Stoddart said unhappily: "That's just it."

Poirot looked at him with suddenly awakened interest.

He said: "But you - you are not very anxious that the police should be interested?"

Michael Stoddart mumbled: "Innocent people get mixed up in things... hard lines on them."

"Is it Mrs Patience Grace for whom you are solicitous?"

"Good Lord, no. She's as hard-boiled as they make them!"

Hercule Poirot said gently: "It is, then, the other one - the girl?"

Dr Stoddart said: "Of course, she's hard-boiled, too, in a way. I mean, she'd describe herself as hard-boiled. But she's really just very young - a bit wild and all that - but it's just kid foolishness. She gets mixed up in

a racket like this because she thinks it's smart or modern or something like that."

A faint smile came to Poirot's lips. He said softly: "This girl, you have met her before tonight?"

Michael Stoddart nodded. He looked very young and embarrassed.

"Ran across her in Mertonshire. At the Hunt Ball. Her father's a retired General - blood and thunder, shoot 'em down - pukka Sahib - all that sort of thing. There are four daughters and they are all a bit wild - driven to it with a father like that, I should say. And it's a bad part of the county where they live - armaments works nearby and a lot of money - none of the old-fashioned country feeling - a rich crowd and most of them pretty vicious. The girls have got in with a bad set."

Hercule Poirot looked at him thoughtfully for some minutes. Then he said:

"I perceive now why you desired my presence. You want me to take the affair in hand?"

"Would you? I feel I ought to do something about it - but I confess I'd like to keep Sheila Grant out of the limelight if I could."

"That can be managed I fancy. I should like to see the young lady."

"Come along."

He led the way out of the room. A voice called fretfully from the door opposite.

"Doctor - for God's sake, doctor, I'm going crazy."

Stoddart went into the room. Poirot followed. It was a bedroom in a complete state of chaos - powder spilled on the floor - pots and jars everywhere, clothes flung about. On the bed was a woman with unnaturally blonde hair and a vacant, vicious face. She called out:

"I've got insects crawling all over me... I have. I swear I have. I'm going mad... For God's sake, give me a shot of something."

Dr Stoddart stood by the bed, his tone was soothing - professional.

Hercule Poirot went quietly out of the room. There was another door opposite him. He opened that.

It was a tiny room - a mere slip of a room - plainly furnished. On the bed a slim, girlish figure lay motionless.

Hercule Poirot tip-toed to the side of the bed and looked down upon the girl.

Dark hair, a long, pale face - and - yes, young - very young...

A gleam of white showed between the girl's lids. Her eyes opened, startled, frightened eyes. She stared, sat up, tossing her head in an effort to throw back the thick mane of blue-black hair. She looked like

a frightened filly - she shrank away a little - as a wild animal shrinks when it is suspicious of a stranger who offers it food.

She said - and her voice was young and thin and abrupt: "Who the hell are you?"

"Do not be afraid. Mademoiselle."

"Where's Dr Stoddart?"

That young man came into the room at that minute.

The girl said with a note of relief in her voice: "Oh! there you are! Who's this?"

"This is a friend of mine, Sheila. How are you feeling now?"

The girl said: "Awful. Lousy... Why did I take that foul stuff?"

Stoddart said dryly: "I shouldn't do it again, if I were you."

"I - I shan't."

Hercule Poirot said: "Who gave it to you?"

Her eyes widened, her upper lip twitched a little.

She said: "It was here - at the party. We all tried it. It - it was wonderful at first."

Hercule Poirot said gently: "But who brought it here?"

She shook her head.

"I don't know... It might have been Tony - Tony Hawker. But I don't really know anything about it."

Poirot said gently: "Is it the first time you have taken cocaine, Mademoiselle?"

She nodded.

"You'd better make it the last," said Stoddart brusquely.

"Yes - I suppose so - but it was rather marvellous."

"Now look here, Sheila Grant," said Stoddart. "I'm a doctor and I know what I'm talking about. Once start this drug-taking racket and you'll land yourself in unbelievable misery. I've seen some and I know. Drugs ruin people, body and soul. Drink's a gentle little picnic compared to drugs. Cut it right out from this minute. Believe me, it isn't funny! What do you think your father would say to tonight's business?"

"Father?" Sheila Grant's voice rose. "Father?" She began to laugh. "I can just see Father's face! He mustn't know about it. He'd have seven fits!"

"And quite right too," said Stoddart.

"Doctor - doctor -" the long wail of Mrs Grace's voice came from the other room.

Stoddart muttered something uncomplimentary under his breath and went out of the room.

Sheila Grant stared at Poirot again. She was puzzled.

She said: "Who are you really? You weren't at the party."

"No, I was not at the party. I am a friend of Dr Stoddart's."

"You're a doctor, too? You don't look like a doctor."

"My name," said Poirot, contriving as usual to make the simple statement sound like the curtain of the first act of a play, "my name is Hercule Poirot."

The statement did not fail of its effect. Occasionally Poirot was distressed to find that a callous younger generation had never heard of him.

But it was evident that Sheila Grant had heard of him. She was flabbergasted - dumbfounded. She stared and stared.

III

It has been said, with or without justification for the statement, that everyone has an aunt in Torquay.

It has also been said that everyone has at least a second cousin in Mertonshire. Mertonshire is a reasonable distance from London, it has hunting, shooting and fishing, it has several very picturesque but slightly self-conscious villages, it has a good system of railways and a new arterial road facilitates motoring to and from the metropolis. Servants object to it less than they do to other, more rural, portions of the British Isles. As a result, it is practically impossible to live in Mertonshire unless you have an income that runs into four figures, and what with income-tax and one thing and another, five figures is better.

Hercule Poirot being a foreigner, had no second cousins in the county, but he had acquired by now a large circle of friends and he had no difficulty in getting himself invited for a visit in that part of the world. He had, moreover, selected as hostess a dear lady whose chief delight was exercising her tongue on the subject of her neighbours - the only drawback being that Poirot had to submit to hearing a great deal about people in whom he had no interest whatever, before coming to the subject of the people he was interested in.

"The Grants? Oh yes, there are four of them. Four girls. I don't wonder the poor General can't control them. What can a man do with four girls?" Lady Carmichael's hands flew up eloquently.

Poirot said: "What indeed?" and the lady continued:

"Used to be a great disciplinarian in his regiment, so he told me. But those girls defeat him. Not like when I was young. Old Colonel Sandys was such a martinet, I remember, that his poor daughters -"

(Long excursion into the trials of the Sandys girls and other friends of Lady Carmichael's youth.)

"Mind you," said Lady Carmichael, reverting to her first theme. "I don't say there's anything really wrong about those girls. Just high spirits - and getting in with an undesirable set. It's not what it used to be down here. The oddest people come here. There's not what you might call 'county' left. It's all money, money, money nowadays. And you do hear the oddest stories! Who did you say? Anthony Hawker? Oh yes, I know him. What I call a very unpleasant young man. But apparently rolling in money. He comes down here to hunt - and he gives parties - very lavish parties - and rather peculiar parties, too, if one is to believe all one is told - not that I ever do, because I do think people are so ill-natured. They always believe the worst. You know, it's become quite a fashion to say a person drinks or takes drugs. Somebody said to me the other day that young girls were natural inebriates, and I really don't think that was a nice thing to say at all. And if anyone's at all peculiar or vague in their manner, everyone says 'drugs' and that's unfair, too. They say it about Mrs Larkin and though I don't care for the woman, I do really think it's nothing more than absent-mindedness. She's a great friend of your Anthony Hawker, and that's why, if you ask me, she's so down on the Grant girls - says they're man-eaters! I dare say they do run after men a bit, but why not? It's natural, after all. And they're good-looking pieces, every one of them."

Poirot interjected a question.

"Mrs Larkin? My dear man, it's no good asking me who she is. Who's anybody nowadays? They say she rides well and she's obviously well off. Husband was something in the city. He's dead, not divorced. She's not been here very long, came here just after the Grants did. I've always thought she -"

Old Lady Carmichael stopped. Her mouth opened, her eyes bulged. Leaning forward she struck Poirot a sharp blow across the knuckles with a paper-cutter she was holding. Disregarding his wince of pain she exclaimed excitedly:

"Why, of course! So that's why you're down here! You nasty, deceitful creature, I insist on your telling me all about it."

"But what is it I am to tell you all about?"

Lady Carmichael aimed another playful blow which Poirot avoided deftly.

"Don't be an oyster, Hercule Poirot! I can see your moustaches quivering. Of course, it's crime brings you down here - and you're just pumping me shamelessly! Now let me see, can it be murder? Who's died lately? Only old Louisa Gilmore and she was eighty-five and had dropsy too. Can't be her. Poor Leo Staverton broke his neck in the hunting-field and he's all done up in plaster - that can't be it. Perhaps it isn't murder. What a pity! I can't remember any special jewel robberies lately... Perhaps it's just a criminal you're tracking down... Is it Beryl Larkin? Did she poison her husband? Perhaps it's remorse that makes her so vague."

"Madame, Madame," cried Hercule Poirot. "You go too fast."

"Nonsense. You're up to something, Hercule Poirot."

"Are you acquainted with the classics, Madame?"

"What have the classics to do with it?"

"They have this to do with it. I emulate my great predecessor Hercules. One of the Labours of Hercules was the taming of the wild horses of Diomedes."

"Don't tell me you came down here to train horses - at your age - and always wearing patent-leather shoes! You don't look to me as though you'd ever been on a horse in your life!"

"The horses, Madame, are symbolic. They were the wild horses who ate human flesh."

"How very unpleasant of them. I always do think these ancient Greeks and Romans are very unpleasant. I can't think why clergymen are so fond of quoting from the classics - for one thing one never understands what they mean and it always seems to me that the whole subject matter of the classics is very unsuitable for clergymen. So much incest, and all those statues with nothing on - not that I mind that myself but you know what clergymen are - quite upset if girls come to church with no stockings on - let me see, where was I?"

"I am not quite sure."

"I suppose, you wretch, you just won't tell me if Mrs Larkin murdered her husband? Or perhaps Anthony Hawker is the Brighton trunk murderer?"

She looked at him hopefully, but Hercule Poirot's face remained impassive.

"It might be forgery," speculated Lady Carmichael. "I did see Mrs Larkin in the bank the other morning and she'd just cashed a fifty pound cheque to self - it seemed to me at the time a lot of money to want in cash. Oh no, that's the wrong way round - if she was a forger she would be paying it in, wouldn't she? Hercule Poirot, if you sit there looking like an owl and saying nothing, I shall throw something at you."

"You must have a little patience," said Hercule Poirot.

IV

Ashley Lodge, the residence of General Grant, was not a large house. It was situated on the side of a hill, had good stables, and a straggling, rather neglected, garden.

Inside, it was what a house agent would have described as "fully furnished". Cross-legged Buddhas leered down from convenient niches, brass Benares trays and tables encumbered the floor space.

Processional elephants garnished the mantelpieces and more tortured brasswork adorned the walls.

In the midst of this Anglo-Indian home from home. General Grant was ensconced in a large, shabby armchair with his leg, swathed in bandages, reposing on another chair.

"Gout," he explained. "Ever had the gout, Mr - er - Poirot? Makes a feller damned bad tempered! All my father's fault. Drank port all his life - so did my grandfather. It's played the deuce with me. Have a drink? Ring that bell, will you, for that feller of mine?"

A turbaned servant appeared. General Grant addressed him as Abdul and ordered him to bring whisky and soda. When it came he poured out such a generous portion that Poirot was moved to protest.

"Can't join you, I'm afraid, Mr Poirot." The General eyed the tantalus sadly. "My doctor wallah says it's poison to me to touch the stuff. Don't suppose he knows for a minute. Ignorant chaps doctors. Spoil-sports. Enjoy knocking a man off his food and drink and putting him on some pap like steamed fish. Steamed fish - pah!"

In his indignation the General incautiously moved his bad foot and uttered a yelp of agony at the twinge that ensued.

He apologised for his language.

"Like a bear with a sore head, that's what I am. My girls give me a wide berth when I've got an attack of gout. Don't know that I blame them. You've met one of 'em, I hear."

"I have had that pleasure, yes. You have several daughters, have you not?"

"Four," said the General gloomily. "Not a boy amongst 'em. Four blinking girls. Bit of a thought, these days."

"They are all four very charming, I hear?"

"Not too bad - not too bad. Mind you, I never know what they're up to. You can't control girls nowadays. Lax times - too much laxity everywhere. What can a man do? Can't lock 'em up, can I?"

"They are popular in the neighbourhood, I gather."

"Some of the old cats don't like 'em," said General Grant. "A good deal of mutton dressed as lamb round here. A man's got to be careful. One of these blue-eyed widows nearly caught me - used to come round here purring like a kitten. 'Poor General Grant - you must have had such an interesting life.'" The General winked and placed one finger against his nose. "A little bit too obvious, Mr Poirot. Oh well, take it all round, I suppose it's not a bad part of the world. A bit go ahead and noisy for my taste. I liked the country when it was the country - not all this motoring and jazz and that blasted, eternal radio. I won't have one here and the girls know it. A man's got a right to a little peace in his own home."

Gently Poirot led the conversation round to Anthony Hawker.

"Hawker? Hawker? Don't know him. Yes, I do, though. Nasty looking fellow with his eyes too close together. Never trust a man who can't look you in the face."

"He is a friend, is he not, of your daughter Sheila's?"

"Sheila? Wasn't aware of it. Girls never tell me anything." The bushy eyebrows came down over the nose - the piercing, blue eyes looked out of the red face straight into Hercule Poirot's. "Look here, Mr Poirot, what's all this about? Mind telling me what you've come to see me about?"

Poirot said slowly: "That would be difficult - perhaps I hardly know myself. I would say only this: your daughter Sheila - perhaps all your daughters - have made some undesirable friends."

"Got into a bad set, have they? I was a bit afraid of that. One hears a word dropped here and there." He looked pathetically at Poirot. "But what am I to do, Mr Poirot? What am I to do?"

Poirot shook his head perplexedly.

General Grant went on: "What's wrong with the bunch they're running with?" he asked.

Poirot replied by another question.

"Have you noticed. General Grant, that any of your daughters have been moody, excited - then depressed - nervy - uncertain in their tempers?"

"Damme, sir, you're talking like a patent medicine. No, I haven't noticed anything of the kind."

"That is fortunate," said Poirot gravely.

"What the devil is the meaning of all this, sir?"

"Drugs!"

"What!"

The word came in a roar.

Poirot said: "An attempt is being made to induce your daughter Sheila to become a drug addict. The cocaine habit is very quickly formed. A week or two will suffice. Once the habit is formed, an addict will pay anything, do anything, to get a further supply of the drug. You can realise what a rich haul the person who peddles that drug can make."

He listened in silence to the spluttering, wrathful blasphemies that poured from the old man's lips. Then, as the fires died down, with a final choice description of exactly what he, the General, would do to the blinkety-blinkety son of a blank when he got hold of him, Hercule Poirot said:

"We have first, as your so admirable Mrs Beeton says, to catch the hare. Once we have caught our drug pedlar, I will turn him over to you with the greatest pleasure, General."

He got up, tripped over a heavily-carved, small table, regained his balance with a clutch at the General, murmured:

"A thousand pardons, and may I beg of you, General - you understand, beg of you - to say nothing whatever about all this to your daughters."

"What? I'll have the truth out of them, that's what I'll have!"

"That is exactly what you will not have. All you will get is a lie."

"But damme, sir -"

"I assure you. General Grant, you must hold your tongue. That is vital - you understand? Vital!"

"Oh well, have it your own way," growled the old soldier.

He was mastered but not convinced.

Hercule Poirot picked his way carefully through the Benares brass and went out.

V

Mrs Larkin's room was full of people.

Mrs Larkin herself was mixing cocktails at a side table. She was a tall woman with pale auburn hair rolled into the back of her neck. Her eyes were greenish-grey with big, black pupils. She moved easily, with a kind of sinister grace. She looked as though she were in the early thirties. Only a close scrutiny revealed the lines at the corners of the eyes and hinted that she was ten years older than her looks.

Hercule Poirot had been brought here by a brisk, middle-aged woman, a friend of Lady Carmichael's. He found himself given a cocktail and further directed to take one to a girl sitting in the window. The girl was small and fair - her face was pink and white and suspiciously angelic. Her eyes, Hercule Poirot noticed at once, were alert and suspicious.

He said: "To your continued good health. Mademoiselle."

She nodded and drank. Then she said abruptly: "You know my sister."

"Your sister? Ah, you are then one of the Miss Grants?"

"I'm Pam Grant."

"And where is your sister today?"

"She's out hunting. Ought to be back soon."

"I met your sister in London."

"I know."

"She told you?"

Pam Grant nodded. She said abruptly: "Was Sheila in a jam?"

"So she did not tell you everything?"

The girl shook her head. She asked: "Was Tony Hawker there?"

Before Poirot could answer, the door opened and Hawker and Sheila Grant came in. They were in hunting kit and Sheila had a streak of mud on her cheek.

"Hullo, people, we've come in for a drink. Tony's flask is dry."

Poirot murmured: "Talk of the angels -"

Pam Grant snapped: "Devils, you mean."

Poirot said sharply: "Is it like that?"

Beryl Larkin had come forward.

She said: "Here you are, Tony. Tell me about the run? Did you draw Gelert's Copse?"

She drew him away skilfully to a sofa near the fireplace. Poirot saw him turn his head and glance at Sheila before he went.

Sheila had seen Poirot. She hesitated a minute, then came over to the two in the window.

She said abruptly: "So it was you who came to the house yesterday?"

"Did your father tell you?"

She shook her head. "Abdul described you. I - guessed."

Pam exclaimed: "You went to see Father?"

Poirot said: "Ah - yes. We have - some mutual friends."

Pam said sharply: "I don't believe it."

"What do you not believe? That your father and I could have a mutual friend?"

The girl flushed. "Don't be stupid. I meant - that wasn't really your reason -"

She turned on her sister.

"Why don't you say something, Sheila?"

Sheila started. She said: "It wasn't - it wasn't anything to do with Tony Hawker?"

"Why should it be?" asked Poirot.

Sheila flushed and went back across the room to the others.

Pam said with sudden vehemence but in a lowered voice: "I don't like Tony Hawker. There - there's something sinister about him - and about her - Mrs Larkin, I mean. Look at them now."

Poirot followed hex glance.

Hawker's head was close to that of his hostess. He appeared to be soothing her. Her voice rose for a minute.

"- but I can't wait. I want it now!"

Poirot said with a little smile: "Les femmes - whatever it is - they always want it now, do they not?"

But Pam Grant did not respond. Her face was cast down. She was nervously pleating and repleating her tweed skirt.

Poirot murmured conversationally: "You are quite a different type from your sister. Mademoiselle."

She flung her head up, impatient of banalities.

She said: "M. Poirot. What's the stuff Tony's been giving Sheila? What is it that's been making her - different?"

He looked straight at her. He asked: "Have you ever taken cocaine, Miss Grant?"

She shook her head. "Oh no! So that's it? Cocaine? But isn't that very dangerous?"

Sheila Grant had come over to them, a fresh drink in her hand.

She said: "What's dangerous?"

Poirot said: "We are talking of the effects of drug-taking. Of the slow death of the mind and spirit - the destroying of all that is true and good in a human being."

Sheila Grant caught her breath. The drink in her hand swayed and spilled on the floor.

Poirot went on: "Dr Stoddart has, I think, made clear to you just what that death in life entails. It is so easily done - so hard to undo. The person who deliberately profits from the degradation and misery of other people is a vampire preying on flesh and blood."

He turned away. Behind him he heard Pam Grant's voice say: "Sheila!" and caught a whisper - a faint whisper - from Sheila Grant. It was so low he hardly heard it.

"The flask..."

Hercule Poirot said good-bye to Mrs Larkin and went out into the hall. On the hall table was a hunting flask lying with a crop and a hat. Poirot picked it up. There were initials on it: A.H.

Poirot murmured to himself: "Tony's flask is empty?"

He shook it gently. There was no sound of liquor. He unscrewed the top.

Tony Hawker's flask was not empty. It was full - of white powder...

VI

Hercule Poirot stood on the terrace of Lady Carmichael's house and pleaded with a girl.

He said: "You are very young. Mademoiselle. It is my belief that you have not known, not really known, what it is you and your sisters have been doing. You have been feeding, like the mares of Diomedes, on human flesh."

Sheila shuddered and gave a sob. She said: "It sounds horrible, put like that. And yet it's true! I never realised it until that evening in London when Dr Stoddart talked to me. He was so grave - so sincere. I saw then what an awful thing it was I had been doing... Before that I thought it was - Oh! rather like drink after hours - something people would pay to get, but not something that really mattered very much!"

Poirot said: "And now?"

Sheila Grant said: "I'll do anything you say. I - I'll talk to the others," she added... "I don't suppose Dr Stoddart will ever speak to me again..."

"On the contrary," said Poirot. "Both Dr Stoddart and I are prepared to help you in every way in our power to start afresh. You can trust us. But one thing must be done. There is one person who must be destroyed - destroyed utterly, and only you and your sisters can destroy him. It is your evidence and your evidence alone that will convict him."

"You mean - my father?"

"Not your father, Mademoiselle. Did I not tell you that Hercule Poirot knows everything? Your photograph was easily recognised in official quarters. You are Sheila Kelly - a persistent young shop-lifter who was sent to a reformatory some years ago. When you came out of that reformatory, you were approached by the man who calls himself General Grant and offered this post - the post of a 'daughter'. There would be plenty of money, plenty of fun, a good time. All you had to do was to introduce the 'snuff' to your friends, always pretending that someone else had given it to you. Your 'sisters' were in the same case as yourself."

He paused and said: "Come now. Mademoiselle - this man must be exposed and sentenced. After that -"

"Yes, afterwards?"

Poirot coughed. He said with a smile: "You shall be dedicated to the service of the Gods..."

VII

Michael Stoddart stared at Poirot in amazement.

He said: "General Grant? General Grant?"

"Precisely, mon cher. The whole mise en scene, you know, was what you would call 'very bogus'. The Buddhas, the Benares brass, the Indian servant! And the gout, too! It is out of date, the gout. It is old, old gentlemen who have the gout - not the fathers of young ladies of nineteen.

"Moreover I made quite certain. As I go out, I stumble, I clutch at the gouty foot. So perturbed is the gentleman by what I have been saying that he did not even notice. Oh yes, he is very, very bogus, that General! Tout de même, it is a smart idea. The retired Anglo-Indian General, the well-known comic figure with a liver and a choleric temper, he settles down - not amongst other retired Anglo-Indian Army officers - oh no, he goes to a milieu far too expensive for the usual retired Army man. There are rich people there, people from London, an excellent field to market the goods. And who would suspect four lively, attractive, young girls? If anything comes out, they will be considered as victims - that for a certainty!"

"What was your idea exactly when you went to see the old devil? Did you want to put the wind up him?"

"Yes. I wanted to see what would happen. I had not long to wait. The girls had their orders. Anthony Hawker, actually one of their victims, was to be the scapegoat. Sheila was to tell me about the flask in the hall. She nearly could not bring herself to do so - but the other girl rapped out an angry 'Sheila' at her and she just faltered it out."

Michael Stoddart got up and paced up and down.

He said: "You know, I'm not going to lose sight of that girl. I've got a pretty sound theory about those adolescent criminal tendencies. If you look into the home life, you nearly always find -"

Poirot interrupted him.

He said: "Mon cher, I have the deepest respect for your science. I have no doubt that your theories will work admirably where Miss Sheila Kelly is concerned."

"The others, too."

"The others, perhaps. It may be. The only one I am sure about is the little Sheila. You will tame her, not a doubt of it! In truth, she eats out of your hand already..."

Flushing, Michael Stoddart said: "What nonsense you talk, Poirot."

Chapter 9

THE GIRDLE OF HYPPOLITA

One thing leads to another, as Hercule Poirot is fond of saying without much originality.

He adds that this was never more clearly evidenced than in the case of the stolen Rubens.

He was never much interested in the Rubens. For one thing Rubens is not a painter he admires, and then the circumstances of the theft were quite ordinary. He took it up to oblige Alexander Simpson who was by the way of being a friend of his and for a certain private reason of his own not unconnected with the classics!

After the theft, Alexander Simpson sent for Poirot and poured out all his woes. The Rubens was a recent discovery, a hitherto unknown masterpiece, but there was no doubt of its authenticity. It had been placed on display at Simpson's Galleries and it had been stolen in broad daylight. It was at the time when the unemployed were pursuing their tactics of lying down on the street crossings and penetrating into the Ritz. A small body of them had entered Simpson's Galleries and lain down with the slogan displayed of "Art is a Luxury. Feed the Hungry." The police had been sent for, everyone had crowded round in eager curiosity, and it was not till the demonstrators had been

forcibly removed by the arm of the law that it was noticed that the new Rubens had been neatly cut out of its frame and removed also!

"It was quite a small picture, you see," explained Mr Simpson. "A man could put it under his arm and walk out while everyone was looking at those miserable idiots of unemployed."

The men in question, it was discovered, had been paid for their innocent part in the robbery. They were to demonstrate at Simpson's Galleries. But they had known nothing of the reason until afterwards.

Hercule Poirot thought that it was an amusing trick but did not see what he could do about it. The police, he pointed out, could be trusted to deal with a straightforward robbery.

Alexander Simpson said: "Listen to me, Poirot. I know who stole the picture and where it is going."

According to the owner of Simpson's Galleries it had been stolen by a gang of international crooks on behalf of a certain millionaire who was not above acquiring works of art at a surprisingly low price - and no questions asked! The Rubens, said Simpson, would be smuggled over to France where it would pass into the millionaire's possession. The English and French police were on the alert, nevertheless Simpson was of the opinion that they would fail.

"And once it has passed into this dirty dog's possession, it's going to be more difficult. Rich men have to be treated with respect. That's where you come in. The situation's going to be delicate. You're the man for that."

Finally, without enthusiasm, Hercule Poirot was induced to accept the task. He agreed to depart for France immediately. He was not very interested in his quest, but because of it, he was introduced to the case of the Missing Schoolgirl which interested him very much indeed.

He first heard of it from Chief Inspector Japp who dropped in to see him just as Poirot was expressing approval of his valet's packing.

"Ha," said Japp. "Going to France, aren't you?"

Poirot said: "Mon cher, you are incredibly well informed at Scotland Yard."

Japp chuckled. He said: "We have our spies! Simpson's got you on to this Rubens business. Doesn't trust us, it seems! Well, that's neither here nor there, but what I want you to do is something quite different. As you're going to Paris anyway, I thought you might as well kill two birds with one stone. Detective Inspector Hearn's over there cooperating with the Frenchies - you know Hearn? Good chap - but perhaps not very imaginative. I'd like your opinion on the business."

"What is this matter of which you speak?"

"Child's disappeared. It'll be in the papers this evening. Looks as though she's been kidnapped. Daughter of a Canon down at Cranchester. King, her name is, Winnie King."

He proceeded with the story.

Winnie had been on her way to Paris, to join that select and high-class establishment for English and American girls - Miss Pope's. Winnie had come up from Cranchester by the early train - had been seen across London by a member of Elder Sisters Ltd. who undertook such work as seeing girls from one station to another, had been delivered at Victoria to Miss Burshaw, Miss Pope's second-in-command, and had then, in company with eighteen other girls, left Victoria by the boat train. Nineteen girls had crossed the channel, had passed through the customs at Calais, had got into the Paris train, had lunched in the restaurant car. But when, on the outskirts of Paris, Miss Burshaw had counted heads, it was discovered that only eighteen girls could be found!

"Aha," Poirot nodded. "Did the train stop anywhere?"

"It stopped at Amiens, but at that time the girls were in the restaurant car and they all say positively that Winnie was with them then. They lost her, so to speak, on the return journey to their compartments. That is to say, she did not enter her own compartment with the other five girls who were in it. They did not suspect anything was wrong, merely thought she was in one of the two other reserved carriages."

Poirot nodded. "So she was last seen - when exactly?"

"About ten minutes after the train left Amiens." Japp coughed modestly. "She was last seen - er - entering the toilette."

Poirot murmured: "Very natural." He went on: "There is nothing else?"

"Yes, one thing." Japp's face was grim. "Her hat was found by the side of the line - at a spot approximately fourteen miles from Amiens."

"But no body?"

"No body."

Poirot asked: "What do you yourself think?"

"Difficult to know what to think! As there's no sign of her body - she can't have fallen off the train."

"Did the train stop at all after leaving Amiens?"

"No. It slowed up once - for a signal, but it didn't stop, and I doubt if it slowed up enough for anyone to have jumped off without injury. You're thinking that the kid got a panic and tried to run away? It was her first term and she might have been homesick, that's true enough, but all the same she was fifteen and a half - a sensible age, and she'd been in quite good spirits all the journey, chattering away and all that."

Poirot asked: "Was the train searched?"

"Oh yes, they went right through it before it arrived at the Nord station. The girl wasn't on the train, that's quite certain."

Japp added in an exasperated manner: "She just disappeared - into thin air! It doesn't make sense, M. Poirot. It's crazy!"

"What kind of a girl was she?"

"Ordinary, normal type as far as I can make out."

"I mean - what did she look like?"

"I've got a snap of her here. She's not exactly a budding beauty."

He proffered the snapshot to Poirot who studied it in silence.

It represented a lanky girl with her hair in two limp plaits. It was not a posed photograph, the subject had clearly been caught unawares. She was in the act of eating an apple, her lips were parted, showing slightly protruding teeth confined by a dentist's plate. She wore spectacles.

Japp said: "Plain-looking kid - but then they are plain at that age! Was at my dentist's yesterday. Saw a picture in the Sketch of Marcia Gaunt, this season's beauty. I remember her at fifteen when I was down at the Castle over their burglary business. Spotty, awkward, teeth sticking out, hair all lank and anyhow. They grow into beauties overnight - I don't know how they do it! It's like a miracle."

Poirot smiled. "Women," he said, "are a miraculous sex! What about the child's family? Have they anything helpful to say?"

Japp shook his head. "Nothing that's any help. Mother's an invalid. Poor old Canon King is absolutely bowled over. He swears that the girl was frightfully keen to go to Paris - had been looking forward to it. Wanted to study painting and music - that sort of thing. Miss Pope's girls go in for Art with a capital A. As you probably know, Miss Pope's is a very well-known establishment. Lots of society girls go there.

She's strict - quite a dragon - and very expensive - and extremely particular whom she takes."

Poirot sighed. "I know the type. And Miss Burshaw who took the girls over from England?"

"Not exactly frantic with brains. Terrified that Miss Pope will say it's her fault."

Poirot said thoughtfully: "There is no young man in the case?"

Japp gesticulated towards the snapshot. "Does she look like it?"

"No, she does not. But notwithstanding her appearance, she may have a romantic heart. Fifteen is not so young."

"Well," said Japp. "If a romantic heart spirited her off that train, I'll take to reading lady novelists."

He looked hopefully at Poirot.

"Nothing strikes you - eh?"

Poirot shook his head slowly.

He said: "They did not, by any chance, find her shoes also by the side of the line?"

"Shoes? No. Why shoes?"

Poirot murmured: "Just an idea..."

II

Hercule Poirot was just going down to his taxi when the telephone rang. He took off the receiver.

"Yes?"

Japp's voice spoke.

"Glad I've just caught you. It's all off, old man. Found a message at the Yard when I got back. The girl's turned up. At the side of the main road fifteen miles from Amiens. She's dazed and they can't get any coherent story from her, doctor says she's been doped - However, she's all right. Nothing wrong with her."

Poirot said slowly: "So you have, then, no need of my services?"

"Afraid not! In fact - sorrrry you have been trrrroubled."

Japp laughed at his witticism and rang off.

Hercule Poirot did not laugh. He put back the receiver slowly. His face was worried.

III

Detective Inspector Hearn looked at Poirot curiously.

He said: "I'd no idea you'd be so interested, sir."

Poirot said: "You had word from Chief Inspector Japp that I might consult with you over this matter?"

Hearn nodded. "He said you were coming over on some other business, and that you'd give us a hand with this puzzle. But I didn't expect you now it's all cleared up. I thought you'd be busy on your own job."

Hercule Poirot said: "My own business can wait. It is this affair here that interests me. You called it a puzzle, and you say it is now ended. But the puzzle is still there, it seems."

"Well, sir, we've got the child back. And she's not hurt. That's the main thing."

"But it does not solve the problem of how you got her back, does it? What does she herself say? A doctor saw her, did he not? What did he say?"

"Said she'd been doped. She was still hazy with it. Apparently, she can't remember anything much after starting off from Cranchester. All later events seem to have been wiped out. Doctor thinks she might possibly have had slight concussion. There's a bruise on the back of her head. Says that would account for a complete blackout of memory."

Poirot said: "Which is very convenient for - someone!"

Inspector Hearn said in a doubtful voice: "You don't think she is shamming, sir?"

"Do you?"

"No, I'm sure she isn't. She's a nice kid - a bit young for her age."

"No, she is not shamming." Poirot shook his head. "But I would like to know how she got off that train. I want to know who is responsible - and why?"

"As to why, I should say it was an attempt at kidnapping, sir. They meant to hold her to ransom."

"But they didn't!"

"Lost their nerve with the hue and cry - and planted her by the road quick."

Poirot inquired sceptically: "And what ransom were they likely to get from a Canon of Cranchester Cathedral? English Church dignitaries are not millionaires."

Detective Inspector Hearn said cheerfully: "Made a botch of the whole thing, sir, in my opinion."

"Ah, that's your opinion."

Hearn said, his face flushing slightly: "What's yours, sir?"

"I want to know how she was spirited off that train."

The policeman's face clouded over.

"That's a real mystery, that is. One minute she was there, sitting in the dining-car, chatting to the other girls. Five minutes later she's vanished - hey presto - like a conjuring trick."

"Precisely, like a conjuring trick! Who else was there in the coach of the train where Miss Pope's reserved compartments were?"

Inspector Hearn nodded.

"That's a good point, sir. That's important. It's particularly important because it was the last coach on the train and as soon as all the people were back from the restaurant car, the doors between the coaches were locked - actually so as to prevent people crowding along to the restaurant car and demanding tea before they'd had time to clear up

lunch and get ready. Winnie King came back to the coach with the others - the school had three reserved compartments there."

"And in the other compartments of the coach?"

Hearn pulled out his notebook.

"Miss Jordan and Miss Butters - two middle-aged spinsters going to Switzerland. Nothing wrong with them, highly respectable, well known in Hampshire where they come from. Two French commercial travellers, one from Lyons, one from Paris. Both respectable middle-aged men. A young man, James Elliot, and his wife - flashy piece of goods she was. He's got a bad reputation, suspected by the police of being mixed up in some questionable transactions - but has never touched kidnapping. Anyway, his compartment was searched and there was nothing in his hand luggage to show that he was mixed up in this. Don't see how he could have been. Only other person was an American lady, Mrs Van Suyder, travelling to Paris. Nothing known about her. Looks OK. That's the lot."

Hercule Poirot said: "And it is quite definite that the train did not stop after it left Amiens?"

"Absolutely. It slowed down once, but not enough to let any one jump off - not without damaging themselves pretty severely and risking being killed."

Hercule Poirot murmured: "That is what makes the problem so peculiarly interesting. The schoolgirl vanishes into thin air - just

outside Amiens. She reappears from thin air just outside Amiens. Where has she been in the meantime?"

Inspector Hearn shook his head.

"It sounds mad, put like that. Oh! by the way, they told me you were asking something about shoes - the girl's shoes. She had her shoes on all right when she was found, but there was a pair of shoes on the line, a signalman found them. Took 'em home with him as they seemed in good condition. Stout black walking shoes."

"Ah," said Poirot. He looked gratified.

Inspector Hearn said curiously: "I don't get the meaning of the shoes, sir? Do they mean anything?"

"They confirm a theory," said Hercule Poirot. "A theory of how the conjuring trick was done."

IV

Miss Pope's establishment was, like many other establishments of the same kind, situated in Neuilly. Hercule Poirot, staring up at its respectable façade, was suddenly submerged by a flow of girls emerging from its portals.

He counted twenty-five of them, all dressed alike in dark blue coats and skirts with uncomfortable-looking British hats of dark blue velour on their heads, round which was tied the distinctive purple and gold of Miss Pope's choice. They were of ages varying from fourteen to eighteen, thick and slim, fair and dark, awkward and graceful. At the end, walking with one of the younger girls, was a grey-haired, fussy looking woman whom Poirot judged to be Miss Burshaw.

Poirot stood looking after them a minute, then he rang the bell and asked for Miss Pope.

Miss Lavinia Pope was a very different person from her second-in-command. Miss Burshaw. Miss Pope had personality. Miss Pope was awe inspiring. Even should Miss Pope unbend graciously to parents, she would still retain that obvious superiority to the rest of the world which is such a powerful asset to a schoolmistress.

Her grey hair was dressed with distinction, her costume was severe but chic. She was competent and omniscient.

The room in which she received Poirot was the room of a woman of culture. It had graceful furniture, flowers, some framed, signed photographs of those of Miss Pope's pupils who were of note in the world - many of them in their presentation gowns and feathers. On the walls hung reproductions of the world's artistic masterpieces and some good water-colour sketches. The whole place was clean and polished to the last degree. No speck of dust, one felt, would have the temerity to deposit itself in such a shrine.

Miss Pope received Poirot with the competence of one whose judgment seldom fails.

"M. Hercule Poirot? I know your name, of course. I suppose you have come about this very unfortunate affair of Winnie King. A most distressing incident."

Miss Pope did not look distressed. She took disaster as it should be taken, dealing with it competently and thereby reducing it almost to insignificance.

"Such a thing," said Miss Pope, "has never occurred before."

"And never will again!" her manner seemed to say.

Hercule Poirot said: "It was the girl's first term here, was it not?"

"It was."

"You had a preliminary interview with Winnie - and with her parents?"

"Not recently. Two years ago, I was staying near Cranchester - with the Bishop, as a matter of fact -"

Miss Pope's manner said: "Mark this, please. I am the kind of person who stays with Bishops!"

"While I was there I made the acquaintance of Canon and Mrs King. Mrs King, alas, is an invalid. I met Winnie then. A very well brought up girl, with a decided taste for art. I told Mrs King that I should be happy

to receive her here in a year or two - when her general studies were completed. We specialise here, M. Poirot, in Art and Music. The girls are taken to the Opera, to the Comedie Française, they attend lectures at the Louvre. The very best masters come here to instruct them in music, singing, and painting. The broader culture, that is our aim."

Miss Pope remembered suddenly that Poirot was not a parent and added abruptly: "What can I do for you, M. Poirot?"

"I would be glad to know what is the present position regarding Winnie?"

"Canon King has come over to Amiens and is taking Winnie back with him. The wisest thing to do after the shock the child has sustained."

She went on: "We do not take delicate girls here. We have no special facilities for looking after invalids. I told the Canon that in my opinion he would do well to take the child home with him."

Hercule Poirot asked bluntly: "What in your opinion actually occurred, Miss Pope?"

"I have not the slightest idea, M. Poirot. The whole thing, as reported to me, sounds quite incredible. I really cannot see that the member of my staff who was in charge of the girls was in any way to blame - except that she might, perhaps, have discovered the girl's absence sooner."

Poirot said: "You have received a visit, perhaps, from the police?"

A faint shiver passed over Miss Pope's aristocratic form.

She said glacially: "A Monsieur Lefarge of the Prefecture called to see me, to see if I could throw any light upon the situation. Naturally I was unable to do so. He then demanded to inspect Winnie's trunk which had, of course, arrived here with those of the other girls. I told him that that had already been called for by another member of the police. Their departments, I fancy, must overlap. I got a telephone call, shortly afterwards, insisting that I had not turned over all Winnie's possessions to them. I was extremely short with them over that. One must not submit to being bullied by officialdom."

Poirot drew a long breath. He said: "You have a spirited nature. I admire you for it, Mademoiselle. I presume that Winnie's trunk had been unpacked on arrival?"

Miss Pope looked a little put out of countenance.

"Routine," she said. "We live strictly by routine. The girls' trunks are unpacked on arrival and their things put away in the way I expect them to be kept. Winnie's things were unpacked with those of the other girls. Naturally, they were afterwards repacked, so that her trunk was handed over exactly as it had arrived."

Poirot said: "Exactly?"

He strolled over to the wall.

"Surely this is a picture of the famous Cranchester Bridge with the Cathedral showing in the distance."

"You are quite right, M. Poirot. Winnie had evidently painted that to bring to me as a surprise. It was in her trunk with a wrapper round it and 'For Miss Pope from Winnie' written on it. Very charming of the child."

"Ah!" said Poirot. "And what do you think of it - as a painting?"

He himself had seen many pictures of Cranchester Bridge. It was a subject that could always be found represented at the Academy each year - sometimes as an oil painting - sometimes in the watercolour room. He had seen it painted well, painted in a mediocre fashion, painted boringly. But he had never seen it quite as crudely represented as in the present example.

Miss Pope was smiling indulgently.

She said: "One must not discourage one's girls, M. Poirot. Winnie will be stimulated to do better work, of course."

Poirot said thoughtfully: "It would have been more natural, would it not, for her to do a water-colour?"

"Yes. I did not know she was attempting to paint in oils."

"Ah," said Hercule Poirot. "You will permit me. Mademoiselle?"

He unhooked the picture and took it to the window. He examined it, then, looking up, he said:

"I am going to ask you, Mademoiselle, to give me this picture."

"Well, really, M. Poirot -"

"You cannot pretend that you are very attached to it. The painting is abominable."

"Oh, it has no artistic merit, I agree. But it is a pupil's work and -"

"I assure you. Mademoiselle, that it is a most unsuitable picture to have hanging upon your wall."

"I don't know why you should say that, M. Poirot."

"I will prove it to you in a moment." He took a bottle, a sponge and some rags from his pocket.

He said: "First I am going to tell you a little story, Mademoiselle. It has a resemblance to the story of the Ugly Duckling that turned into a Swan."

He was working busily as he talked. The odour of turpentine filled the room.

"You do not perhaps go much to theatrical revues?"

"No, indeed, they seem to me so trivial..."

"Trivial, yes, but sometimes instructive. I have seen a clever revue artist change her personality in the most miraculous way. In one sketch she is a cabaret star, exquisite and glamorous. Ten minutes

later, she is an undersized, anaemic child with adenoids, dressed in a gym tunic - ten minutes later still, she is a ragged gypsy telling fortunes by a caravan."

"Very possible, no doubt, but I do not see -"

"But I am showing you how the conjuring trick was worked on the train. Winnie, the schoolgirl, with her fair plaits, her spectacles, her disfiguring dental plate - goes into the Toilette. She emerges a quarter of an hour later as - to use the words of Detective Inspector Heam - 'a flashy piece of goods'. Sheer silk stockings, high heeled shoes - a mink coat to cover a school uniform, a daring little piece of velvet called a hat perched on her curls - and a face - oh yes, a face. Rouge, powder, lipstick, mascara! What is the real face of that quick change artiste really like? Probably only the good God knows! But you. Mademoiselle, you yourself, you have often seen how the awkward schoolgirl changes almost miraculously into the attractive and well-groomed debutante."

Miss Pope gasped.

"Do you mean that Winnie King disguised herself as -"

"Not Winnie King - no. Winnie was kidnapped on the way across London. Our quick change artiste took her place. Miss Burshaw had never seen Winnie King - how was she to know that the schoolgirl with the lank plaits and the brace on her teeth was not Winnie King at all? So far, so good, but the impostor could not afford actually to arrive here, since you were acquainted with the real Winnie. So hey presto, Winnie disappears in the Toilette and emerges as wife to a man called

Jim Elliott whose passport includes a wife! The fair plaits, the spectacles, the lisle thread stockings, the dental plate - all that can go into a small space. But the thick unglamorous shoes and the hat - that very unyielding British hat - have to be disposed of elsewhere - they go out of the window. Later, the real Winnie is brought across the channel - no one is looking for a sick, half-doped child being brought from England to France - and is quietly deposited from a car by the side of the main road. If she has been doped all along with scopolamine, she will remember very little of what has occurred."

Miss Pope was staring at Poirot.

She demanded: "But why? What would be the reason of such a senseless masquerade?"

Poirot replied gravely: "Winnie's luggage! These people wanted to smuggle something from England into France - something that every Customs man was on the look-out for - in fact, stolen goods. But what place is safer than a schoolgirl's trunk? You are well-known, Miss Pope, your establishment is justly famous. At the Gare du Nord the trunks of Mesdemoiselles the little Pensionnaires are passed en bloc. It is the well-known English school of Miss Pope! And then, after the kidnapping, what more natural than to send and collect the child's luggage - ostensibly from the Préfecture?"

Hercule Poirot smiled.

"But fortunately, there was the school routine of unpacking trunks on arrival - and a present for you from Winnie - but not the same present that Winnie packed at Cranchester"

He came towards her.

"You have given this picture to me. Observe now, you must admit that it is not suitable for your select school!"

He held out the canvas.

As though by magic Cranchester Bridge had disappeared. Instead was a classical scene in rich, dim colourings.

Poirot said softly: "The Girdle of Hyppolita. Hyppolita gives her girdle to Hercules - painted by Rubens. A great work of art - mais tout de même not quite suitable for your drawing room."

Miss Pope blushed slightly.

Hyppolita's hand was on her girdle - she was wearing nothing else... Hercules had a lion skin thrown lightly over one shoulder. The flesh of Rubens is rich, voluptuous flesh...

Miss Pope said, regaining her poise: "A fine work of art... All the same - as you say - after all, one must consider the susceptibilities of parents. Some of them are inclined to be narrow... if you know what I mean..."

V

It was just as Poirot was leaving the house that the onslaught took place. He was surrounded, hemmed-in, overwhelmed by a crowd of girls, thick, thin, dark and fair.

"Mon Dieu!" he murmured. "Here indeed is the attack by the Amazons!"

A tall fair girl was crying out: "A rumour has gone round -"

They surged closer. Hercule Poirot was surrounded. He disappeared in a wave of young, vigorous femininity.

Twenty-five voices arose, pitched in various keys but all uttering the same momentous phrase.

"M. Poirot, will you write your name in my autograph book?"

Chapter 10

THE FLOCK OF GERYON

"I really do apologise for intruding like this, M. Poirot."

Miss Carnaby clasped her hands fervently round her handbag and leaned forward, peering anxiously into Poirot's face. As usual, she sounded breathless.

Hercule Poirot's eyebrows rose.

She said anxiously: "You do remember me, don't you?"

Hercule Poirot's eyes twinkled.

He said: "I remember you as one of the most successful criminals that I have ever encountered!"

"Oh dear me, M. Poirot, must you really say such things? You were so kind to me. Emily and I often talk about you, and if we see anything about you in the paper we cut it out at once and paste it in a book. As for Augustus, we have taught him a new trick. We say, "Die for Sherlock Holmes, die for Mr Fortune, die for Sir Henry Merrivale, and then die for M. Hercule Poirot' and he goes down and lies like a log - lies absolutely still without moving until we say the word!"

"I am gratified," said Poirot. "And how is ce cher Auguste?"

Miss Carnaby clasped her hands and became eloquent in praise of her Pekinese.

"Oh, M. Poirot, he's cleverer than ever. He knows everything. Do you know, the other day I was just admiring a baby in a pram and suddenly I felt a tug and there was Augustus trying his hardest to bite through his lead. Wasn't that clever?"

Poirot's eyes twinkled. He said: "It looks to me as though Augustus shared these criminal tendencies we were speaking of just now!"

Miss Carnaby did not laugh. Instead, her nice plump face grew worried and sad.

She said in a kind of gasp: "Oh, M. Poirot, I'm so worried!"

Poirot said kindly: "What is it?"

"Do you know, M. Poirot, I'm afraid - I really am afraid - that I must be a hardened criminal - if I may use such a term. Ideas come to me!"

"What kind of ideas?"

"The most extraordinary ideas! For instance, yesterday, a really most practical scheme for robbing a post office came into my head. I wasn't thinking about it - it just came! And another very ingenious way for evading custom duties... I feel convinced - quite convinced - that it would work."

"It probably would," said Poirot dryly. "That is the danger of your ideas."

"It has worried me, M. Poirot, very much. Having been brought up with strict principles, as I have been, it is most disturbing that such lawless - such really wicked - ideas should come to me. The trouble is partly, I think, that I have a good deal of leisure time now. I have left Lady Hoggin and I am engaged by an old lady to read to her and to write her

letters every day. The letters are soon done and the moment I begin reading she goes to sleep, so I am left just sitting there - with an idle mind - and we all know the use the devil has for idleness."

"Tcha, tcha," said Poirot.

"Recently I have read a book - a very modern book, translated from the German. It throws a most interesting light on criminal tendencies. One must, so I understand, sublimate one's impulses! That, really, is why I came to you."

"Yes?" said Poirot.

"You see, M. Poirot. I think that it is really not so much wickedness as a craving for excitement! My life has unfortunately been very humdrum. The - er - campaign of the Pekinese dogs, I sometimes feel, was the only time I really lived. Very reprehensible, of course, but, as my book says, one must not turn one's back on the truth. I came to you, M. Poirot, because I hoped it might be possible to - to sublimate that craving for excitement by employing it, if I may put it that way, on the side of the angels."

"Aha," said Poirot. "It is then as a colleague that you present yourself?"

Miss Carnaby blushed.

"It is very presumptuous of me, I know. But you were so kind -"

She stopped. Her eyes, faded blue eyes, had something in them of the pleading of a dog who hopes against hope that you will take him for a walk.

"It is an idea," said Hercule Poirot slowly.

"I am, of course, not at all clever," explained Miss Carnaby. "But my powers of - of dissimulation are good. They have to be - otherwise one would be discharged from the post of companion immediately. And I have always found that to appear even stupider than one is, occasionally has good results."

Hercule Poirot laughed. He said: "You enchant me, Mademoiselle."

"Oh dear, M. Poirot, what a very kind man you are. Then you do encourage me to hope? As it happens, I have just received a small legacy - a very small one, but it enables my sister and myself to keep and feed ourselves in a frugal manner so that I am not absolutely dependent on what I earn."

"I must consider," said Poirot, "where your talents may best be employed. You have no idea yourself, I suppose?"

"You know, you must really be a thought reader, M. Poirot. I have been anxious lately about a friend of mine. I was going to consult you. Of course you may say it is all an old maid's fancy - just imagination. One is prone, perhaps to exaggerate, and to see design where there may be only coincidence."

"I do not think you would exaggerate, Miss Carnaby. Tell me what is on your mind."

"Well, I have a friend, a very dear friend, though I have not seen very much of her of late years. Her name is Emmeline Clegg. She married a man in the North of England and he died a few years ago leaving her very comfortably off. She was unhappy and lonely after his death and I am afraid she is in some ways a rather foolish and perhaps credulous woman. Religion, M. Poirot, can be a great help and sustenance - but by that I mean orthodox religion."

"You refer to the Greek Church?" asked Poirot.

Miss Carnaby looked shocked.

"Oh no, indeed. Church of England. And though I do not approve of Roman Catholics, they are at least recognised. And the Wesleyans and Congregationalists - they are all well-known respectable bodies. What I am talking about are these odd sects. They just spring up. They have a kind of emotional appeal but sometimes I have very grave doubts as to whether there is any true religious feeling behind them at all."

"You think your friend is being victimised by a sect of this kind?"

"I do. Oh! I certainly do. The Flock of the Shepherd, they call themselves. Their headquarters is in Devonshire - a very lovely estate by the sea. The adherents go there for what they term a Retreat. That is a period of a fortnight - with religious services and rituals. And there are three big Festivals in the year, the Coming of the Pasture, the Full Pasture, and the Reaping of the Pasture."

"Which last is stupid," said Poirot. "Because one does not reap pasture."

"The whole thing is stupid," said Miss Carnaby with warmth. "The whole sect centers round the head of the movement, the Great Shepherd, he is called. A Dr Andersen. A very handsome-looking man, I believe, with a presence."

"Which is attractive to the women, yes?"

"I am afraid so," Miss Carnaby sighed. "My father was a very handsome man. Sometimes, it was most awkward in the parish. The rivalry in embroidering vestments - and the division of church work..."

She shook her head reminiscently.

"Are the members of the Great Flock mostly women?"

"At least three quarters of them, I gather. What men there are, are mostly cranks! It is upon the women that the success of the movement depends and - and on the funds they supply."

"Ah," said Poirot. "Now we come to it. Frankly, you think the whole thing is a ramp?"

"Frankly, M. Poirot, I do. And another thing worries me. I happen to know that my poor friend is so bound up in this religion that she has recently made a will leaving all her property to the movement."

Poirot said sharply: "Was that - suggested to her?"

"In all fairness, no. It was entirely her own idea. The Great Shepherd had shown her a new way of life - so all that she had was to go on her death to the Great Cause. What really worries me is -"

"Yes - go on -"

"Several very wealthy women have been among the devotees. In the last year three of them, no less, have died."

"Leaving all their money to this sect?"

"Yes."

"Their relations have made no protest? I should have thought it likely that there might have been litigation."

"You see, M. Poirot, it is usually lonely women who belong to this gathering. People who have no very near relations or friends."

Poirot nodded thoughtfully. Miss Carnaby hurried on:

"Of course I've no right to suggest anything at all. From what I have been able to find out, there was nothing wrong about any of these deaths. One, I believe, was pneumonia following influenza and another was attributed to gastric ulcer. There were absolutely no suspicious circumstances, if you know what I mean, and the deaths did not take place at Green Hills Sanctuary, but at their own homes. I've no doubt it

is quite all right, but all the same I - well - I shouldn't like anything to happen to Emmie."

She clasped her hands, her eyes appealed to Poirot.

Poirot himself was silent for some minutes. When he spoke there was a change in his voice. It was grave and deep.

He said: "Will you give me, or will you find out for me, the names and addresses of these members of the sect who have recently died?"

"Yes indeed, M. Poirot."

Poirot said slowly: "Mademoiselle, I think you are a woman of great courage and determination. You have good histrionic powers. Would you be willing to undertake a piece of work that may be attended with considerable danger?"

"I should like nothing better," said the adventurous Miss Carnaby.

Poirot said warningly: "If there is a risk at all, it will be a grave one. You comprehend - either this is a mare's nest or else it is serious. To find out which it is, it will be necessary for you yourself to become a member of the Great Flock. I would suggest that you exaggerate the amount of the legacy that you recently inherited. You are now a well-to-do woman with no very definite aim in life. You argue with your friend Emmeline about this religion she has adopted - assure her that it is all nonsense. She is eager to convert you. You allow yourself to be persuaded to go down to Green Hills Sanctuary. And there you fall a

victim to the persuasive powers and magnetic influence of Dr Andersen. I think I can safely leave that part to you?"

Miss Carnaby smiled modestly.

She murmured: "I think I can manage that all right!"

II

"Well, my friend, what have you got for me?"

Chief Inspector Japp looked thoughtfully at the little man who asked the question.

He said ruefully: "Not at all what I'd like to have, Poirot. I hate these long-haired, religious cranks like poison. Filling up women with a lot of mumbo-jumbo. But this fellow's being careful. There's nothing one can get hold of. All sounds a bit batty but harmless."

"Have you learned anything about this Dr Andersen?"

"I've looked up his past history. He was a promising chemist and got chucked out of some German University. Seems his mother was Jewish. He was always keen on the study of Oriental Myths and Religions, spent all his spare time on that and has written various articles on the subject - some of the articles sound pretty crazy to me."

"So it is possible that he is a genuine fanatic?"

"I'm bound to say it seems quite likely!"

"What about those names and addresses I gave you?"

"Nothing doing there. Miss Everett died of ulcerative colitis. Doctor quite positive there was no hanky-panky. Mrs Lloyd died of broncho-pneumonia. Lady Western died of tuberculosis. Had suffered from it many years ago - before she even met this bunch. Miss Lee died of typhoid - attributed to some salad she ate somewhere in the north of England. Three of them got ill and died in their own homes, and Mrs Lloyd died in a hotel in the south of France. As far as those deaths go, there's nothing to connect them with the Great Flock or with Andersen's place down in Devonshire. Must be pure coincidence. All absolutely OK and according to Cocker."

Hercule Poirot sighed. He said: "And yet, mon cher, I have a feeling that this is the tenth Labour of Hercules, and that this Dr Andersen is the Monster Geryon whom it is my mission to destroy."

Japp looked at him anxiously.

"Look here, Poirot, you haven't been reading any queer literature yourself lately, have you?"

Poirot said with dignity: "My remarks are, as always, apt, sound, and to the point."

"You might start a new religion yourself," said Japp, "with the creed: 'There is no one so clever as Hercule Poirot, Amen, DC. Repeat ad lib'!"

III

"It is the peace here that I find so wonderful," said Miss Carnaby, breathing heavily and ecstatically.

"I told you so, Amy," said Emmeline Clegg.

The two friends were sitting on the slope of a hillside overlooking a deep and lovely blue sea. The grass was vivid green, the earths and the cliffs a deep, glowing red. The little estate now known as Green Hills Sanctuary was a promontory comprising about six acres. Only a narrow neck of land joined it to the mainland so that it was almost an island.

Mrs Clegg murmured sentimentally: "The red land - the land of glow and promise - where three-fold destiny is to be accomplished."

Miss Carnaby sighed deeply and said: "I thought the Master put it all so beautifully at the service last night."

"Wait," said her friend, "for the festival tonight. The Full Growth of the Pasture!"

"I'm looking forward to it," said Miss Carnaby.

"You will find it a wonderful spiritual experience," her friend promised her.

Miss Carnaby had arrived at Green Hills Sanctuary a week previously. Her attitude on arrival had been: "Now what's all this nonsense? Really, Emmie, a sensible woman like you - etc., etc."

At a preliminary interview with Dr Andersen, she had conscientiously made her position quite clear.

"I don't want to feel that I am here under false pretences, Dr Andersen. My father was a clergyman of the Church of England and I have never wavered in my faith. I don't hold with heathen doctrines."

The big, golden-haired man had smiled at her - a very sweet and understanding smile. He had looked indulgently at the plump, rather belligerent figure sitting so squarely in her chair.

"Dear Miss Carnaby," he said. "You are Mrs Clegg's friend, and as such welcome. And believe me, our doctrines are not heathen. Here all religions are welcomed, and all honoured equally."

"Then they shouldn't be," said the staunch daughter of the late Reverend Thomas Carnaby.

Leaning back in his chair, the Master murmured in his rich voice: "In my Father's House are many mansions... Remember that, Miss Carnaby."

As they left the presence, Miss Carnaby murmured to her friend: "He really is a very handsome man."

"Yes," said Emmeline Clegg. "And so wonderfully spiritual."

Miss Carnaby agreed. It was true - she had felt it - an aura of unworldliness - of spirituality...

She took a grip upon herself. She was not here to fall a prey to the fascination, spiritual or otherwise, of the Great Shepherd. She conjured up a vision of Hercule Poirot. He seemed very far away, and curiously mundane...

"Amy," said Miss Carnaby to herself. "Take a grip upon yourself. Remember what you are here for..."

But as the days went on, she found herself surrendering only too easily to the spell of Green Hills. The peace, the simplicity, the delicious though simple food, the beauty of the services with their chants of Love and Worship, the simple moving words of the Master, appealing to all that was best and highest in humanity - here all the strife and ugliness of the world was shut out. Here was only Peace and Love...

And tonight was the great summer Festival, the Festival of the Full Pasture. And at it, she, Amy Carnaby, was to become initiated - to become one of the Flock.

The Festival took place in the white, glittering, concrete building, called by the Initiates the Sacred Fold. Here the devotees assembled just before the setting of the sun. They wore sheepskin cloaks and had sandals on their feet. Their arms were bare. In the centre of the Fold on a raised platform stood Dr Andersen. The big man, golden-haired and blue-eyed, with his fair beard and his handsome profile had never seemed more compelling. He was dressed in a green robe and carried a shepherd's crook of gold.

He raised this aloft and a deathly silence fell on the assembly.

"Where are my sheep?"

The answer came from the crowd. "We are here, O Shepherd."

"Lift up your hearts with joy and thanksgiving. This is the Feast of Joy."

"The Feast of Joy and we are joyful."

"There shall be no more sorrow for you, no more pain. All is joy!"

"All is joy..."

"How many heads has the Shepherd?"

"Three heads, a head of gold, a head of silver, a head of sounding brass."

"How many bodies have the Sheep?"

"Three bodies, a body of flesh, a body of corruption, and a body of light."

"How shall you be sealed in the Flock?"

"By the Sacrament of Blood."

"Are you prepared for that Sacrament?"

"We are."

"Bind your eyes and hold forth your right arm."

The crowd obediently bound their eyes with the green scarves provided for the purpose. Miss Carnaby, like the rest held her arm out in front of her.

The Great Shepherd moved along the lines of his Flock. There were little cries, moans of either pain or ecstasy.

Miss Carnaby, to herself, said fiercely: "Most blasphemous, the whole thing! This kind of religious hysteria is to be deplored. I shall remain absolutely calm and observe the reactions of other people. I will not be carried away - I will not..."

The Great Shepherd had come to her. She felt her arm taken, held, there was a sharp, stinging pain like the prick of a needle. The Shepherd's voice murmured:

"The Sacrament of Blood that brings joy..."

He passed on.

Presently there came a command.

"Unveil and enjoy the pleasures of the spirit!"

The sun was just sinking. Miss Carnaby looked round her. At one with the others, she moved slowly out of the Fold. She felt suddenly uplifted, happy. She sank down on a soft, grassy bank. Why had she ever thought she was a lonely, unwanted, middle-aged woman? Life was wonderful - she herself was wonderful! She had the power of thought - of dreaming. There was nothing that she could not accomplish!

A great rush of exhilaration surged through her. She observed her fellow devotees round her - they seemed suddenly to have grown to an immense stature.

"Like trees walking..." said Miss Carnaby to herself reverently.

She lifted her hand. It was a purposeful gesture - with it she could command the earth. Caesar, Napoleon, Hitler - poor, miserable, little fellows! They knew nothing of what she, Amy Carnaby, could do! Tomorrow she would arrange for World Peace, for International Brotherhood. There should be no more Wars - no more Poverty - no more Disease. She, Amy Carnaby, would design a New World.

But there need be no hurry. Time was infinite... Minute succeeded minute, hour succeeded hour! Miss Carnaby's limbs felt heavy, but her mind was delightfully free. It could roam at will over the whole universe. She slept - but even as she slept she dreamt... Great spaces... vast buildings... a new and wonderful world...

Gradually the world shrank. Miss Carnaby yawned. She moved her stiff limbs. What had happened since yesterday? Last night she had dreamt...

There was a moon. By it, Miss Carnaby could just distinguish the figures on her watch. To her stupefaction the hands pointed to a quarter to ten. The sun, as she knew, had set at eight-ten. Only an hour and thirty-five minutes ago? Impossible. And yet -

"Very remarkable," said Miss Carnaby to herself.

IV

Hercule Poirot said: "You must obey my instructions very carefully. You understand?"

"Oh yes, Mr Poirot. You may rely on me."

"You have spoken of your intention to benefit the cult?"

"Yes, Mr Poirot. I spoke to the Master - excuse me, to Dr Andersen myself. I told him very emotionally what a wonderful revelation the whole thing had been - how I had come to scoff and remained to believe. I - really it seemed quite natural to say all these things. Dr Andersen, you know, has a lot of magnetic charm."

"So I perceive," said Hercule Poirot dryly.

"His manner was most convincing. One really feels he doesn't care about money at all. 'Give what you can,' he said smiling in that wonderful way of his, 'if you can give nothing, it does not matter. You are one of the Flock just the same.' 'Oh, Dr Andersen,' I said, 'I am not so badly off as that. I have just inherited a considerable amount of money from a distant relative and though I cannot actually touch any of the money until the legal formalities are all complied with, there is one thing I want to do at once.' And then I explained that I was making a will and that I wanted to leave all I had to the Brotherhood. I explained that I had no near relatives."

"And he graciously accepted the bequest?"

"He was very detached about it. Said it would be many long years before I passed over, that he could tell I was cut out for a long life of joy and spiritual fulfilment. He really speaks most movingly."

"So it would seem."

Poirot's tone was dry. He went on: "You mentioned your health?"

"Yes, Mr Poirot. I told him that I had had lung trouble, and that it had recurred more than once, but that a final treatment in a Sanatorium some years ago had, I hoped, quite cured me."

"Excellent!"

"Though why it is necessary for me to say that I am consumptive when my lungs are as sound as a bell I really cannot see."

"Be assured it is necessary. You mentioned your friend?"

"Yes. I told him (strictly in confidence) that dear Emmeline, besides the fortune she had inherited from her husband, would inherit an even larger sum shortly from an aunt who was deeply attached to her."

"Eh bien, that ought to keep Mrs Clegg safe for the time being!"

"Oh, Mr Poirot, do you really think there is anything wrong?"

"That is what I am going to endeavour to find out. Have you met a Mr Cole down at the Sanctuary?"

"There was a Mr Cole there last time I went down. A most peculiar man. He wears grass-green shorts and eats nothing but cabbage. He is a very ardent believer."

"Eh bien, all progresses well - I make you my compliments on the work you have done - all is now set for the Autumn Festival."

V

"Miss Carnaby - just a moment."

Mr Cole clutched at Miss Carnaby, his eyes bright and feverish.

"I have had a Vision - a most remarkable Vision. I really must tell you about it."

Miss Carnaby sighed. She was rather afraid of Mr Cole and his Visions. There were moments when she was decidedly of the opinion that Mr Cole was mad.

And she found these Visions of his sometimes very embarrassing. They recalled to her certain outspoken passages in that very modern German book on the Subconscious Mind which she had read before coming down to Devon.

Mr Cole, his eyes glistening, his lips twitching, began to talk excitedly.

"I had been meditating - reflecting on the Fullness of Life, on the Supreme Joy of Oneness - and then, you know, my eyes were opened and I saw -"

Miss Carnaby braced herself and hoped that what Mr Cole had seen would not be what he had seen the last time - which had been,

apparently, a Ritual Marriage in ancient Sumeria between a god and goddess.

"I saw -" Mr Cole leant towards her, breathing hard, his eyes looking (yes, really they did) quite mad - "the Prophet Elijah descending from Heaven in his fiery chariot."

Miss Carnaby breathed a sigh of relief. Elijah was much better, she didn't mind Elijah.

"Below," went on Mr Cole, "were the altars of Baal - hundreds and hundreds of them. A Voice cried to me: 'Look, write and testify that which you shall see -'"

He stopped and Miss Carnaby murmured politely: "Yes?"

"On the altars were the sacrifices, bound there, helpless, waiting for the knife. Virgins - hundreds of virgins - young beautiful, naked virgins -"

Mr Cole smacked his lips. Miss Carnaby blushed.

"Then came the ravens, the ravens of Odin, flying from the North. They met the ravens of Elijah - together they circled in the sky - they swooped, they plucked out the eyes of the victims - there was wailing and gnashing of teeth - and the Voice cried: 'Behold a Sacrifice - for on this day shall Jehovah and Odin sign blood brotherhood!' Then the Priests fell upon their victims, they raised their knives - they mutilated their victims -"

Desperately Miss Carnaby broke away from her tormentor who was now slavering at the mouth in a kind of sadistic fervour:

"Excuse me one moment."

She hastily accosted Lipscomb, the man who occupied the Lodge which gave admission to Green Hills and who providentially happened to be passing.

"I wonder," she said, "if you have found a brooch of mine. I must have dropped it somewhere about the grounds."

Lipscomb, who was a man immune from the general sweetness and light of Green Hills, merely growled that he hadn't seen any brooch. It wasn't his work to go about looking for things. He tried to shake off Miss Carnaby but she accompanied him, babbling about her brooch, till she had put a safe distance between herself and the fervour of Mr Cole.

At that moment, the Master himself came out of the Great Fold and, emboldened by his benignant smile, Miss Carnaby ventured to speak her mind to him.

Did he think that Mr Cole was quite - was quite -

The Master laid a hand on her shoulder.

"You must cast out Fear," he said. "Perfect Love casteth out Fear..."

"But I think Mr Cole is mad. Those Visions he has -"

"As yet," said the Master, "he sees Imperfectly... through the Glass of his own Carnal Nature. But the day will come when he shall see Spiritually - Face to Face."

Miss Carnaby was abashed. Of course, put like that - She rallied to make a smaller protest.

"And really," she said, "need Lipscomb be so abominably rude?"

Again the Master gave his Heavenly smile.

"Lipscomb," he said, "is a faithful watch-dog. He is a crude - a primitive soul - but faithful - utterly faithful."

He strode on. Miss Carnaby saw him meet Mr Cole, pause, put a hand on Mr Cole's shoulder. She hoped that the Master's influence might alter the scope of future visions.

In any case, it was only a week now to the Autumn Festival.

VI

On the afternoon preceding the Festival, Miss Carnaby met Hercule Poirot in a small teashop in the sleepy little town of Newton Woodbury.

Miss Carnaby was flushed and even more breathless than usual. She sat sipping tea and crumbling a rock bun between her fingers.

Poirot asked several questions to which she replied monosyllabically.

Then he said: "How many will there be at the Festival?"

"I think a hundred and twenty. Emmeline is there, of course, and Mr Cole - really he has been very odd lately. He has visions. He described some of them to me - really most peculiar - I hope, I do hope, he is not insane. Then there will be quite a lot of new members - nearly twenty."

"Good. You know what you have to do?"

There was a moment's pause before Miss Carnaby said in a rather odd voice: "I know what you told me, M, Poirot..."

"Très bien!"

Then Amy Carnaby said clearly and distinctly: "But I am not going to do it!"

Hercule Poirot stared at her. Miss Carnaby rose to her feet. Her voice came fast and hysterical.

"You sent me here to spy on Dr Andersen. You suspected him of all sorts of things. But he is a wonderful man - a great Teacher. I believe in him heart and soul! And I am not going to do your spying work any more, M. Poirot! I am one of the Sheep of the Shepherd. The Master

has a new message for the World and from now on, I belong to him body and soul. And I'll pay for my own tea, please."

With which slight anticlimax Miss Carnaby planked down one and threepence and rushed out of the teashop.

"Nom d'un nom d'un nom," said Hercule Poirot.

The waitress had to ask him twice before he realised that she was presenting the bill. He met the interested stare of a surly looking man at the next table, flushed, paid the check and got up and went out.

He was thinking furiously.

VII

Once again the Sheep were assembled in the Great Fold. The Ritual Questions and Answers had been chanted.

"Are you prepared for the Sacrament?"

"We are."

"Bind your eyes and hold out your right arm."

The Great Shepherd, magnificent in his green robe, moved along the waiting lines. Mr Cole, next to Miss Carnaby, gave a gulp of painful ecstasy as the needle pierced his flesh.

The Great Shepherd stood by Miss Carnaby. His hands touched her arm -

"No you don't. None of that..."

Words incredible - unprecedented. A scuffle, a roar of anger. Green veils were torn from eyes - to see an unbelievable sight - the Great Shepherd struggling in the grasp of the sheepskinned Mr Cole aided by another devotee.

In rapid professional tones, the erstwhile Mr Cole was saying:

"- and I have here a warrant for your arrest. I must warn you that anything you say may be used in evidence at your trial."

There were other figures now at the door of the Sheep Fold - blue-uniformed figures.

Someone cried: "It's the police. They're taking the Master..."

Everyone was shocked - horrified. To them the Great Shepherd was a martyr, suffering, as all great teachers suffer, from the ignorance and persecution of the outside world.

Meanwhile Detective Inspector Cole was carefully packing up the hypodermic syringe that had fallen from the Great Shepherd's hand.

VIII

"My brave colleague!"

Poirot shook Miss Carnaby warmly by the hand and introduced her to Chief Inspector Japp.

"First-class work, Miss Carnaby," said Chief Inspector Japp. "We couldn't have done it without you and that's a fact."

"Oh dear!" Miss Carnaby was fluttered. "It's so kind of you to say so, And I'm afraid, you know, that I've really enjoyed it all. The excitement, you know, and playing my part. I got quite carried away sometimes. I really felt I was one of those foolish women."

"That's where your success lay," said Japp. "You were the genuine article. Nothing less would have taken that gentleman in! He's a pretty astute scoundrel!"

Miss Carnaby turned to Poirot.

"That was a terrible moment in the teashop. I didn't know what to do. I just had to act on the spur of the moment."

"You were magnificent," said Poirot warmly. "For a moment I thought that either you or I had taken leave of our senses. I thought for one little minute that you meant it."

"It was such a shock," said Miss Carnaby. "Just when we had been talking confidentially. I saw in the glass that Lipscomb, who keeps the Lodge of the Sanctuary, was sitting at the table behind me. I don't know now if it was an accident or if he had actually followed me. As I say, I had to do the best I could on the spur of the minute and trust that you would understand."

Poirot smiled. "I did understand. There was only one person sitting near enough to overhear anything we said and as soon as I left the teashop I arranged to have him followed when he came out. When he went straight back to the Sanctuary I understood that I could rely on you and that you would not let me down - but I was afraid because it increased the danger for you."

"Was - was there really danger? What was there in the syringe?"

Japp said: "Will you explain, or shall I?"

Poirot said gravely: "Mademoiselle, this Dr Andersen had perfected a scheme of exploitation and murder - scientific murder. Most of his life has been spent in bacteriological research. Under a different name he has a chemical laboratory in Sheffield. There he makes cultures of various bacilli. It was his practice, at the Festivals, to inject into his followers a small but sufficient dose of Cannabis Indica - which is also known by the names of Hashish or Blang. This gives delusions of

grandeur and pleasurable enjoyment. It bound his devotees to him. These were the Spiritual Joys that he promised them."

"Most remarkable," said Miss Carnaby. "Really a most remarkable sensation."

Hercule Poirot nodded. "That was his general stock in trade - a dominating personality, the power of creating mass hysteria and the reactions produced by this drug. But he had a second aim in view.

"Lonely women, in their gratitude and fervour, made wills leaving their money to the Cult. One by one, these women died. They died in their own homes and apparently of natural causes. Without being too technical I will try to explain. It is possible to make intensified cultures of certain bacteria. The bacillus colicommunis, for instance, the cause of ulcerative colitis. Typhoid bacilli can be introduced into the system. So can the Pneumococcus. There is also what is termed Old Tuberculin which is harmless to a healthy person but which stimulates any old tubercular lesion into activity. You perceive the cleverness of the man? These deaths would occur in different parts of the country, with different doctors attending them and without any risk of arousing suspicion. He had also, I gather, cultivated a substance which had the power of delaying but intensifying the action of the chosen bacillus."

"He's a devil, if there ever was one!" said Chief Inspector Japp.

Poirot went on: "By my orders, you told him that you were a tuberculous subject. There was Old Tuberculin in the syringe when Cole arrested him. Since you were a healthy person it would not have harmed you, which is why I made you lay stress on your tubercular

trouble. I was terrified that even now he might choose some other germ, but I respected your courage and I had to let you take the risk."

"Oh, that's all right," said Miss Carnaby brightly. "I don't mind taking risks. I'm only frightened of bulls in fields and things like that. But have you enough evidence to convict this dreadful person?"

Japp grinned. "Plenty of evidence," he said. "We've got his laboratory and his cultures and the whole layout!"

Poirot said: "It is possible, I think, that he has committed a long line of murders. I may say that it was not because his mother was a Jewess that he was dismissed from that German University. That merely made a convenient tale to account for his arrival here and to gain sympathy for him. Actually, I fancy, he is of pure Aryan blood."

Miss Carnaby sighed.

"Qu'est ce qu'il y a?" asked Poirot.

"I was thinking," said Miss Carnaby, "of a marvellous dream I had at the First Festival - hashish, I suppose. I arranged the whole world so beautifully! No wars, no poverty, no ill health, no ugliness... no crime..."

"It must have been a fine dream," said Japp enviously.

Miss Carnaby jumped up. She said: "I must get home. Emily has been so anxious. And dear Augustus has been missing me terribly, I hear."

Hercule Poirot said with a smile: "He was afraid, perhaps, that like him, you were going to 'die for Hercule Poirot'!"

Chapter 11

THE APPLES OF THE HESPERIDES

Hercule Poirot looked thoughtfully into the face of the man behind the big mahogany desk. He noted the generous brow, the mean mouth, the rapacious line of the jaw and the piercing, visionary eyes. He understood from looking at the man why Emery Power had become the great financial force that he was.

And his eyes falling to the long delicate hands, exquisitely shaped, that lay on the desk, he understood, too, why Emery Power had attained renown as a great collector. He was known on both sides of the Atlantic as a connoisseur of works of art. His passion for the artistic went hand in hand with an equal passion for the historic. It was not enough for him that a thing should be beautiful - he demanded also that it should have a tradition behind it.

Emery Power was speaking. His voice was quiet - a small, distinct voice that was more effective than any mere volume of sound could have been.

"You do not, I know, take many cases nowadays. But I think you will take this one."

"Is it, then, an affair of great moment?"

Emery Power said: "It is of moment to me."

Poirot remained in an enquiring attitude, his head slightly on one side. He looked like a meditative robin.

The other went on:

"It concerns the recovery of a work of art. To be exact, a gold chased goblet, dating from the Renaissance. It is said to be the goblet used by Pope Alexander VI - Roderigo Borgia. He sometimes presented it to a favoured guest to drink from. That guest, M. Poirot, usually died."

"A pretty history," Poirot murmured.

"Its career has always been associated with violence. It has been stolen more than once. Murder has been done to gain possession of it. A trail of bloodshed has followed it through the ages."

"On account of its intrinsic value or for other reasons?"

"Its intrinsic value is certainly considerable. The workmanship is exquisite (it is said to have been made by Benvenuto Cellini). The design represents a tree round which a jewelled serpent is coiled and the apples on the tree are formed of very beautiful emeralds."

Poirot murmured with an apparent quickening of interest: "Apples?"

"The emeralds are particularly fine, so are the rubies in the serpent, but of course the real value of the cup is its historical associations. It was put up for sale by the Marchese di San Veratrino in 1929. Collectors bid against each other and I secured it finally for a sum equalling (at the then rate of exchange) thirty thousand pounds."

Poirot raised his eyebrows.

He murmured: "Indeed a princely sum! The Marchese di San Veratrino was fortunate."

Emery Power said: "When I really want a thing, I am willing to pay for it, M. Poirot."

Hercule Poirot said softly: "You have no doubt heard the Spanish proverb: 'Take what you want - and pay for it, says God.'"

For a moment the financier frowned - a swift light of anger showed in his eyes.

He said coldly: "You are by way of being a philosopher, M. Poirot."

"I have arrived at the age of reflection, Monsieur."

"Doubtless. But it is not reflection that will restore my goblet to me."

"You think not?"

"I fancy action will be necessary."

Hercule Poirot nodded placidly. "A lot of people make the same mistake. But I demand your pardon, Mr Power, we have digressed from the matter in hand. You were saying that you had bought the cup from the Marchese di San Veratrino?"

"Exactly. What I have now to tell you is that it was stolen before it actually came into my possession."

"How did that happen?"

"The Marchese's Palace was broken into on the night of the sale and eight or ten pieces of considerable value were stolen, including the goblet."

"What was done in the matter?"

Power shrugged his shoulders. "The police, of course, took the matter in hand. The robbery was recognised to be the work of a well-known international gang of thieves. Two of their number, a Frenchman called Dublay and an Italian called Riccovetti, were caught and tried - some of the stolen goods were found in their possession."

"But not the Borgia goblet?"

"But not the Borgia goblet. There were, as far as the police could ascertain, three men actually engaged in the robbery - the two I have just mentioned and a third, an Irishman named Patrick Casey. This last was an expert cat burglar. It was he who is said to have actually stolen

the things. Dublay was the brains of the group and planned their coups, Riccovetti drove the car and waited below for the goods to be lowered down to him."

"And the stolen goods? Were they split up into three parts?"

"Possibly. On the other hand, the articles that were recovered were those of least value. It seems possible that the more noteworthy and spectacular pieces had been hastily smuggled out of the country."

"What about the third man, Casey? Was he never brought to justice?"

"Not in the sense you mean. He was not a very young man. His muscles were stiffer than formerly. Two weeks later he fell from the fifth floor of a building and was killed instantly."

"Where was this?"

"In Paris. He was attempting to rob the house of the millionaire banker, Duvauglier."

"And the goblet has never been seen since?"

"Exactly."

"It has never been offered for sale?"

"I am quite sure it has not. I may say that not only the police, but also private inquiry agents, have been on the look out for it."

"What about the money you had paid over?"

"The Marchese, a very punctilious person, offered to refund it to me as the cup had been stolen from his house."

"But you did not accept?"

"No."

"Why was that?"

"Shall we say because I preferred to keep the matter in my own hands?"

"You mean that if you had accepted the Marchese's offer, the goblet, if recovered, would be his property, whereas now it is legally yours?"

"Exactly."

Poirot asked: "What was there behind that attitude of yours?"

Emery Power said with a smile: "You appreciate that point, I see. Well, M. Poirot, it is quite simple. I thought I knew who was actually in possession of the goblet."

"Very interesting. And who was it?"

"Sir Reuben Rosenthal. He was not only a fellow collector but he was at the time a personal enemy. We had been rivals in several business deals - and on the whole I had come out the better. Our animosity

culminated in this rivalry over the Borgia Goblet. Each of us was determined to possess it. It was more or less a point of honour. Our appointed representatives bid against each other at the sale."

"And your representative's final bid secured the treasure?"

"Not precisely. I took the precaution of having a second agent - ostensibly the representative of a Paris dealer. Neither of us, you understand, would have been willing to yield to the other, but to allow a third party to acquire the cup, with the possibility of approaching that third party quietly afterwards - that was a very different matter."

"In fact, une petite déception."

"Exactly."

"Which was successful - and immediately afterwards Sir Reuben discovered how he had been tricked?"

Power smiled.

It was a revealing smile.

Poirot said: "I see the position now. You believed that Sir Reuben, determined not to be beaten, deliberately commissioned the theft?"

Emery Power raised a hand.

"Oh no, no! It would not be so crude as that. It amounted to this - shortly afterwards Sir Reuben would have purchased a Renaissance goblet, provenance unspecified."

"The description of which would have been circulated by the police?"

"The goblet would not have been placed openly on view."

"You think it would have been sufficient for Sir Reuben to know that he possessed it?"

"Yes. Moreover, if I had accepted the Marchese's offer - it would have been possible for Sir Reuben to conclude a private arrangement with him later, thus allowing the goblet to pass legally into his possession."

He paused a minute and then said:

"But by retaining the legal ownership, there were still possibilities left open to me of recovering my property."

"You mean," said Poirot bluntly, "that you could arrange for it to be stolen from Sir Reuben."

"Not stolen, M. Poirot. I should have been merely recovering my own property."

"But I gather that you were not successful?"

"For a very good reason. Rosenthal has never had the goblet in his possession!"

"How do you know?"

"Recently there has been a merger of oil interests. Rosenthal's interests and mine now coincide. We are allies and not enemies. I spoke to him frankly on the subject and he at once assured me that the cup had never been in his possession."

"And you believe him?"

"Yes."

Poirot said thoughtfully: "Then for nearly ten years you have been, as they say in this country, barking up the mistaken tree?"

The financier said bitterly: "Yes, that is exactly what I have been doing!"

"And now - it is all to start again from the beginning?"

The other nodded.

"And that is where I come in? I am the dog that you set upon the cold scent - a very cold scent."

Emery Power said dryly: "If the affair were easy it would not have been necessary for me to send for you. Of course, if you think it impossible - "

He had found the right word.

Hercule Poirot drew himself up. He said coldly: "I do not recognise the word impossible, Monsieur! I ask myself only - is this affair sufficiently interesting for me to undertake?"

Emery Power smiled again.

He said: "It has this interest - you may name your own fee."

The small man looked at the big man.

He said softly: "Do you then desire this work of art so much? Surely not!"

Emery Power said: "Put it that I, like yourself, do not accept defeat."

Hercule Poirot bowed his head. He said: "Yes - put that way - I understand."

II

Inspector Wagstaffe was interested.

"The Veratrino cup? Yes, I remember all about it. I was in charge of the business this end. I speak a bit of Italiano, you know, and I went over

and had a powwow with the Macaronis. It's never turned up from that day to this. Funny thing, that."

"What is your explanation? A private sale?"

Wagstaffe shook his head.

"I doubt it. Of course it's remotely possible... No, my explanation is a good deal simpler. The stuff was cached - and the only man who knew where it was is dead."

"You mean Casey?"

"Yes. He may have cached it somewhere in Italy, or he may have succeeded in smuggling it out of the country. But he hid it and wherever he hid it, there it still is."

Hercule Poirot sighed. "It is a romantic theory. Pearls stuffed into plaster casts - what is the story - the Bust of Napoleon, is it not? But in this case it is not jewels - it is a large, solid gold cup. Not so easy to hide that, one would think."

Wagstaffe said vaguely: "Oh, I don't know. It could be done, I suppose. Under the floor-boards - something of that kind."

"Had Casey a house of his own?"

"Yes - in Liverpool." He grinned. "It wasn't under the floor-boards there. We made sure of that."

"What about his family?"

"Wife was a decent sort of woman - tubercular. Worried to death by her husband's way of life. She was religious - a devout Catholic - but couldn't make up her mind to leave him. She died a couple of years ago. Daughter took after her - she became a nun. The son was different - a chip off the old block. Last I heard of him he was doing time in America."

Hercule Poirot wrote, in his little notebook, America.

He said: "It is possible that Casey's son may have known the hiding-place?"

"Don't believe he did. It would have come into the fences' hands by now."

"The cup might have been melted down."

"It might. Quite possible, I should say. But I don't know - its supreme value is to collectors - and there's a lot of funny business goes on with collectors - you'd be surprised! Sometimes," said Wagstaffe virtuously, "I think collectors haven't any morals at all."

"Ah! Would you be surprised if Sir Reuben Rosenthal, for instance, were engaged in what you describe as 'funny business'?"

Wagstaffe grinned. "I wouldn't put it past him. He's not supposed to be very scrupulous where works of art are concerned."

"What about the other members of the gang?"

"Ricovetti and Dublay both got stiff sentences. I should imagine they'll be coming out about now."

"Dublay is a Frenchman, is he not?"

"Yes, he was the brains of the gang."

"Were there other members of it?"

"There was a girl - Red Kate she used to be called. Took a job as lady's-maid and found out all about a crib - where stuff was kept and so on. She went to Australia, I believe, after the gang broke up."

"Anyone else?"

"Chap called Yougouian was suspected of being in with them. He's a dealer. Headquarters in Stamboul but he has a shop in Paris. Nothing proved against him - but he's a slippery customer."

Poirot sighed. He looked at his little notebook. In it was written: America, Australia, Italy, France, Turkey...

He murmured: "I'll put a girdle round the earth -"

"Pardon?" said Inspector Wagstaffe.

"I was observing," said Hercule Poirot, "that a world tour seems indicated."

III

It was the habit of Hercule Poirot to discuss his cases with his capable valet, George. That is to say, Hercule Poirot would let drop certain observations to which George would reply with the worldly wisdom which he had acquired in the course of his career as a gentleman's gentleman.

"If you were faced, Georges," said Poirot, "with the necessity of conducting investigations in five different parts of the globe, how would you set about it?"

"Well, sir, air travel is very quick, though some say as it upsets the stomach. I couldn't say myself."

"One asks oneself," said Hercule Poirot, "what would Hercules have done?"

"You mean the bicycle chap, sir?"

"Or," pursued Hercule Poirot, "one simply asks, what did he do? And the answer, Georges, is that he travelled energetically. But he was forced in the end to obtain information - as some say - from Prometheus - others from Nereus."

"Indeed, sir?" said George. "I never heard of either of those gentlemen. Are they travel agencies, sir?"

Hercule Poirot, enjoying the sound of his own voice, went on:

"My client, Emery Power, understands only one thing - action! But it is useless to dispense energy by unnecessary action. There is a golden rule in life, Georges, never do anything yourself that others can do for you.

"Especially," added Hercule Poirot, rising and going to the bookshelf, "when expense is no object!"

He took from the shelf a file labelled with the letter D and opened it at the words "Detective Agencies - Reliable".

"The modern Prometheus," he murmured. "Be so obliging, Georges, as to copy out for me certain names and addresses. Messrs. Hankerton, New York. Messrs. Laden and Bosher, Sydney. Signor Giovanni Mezzi, Rome. M. Nahum, Stamboul. Messrs. Roget et Franconard, Paris."

He paused while George finished this. Then he said:

"And now be so kind as to look up the trains for Liverpool."

"Yes, sir, you are going to Liverpool, sir?"

"I am afraid so. It is possible, Georges, that I may have to go even further. But not just yet."

IV

It was three months later that Hercule Poirot stood on a rocky point and surveyed the Atlantic Ocean. Gulls rose and swooped down again with long melancholy cries. The air was soft and damp.

Hercule Poirot had the feeling, not uncommon in those who come to Inishgowlan for the first time, that he had reached the end of the world. He had never in his life imagined anything so remote, so desolate, so abandoned. It had beauty, a melancholy, haunted beauty, the beauty of a remote and incredible past. Here, in the west of Ireland, the Romans had never marched, tramp, tramp, tramp; had never fortified a camp; had never built a well-ordered, sensible, useful road. It was a land where common sense and an orderly way of life were unknown.

Hercule Poirot looked down at the tips of his patent-leather shoes and sighed. He felt forlorn and very much alone. The standards by which he lived were here not appreciated.

His eyes swept slowly up and down the desolate coast line, then once more out to sea. Somewhere out there, so tradition had it, were the Isles of the Blest, the Land of Youth...

He murmured to himself: "The Apple Tree, the Singing and the Gold..."

And suddenly, Hercule Poirot was himself again - the spell was broken, he was once more in harmony with his patent-leather shoes and natty, dark grey gent's suiting.

Not very far away he had heard the toll of a bell. He understood that bell. It was a sound he had been familiar with from early youth.

He set off briskly along the cliff. In about ten minutes he came in sight of the building on the cliff. A high wall surrounded it and a great wooden door studded with nails was set in the wall. Hercule Poirot came to this door and knocked. There was a vast iron knocker. Then he cautiously pulled at a rusty chain and a shrill little bell tinkled briskly inside the door.

A small panel in the door was pushed aside and showed a face. It was a suspicious face, framed in starched white. There was a distinct moustache on the upper lip, but the voice was the voice of a woman, it was the voice of what Hercule Poirot called a femme formidable.

It demanded his business.

"Is this the Convent of St Mary and All Angels?"

The formidable woman said with asperity: "And what else would it be?"

Hercule Poirot did not attempt to answer that. He said to the dragon:

"I would like to see the Mother Superior."

The dragon was unwilling, but in the end she yielded. Bars were drawn back, the door opened and Hercule Poirot was conducted to a small bare room where visitors to the Convent were received.

Presently a nun glided in, her rosary swinging at her waist.

Hercule Poirot was a Catholic by birth. He understood the atmosphere in which he found himself.

"I apologise for troubling you, ma mère," he said, "but you have here, I think, a religieuse who was, in the world, Kate Casey."

The Mother Superior bowed her head.

She said: "That is so. Sister Mary Ursula in religion."

Hercule Poirot said: "There is a certain wrong that needs righting. I believe that Sister Mary Ursula could help me. She has information that might be invaluable."

The Mother Superior shook her head. Her face was placid, her voice calm and remote. She said:

"Sister Mary Ursula cannot help you."

"But I assure you -"

He broke off. The Mother Superior said:

"Sister Mary Ursula died two months ago."

V

In the saloon bar of Jimmy Donovan's Hotel, Hercule Poirot sat uncomfortably against the wall. The hotel did not come up to his ideas of what a hotel should be. His bed was broken - so were two of the window panes in his room - thereby admitting that night air which Hercule Poirot distrusted so much. The hot water brought him had been tepid and the meal he had eaten was producing curious and painful sensations in his inside.

There were five men in the bar and they were all talking politics. For the most part Hercule Poirot could not understand what they said. In any case, he did not much care.

Presently he found one of the men sitting beside him. This was a man of slightly different class to the others. He had the stamp of the seedy townsman upon him.

He said with immense dignity: "I tell you, sir. I tell you - Pegeen's Pride hasn't got a chance, not a chance... bound to finish right down the course - right down the course. You take my tip... everybody ought to take my tip. Know who I am, sir, do you know, I shay? Atlas, thatsh who I am - Atlas of the Dublin Sun... been tipping winnersh all the season... Didn't I give Larry's Girl? Twenty-five to one - twenty-five to one. Follow Atlas and you can't go wrong."

Hercule Poirot regarded him with a strange reverence. He said, and his voice trembled:

"Mon Dieu, it is an omen!"

VI

It was some hours later. The moon showed from time to time, peeping out coquettishly from behind the clouds. Poirot and his new friend had walked some miles. The former was limping. The idea crossed his mind that there were, after all, other shoes - more suitable to country walking than patent-leather. Actually George had respectfully conveyed as much. "A nice pair of brogues," was what George had said.

Hercule Poirot had not cared for the idea. He liked his feet to look neat and well-shod. But now, tramping along this stony path, he realised that there were other shoes...

His companion said suddenly: "Is it the way the Priest would be after me for this? I'll not have a mortal sin upon my conscience."

Hercule Poirot said: "You are only restoring to Caesar the things which are Caesar's."

They had come to the wall of the Convent. Atlas prepared to do his part.

A groan burst from him and he exclaimed in low, poignant tones that he was destroyed entirely!

Hercule Poirot spoke with authority.

"Be quiet. It is not the weight of the world that you have to support - only the weight of Hercule Poirot."

VII

Atlas was turning over two new five pound notes.

He said hopefully: "Maybe I'll not remember in the morning the way I earned this. I'm after worrying that Father O'Reilly will be after me."

"Forget everything, my friend. Tomorrow the world is yours."

Atlas murmured: "And what'll I put it on? There's Working Lad, he's a grand horse, a lovely horse he is! And there's Sheila Boyne. 7 to 1 I'd get on her."

He paused.

"Was it my fancy now or did I hear you mention the name of a heathen god? Hercules, you said, and glory be to God, there's a Hercules running in the three-thirty tomorrow."

"My friend," said Hercule Poirot, "put your money on that horse. I tell you this, Hercules cannot fail."

And it is certainly true that on the following day Mr Rosslyn's Hercules very unexpectedly won the Boynan Stakes, starting price 60 to 1.

VIII

Deftly Hercule Poirot unwrapped the neatly done-up parcel. First the brown paper, then the wadding, lastly the tissue paper.

On the desk in front of Emery Power he placed a gleaming golden cup. Chased on it was a tree bearing apples of green emeralds.

The financier drew a deep breath. He said: "I congratulate you, M. Poirot."

Hercule Poirot bowed.

Emery Power stretched out a hand. He touched the rim of the goblet, drawing his finger round it.

He said in a deep voice: "Mine!"

Hercule Poirot agreed. "Yours!"

The other gave a sigh. He leaned back in his chair.

He said in a businesslike voice: "Where did you find it?"

Hercule Poirot said: "I found it on an altar."

Emery Power stared.

Poirot went on: "Casey's daughter was a nun. She was about to take her final vows at the time of her father's death. She was an ignorant but a devout girl. The cup was hidden in her father's house in Liverpool. She took it to the Convent wanting, I think, to atone for her father's sins. She gave it to be used to the glory of God. I do not think that the nuns themselves ever realised its value. They took it, probably, for a family heirloom. In their eyes it was a chalice and they used it as such."

Emery Power said: "An extraordinary story!" He added: "What made you think of going there?"

Poirot shrugged his shoulders.

"Perhaps - a process of elimination. And then there was the extraordinary fact that no one had ever tried to dispose of the cup. That looked, you see, as though it were in a place where ordinary

material values did not apply. I remembered that Patrick Casey's daughter was a nun."

Power said heartily: "Well, as I said before, I congratulate you. Let me know your fee and I'll write you a cheque."

Hercule Poirot said: "There is no fee."

The other stared at him. "What do you mean?"

"Did you ever read fairy stories when you were a child? The King in them would say: 'Ask of me what you will'?"

"So you are asking something?"

"Yes, but not money. Merely a simple request."

"Well, what is it? D'you want a tip for the markets?"

"That would be only money in another form. My request is much simpler than that."

"What is it?"

Hercule Poirot laid his hands on the cup.

"Send this back to the Convent."

There was a pause. Then Emery Power said:

"Are you quite mad?"

Hercule Poirot shook his head.

"No, I am not mad. See, I will show you something."

He picked up the goblet. With his finger-nail, he pressed hard into the open jaws of the snake that was coiled round the tree. Inside the cup a tiny portion of the gold chased interior slid aside leaving an aperture into the hollow handle.

Poirot said: "You see? This was the drinking cup of the Borgia Pope. Through this little hole the poison passed into the drink. You have said yourself that the history of this cup is evil. Violence and blood and evil passions have accompanied its possession. Evil will perhaps come to you in turn."

"Superstition!"

"Possibly. But why were you so anxious to possess this thing? Not for its beauty. Not for its value. You have a hundred - a thousand perhaps - beautiful and rare things. You wanted it to sustain your pride. You were determined not to be beaten. Eh bien, you are not beaten. You win! The goblet is in your possession. But now, why not make a great - a supreme gesture? Send it back to where it has dwelt in peace for nearly ten years. Let the evil of it be purified there. It belonged to the Church once - let it return to the Church. Let it stand once more on the altar, purified and absolved as we hope that the souls of men shall be also purified and absolved from their sins."

He leaned forward.

"Let me describe for you the place where I found it - the Garden of Peace, looking out over the Western Sea towards a forgotten Paradise of Youth and Eternal Beauty."

He spoke on, describing in simple words the remote charm of Inishgowlan.

Emery Power sat back, one hand over his eyes.

He said at last: "I was born on the west coast of Ireland. I left there as a boy to go to America."

Poirot said gently: "I heard that."

The financier sat up. His eyes were shrewd again. He said, and there was a faint smile on his lips:

"You are a strange man, M. Poirot. You shall have your way. Take the goblet to the Convent as a gift in my name. A pretty costly gift. Thirty thousand pounds - and what shall I get in exchange?"

Poirot said gravely: "The nuns will say Masses for your soul."

The rich man's smile widened - a rapacious, hungry smile.

He said: "So, after all, it may be an investment! Perhaps, the best one I ever made..."

IX

In the little parlour of the Convent, Hercule Poirot told his story and restored the chalice to the Mother Superior.

She murmured: "Tell him we thank him and we will pray for him."

Hercule Poirot said gently: "He needs your prayers."

"Is he then an unhappy man?"

Poirot said: "So unhappy that he has forgotten what happiness means. So unhappy that he does not know he is unhappy."

The nun said softly: "Ah, a rich man..."

Hercule Poirot said nothing - for he knew there was nothing to say.

Chapter 12

THE CAPTURE OF CERBERUS

Hercule Poirot, swaying to and fro in the tube train, thrown now against one body, now against another, thought to himself that there were too many people in the world! Certainly there were too many people in the Underground world of London at this particular moment (6:30 p.m.) of the evening. Heat, noise, crowd, contiguity - the unwelcome pressure of hands, arms, bodies, shoulders! Hemmed in and pressed around by strangers - and on the whole (he thought distastefully) a plain and uninteresting lot of strangers! Humanity seen thus en masse was not attractive. How seldom did one see a face sparkling with intelligence, how seldom a femme bien mise! What was this passion that attacked women for knitting under the most unpropitious conditions? A woman did not look her best knitting; the absorption, the glassy eyes, the restless, busy fingers! One needed the agility of a wild cat, and the willpower of a Napoleon to manage to knit in a crowded tube, but women managed it! If they succeeded in obtaining a seat, out came a miserable little strip of shrimp pink and click, click went the pins!

No repose, thought Poirot, no feminine grace! His elderly soul revolted from the stress and hurry of the modern world. All these young women who surrounded him - so alike, so devoid of charm, so lacking in rich, alluring femininity! He demanded a more flamboyant appeal. Ah! to see a femme du monde, chic, sympathetic, spirituelle - a woman with

ample curves, a woman ridiculously and extravagantly dressed! Once there had been such women. But now - now -

The train stopped at a station, people surged out, forcing Poirot back on to the points of knitting pins, surged in, squeezing him into even more sardine-like proximity with his fellow passengers. The train started off again with a jerk, Poirot was thrown against a stout woman with knobbly parcels, said "Pardon!" bounced off again into a long angular man whose attaché-case caught him in the small of the back. He said "Pardon!" again. He felt his moustaches becoming limp and uncurled. Quel enfer! Fortunately the next station was his!

It was also the station of what seemed to be about a hundred and fifty other people, since it happened to be Piccadilly Circus. Like a great tidal wave they flowed out on to the platform. Presently Poirot was again jammed tightly on an escalator being carried upwards towards the surface of the earth.

Up, thought Poirot, from the Infernal Regions... How exquisitely painful was a suit-case rammed into one's knees from behind on an ascending escalator!

At that moment, a voice cried his name. Startled, he raised his eyes. On the opposite escalator, the one descending, his unbelieving eyes saw a vision from the past. A woman of full and flamboyant form; her luxuriant henna red hair crowned with a small plastron of straw to which was attached a positive platoon of brilliantly feathered little birds. Exotic-looking furs dripped from her shoulders.

Her crimson mouth opened wide, her rich, foreign voice echoed resoundingly. She had good lungs.

"It is!" she screamed. "But it is! Mon cher Hercule Poirot! We must meet again! I insist!"

But Fate itself is not more inexorable than the behaviour of two escalators moving in an inverse direction. Steadily, remorselessly, Hercule Poirot was borne upward, and the Countess Vera Rossakoff was borne downwards.

Twisting himself sideways, leaning over the balustrade, Poirot cried despairingly:

"Chère Madame - where can I find you?"

Her reply came to him faintly from the depths. It was unexpected, yet seemed at the moment strangely apposite.

"In Hell..."

Hercule Poirot blinked. He blinked again. Suddenly he rocked on his feet. Unawares he had reached the top - and had neglected to step off properly. The crowd spread out round him. A little to one side a dense crowd was pressing on to the downward escalator. Should he join them? Had that been the Countess's meaning? No doubt that travelling in the bowels of the earth at the rush hour was Hell. If that had been the Countess's meaning, he could not agree with her more...

Resolutely Poirot crossed over, sandwiched himself into the descending crowd and was borne back into the depths. At the foot of the escalator no sign of the Countess. Poirot was left with a choice of blue, amber, etc. lights to follow.

Was the Countess patronising the Bakerloo or the Piccadilly line? Poirot visited each platform in turn. He was swept about amongst surging crowds boarding or leaving trains, but nowhere did he espy that flamboyant Russian figure, the Countess Vera Rossakoff.

Weary, battered, and infinitely chagrined, Hercule Poirot once more ascended to ground level and stepped out into the hubbub of Piccadilly Circus. He reached home in a mood of pleasurable excitement.

It is the misfortune of small precise men to hanker after large and flamboyant women. Poirot had never been able to rid himself of the fatal fascination the Countess held for him. Though it was something like twenty years since he had seen her last the magic still held. Granted that her makeup now resembled a scene-painter's sunset, with the woman under the make-up well hidden from sight, to Hercule Poirot she still represented the sumptuous and the alluring. The little bourgeois was still thrilled by the aristocrat. The memory of the adroit way she stole jewellery roused the old admiration. He remembered the magnificent aplomb with which she had admitted the fact when taxed with it. A woman in a thousand - in a million! And he had met her again - and lost her!

"In Hell," she had said. Surely his ears had not deceived him? She had said that?

But what had she meant by it? Had she meant London's Underground Railways? Or were her words to be taken in a religious sense? Surely, even if her own way of life made Hell the most plausible destination for her after this life, surely - surely her Russian courtesy would not suggest that Hercule Poirot was necessarily bound for the same place?

No, she must have meant something quite different. She must have meant - Hercule Poirot was brought up short against bewilderment. What an intriguing, what an unpredictable woman! A lesser woman might have shrieked "The Ritz" or "Claridge." But Vera Rossakoff had cried poignantly and impossibly: "Hell!"

Poirot sighed. But he was not defeated. In his perplexity he took the simplest and most straightforward course on the following morning, he asked his secretary, Miss Lemon.

Miss Lemon was unbelievably ugly and incredibly efficient. To her Poirot was nobody in particular - he was merely her employer. She gave him excellent service. Her private thoughts and dreams were concentrated on a new filing system which she was slowly perfecting in the recesses of her mind.

"Miss Lemon, may I ask you a question?"

"Of course, M. Poirot." Miss Lemon took her fingers off the typewriter keys and waited attentively.

"If a friend asked you to meet her - or him - in Hell, what would you do?"

Miss Lemon, as usual, did not pause. She knew, as the saying goes, all the answers.

"It would be advisable, I think, to ring up for a table," she said.

Hercule Poirot stared at her in a stupefied fashion.

He said, staccato: "You - would - ring - up - for - a table?"

Miss Lemon nodded and drew the telephone towards her.

"Tonight?" she asked, and taking assent for granted since he did not speak, she dialled briskly.

"Temple Bar 14578? Is that Hell? Will you please reserve a table for two. M. Hercule Poirot. Eleven o'clock."

She replaced the receiver and her fingers hovered over the keys of her typewriter. A slight - a very slight look of impatience was discernible upon her face. She had done her part, the look seemed to say, surely her employer could now leave her to get on with what she was doing?

But Hercule Poirot required explanations.

"What is it, then, this Hell?" he demanded.

Miss Lemon looked slightly surprised.

"Oh didn't you know, M. Poirot? It's a night club - quite new and very much the rage at present - run by some Russian woman, I believe. I can fix up for you to become a member before this evening quite easily."

Whereupon, having wasted (as she made obvious) quite time enough. Miss Lemon broke into a perfect fusillade of efficient typing.

At eleven that evening Hercule Poirot passed through a doorway over which a Neon sign discreetly showed one letter at a time. A gentleman in red tails received him and took from him his coat.

A gesture directed him to a flight of wide shallow stairs leading downwards. On each step a phrase was written.

The first one ran: "I meant well."

The second: "Wipe the slate clean and start afresh."

The third: "I can give it up any time I like."

"The good intentions that pave the way to Hell," Hercule Poirot murmured appreciatively. "C'est bien imaginé, ça!"

He descended the stairs. At the foot was a tank of water with scarlet lilies. Spanning it was a bridge shaped like a boat. Poirot crossed by it.

On his left in a kind of marble grotto sat the largest and ugliest and blackest dog Poirot had ever seen! It sat up very straight and gaunt

and immovable. It was perhaps, he thought, (and hoped!) not real. But at that moment the dog turned its ferocious and ugly head and from the depths of its black body a low, rumbling growl was emitted. It was a terrifying sound.

And then Poirot noticed a decorative basket of small round dog biscuits. They were labelled, "A sop for Cerberus!"

It was on them that the dog's eyes were fixed. Once again the low, rumbling growl was heard. Hastily Poirot picked up a biscuit and tossed it towards the great hound.

A cavernous red mouth yawned, then came a snap as the powerful jaws closed again. Cerberus had accepted his sop! Poirot moved on through an open doorway.

The room was not a big one. It was dotted with little tables, a space of dancing floor in the middle. It was lighted with small red lamps, there were frescoes on the walls, and at the far end was a vast grill at which officiated chefs dressed as devils with tails and horns.

All this Poirot took in before, with all the impulsiveness of her Russian nature, Countess Vera Rossakoff, resplendent in scarlet evening dress, bore down upon him with outstretched hands.

"Ah, you have come! My dear - my very dear friend! what a joy to see you again! After such years - so many - how many? - No, we will not say how many! To me it seems but as yesterday. You have not changed - not in the least have you changed!"

"Nor you, chère amie," Poirot exclaimed, bowing over her hand.

Nevertheless he was fully conscious now that twenty years is twenty years. Countess Rossakoff might not uncharitably have been described as a ruin. But she was at least a spectacular ruin. The exuberance, the full-blooded enjoyment of life was still there, and she knew, none better, how to flatter a man.

She drew Poirot with her to a table at which two other people were sitting.

"My friend, my celebrated friend, M. Hercule Poirot," she announced. "He who is the terror of evildoers! I was once afraid of him myself, but now I lead a life of the extreme, the most virtuous dullness. Is it not so?"

The tall thin elderly man to whom she spoke said, "Never say dull, Countess."

"The Professor Liskeard," the Countess announced. "He who knows everything about the past and who gave me the valuable hints for the decorations here."

The Archaeologist shuddered slightly.

"If I'd known what you meant to do!" he murmured. "The result is so appalling."

Poirot observed the frescoes more closely. On the wall facing him Orpheus and his jazz band played, while Eurydice looked hopefully

towards the grill. On the opposite wall Osiris and Isis seemed to be throwing an Egyptian underworld boating party. On the third wall some bright young people were enjoying mixed bathing in a state of Nature.

"The Country of the Young," explained the Countess and added in the same breath, completing her introductions: "And this is my little Alice."

Poirot bowed to the second occupant of the table, a severe-looking girl in a check coat and skirt. She wore horned-rimmed glasses.

"She is very, very clever," said Countess Rossakoff. "She has a degree and she is a psychologist and she knows all the reasons why lunatics are lunatics! It is not, as you might think, because they are mad! No, there are all sorts of other reasons! I find that very peculiar."

The girl called Alice smiled kindly but a little disdainfully. She asked the Professor in a firm voice if he would like to dance. He appeared flattered but dubious.

"My dear young lady, I fear I only waltz."

"This is a waltz," said Alice patiently.

They got up and danced. They did not dance well.

The Countess Rossakoff sighed. Following out a train of thought of her own, she murmured, "And yet she is not really bad-looking..."

"She does not make the most of herself," said Poirot judicially.

"Frankly," cried the Countess, "I cannot understand the young people of nowadays. They do not try any more to please - always, in my youth, I tried - the colours that suited me - a little padding in the frocks - the corset laced tight round the waist - the hair, perhaps, a more interesting shade -"

She pushed back the heavy Titian tresses from her forehead - it was undeniable that she, at least, was still trying and trying hard!

"To be content with what Nature has given you, that - that is stupid! It is also arrogant! The little Alice she writes pages of long words about Sex, but how often, I ask you, does a man suggest to her that they should go to Brighton for the weekend? It is all long words and work, and the welfare of the workers, and the future of the world. It is very worthy, but I ask you, is it gay? And look, I ask you, how drab these young people have made the world! It is all regulations and prohibitions! Not so when I was young."

"That reminds me, how is your son, Madame?" At the last moment he substituted "son", for "little boy", remembering that twenty years had passed.

The Countess's face lit up with enthusiastic motherhood.

"The beloved angel! So big now, such shoulders, so handsome! He is in America. He builds there - bridges, banks, hotels, department stores, railways, anything the Americans want!"

Poirot looked slightly puzzled.

"He is then an engineer? Or an architect?"

"What does it matter?" demanded the Countess. "He is adorable! He is wrapped up in iron girders, and machinery, and things called stresses. The kind of things that I have never understood in the least. But we adore each other - always we adore each other! And so for his sake I adore the little Alice. But yes, they are engaged. They meet on a plane or a boat or a train, and they fall in love, all in the midst of talking about the welfare of the workers. And when she comes to London she comes to see me and I take her to my heart." The Countess clasped her arms across her vast bosom, "And I say - 'You and Niki love each other - so I too love you - but if you love him why do you leave him in America?' And she talks about her 'job' and the book she is writing, and her career, and frankly I do not understand, but I have always said: 'One must be tolerant'." She added all in one breath, "And what do you think, cher ami, of all this that I have imagined here?"

"It is very well imagined," said Poirot, looking round him approvingly. "It is chic!"

The place was full and it had about it that unmistakable air of success which cannot be counterfeited. There were languid couples in full evening dress, Bohemians in corduroy trousers, stout gentlemen in business suits. The band, dressed as devils, dispensed hot music. No doubt about it. Hell had caught on.

"We have all kinds here," said the Countess. "That is as it should be, is it not? The gates of Hell are open to all?"

"Except, possibly, to the poor?" Poirot suggested.

The Countess laughed. "Are we not told that it is difficult for a rich man to enter the Kingdom of Heaven? Naturally, then, he should have priority in Hell."

The Professor and Alice were returning to the table. The Countess got up.

"I must speak to Aristide."

She exchanged some words with the head waiter, a lean Mephistopheles, then went round from table to table, speaking to the guests.

The Professor, wiping his forehead and sipping a glass of wine, remarked:

"She is a personality, is she not? People feel it."

He excused himself as he went over to speak to someone at another table. Poirot, left alone with the severe Alice, felt slightly embarrassed as he met the cold blue of her eyes. He recognised that she was actually quite good-looking, but he found her distinctly alarming.

"I do not yet know your last name," he murmured.

"Cunningham. Dr Alice Cunningham. You have known Vera in past days, I understand?"

"Twenty years ago it must be."

"I find her a very interesting study," said Dr Alice Cunningham. "Naturally I am interested in her as the mother of the man I am going to marry, but I am interested in her from the professional standpoint as well."

"Indeed?"

"Yes. I am writing a book on criminal psychology. I find the night life of this place very illuminating. We have several criminal types who come here regularly. I have discussed their early life with some of them. Of course you know all about Vera's criminal tendencies - I mean that she steals?"

"Why, yes - I know that," said Poirot, slightly taken aback.

"I call it the Magpie complex myself. She takes, you know, always glittering things. Never money. Always jewels. I find that as a child she was petted and indulged but very much shielded. Life was unendurably dull for her - dull and safe. Her nature demanded drama - it craved for punishment. That is at the root of her indulgence in theft. She wants the importance, the notoriety of being punished!"

Poirot objected, "Her life can surely not have been safe and dull as a member of the ancien régime in Russia during the Revolution?"

A look of faint amusement showed in Miss Cunningham's pale blue eyes.

"Ah," she said. "A member of the ancien régime? She has told you that?"

"She is undeniably an aristocrat," said Poirot staunchly, fighting back certain uneasy memories of the wildly varying accounts of her early life told him by the Countess herself.

"One believes what one wishes to believe," remarked Miss Cunningham, casting a professional eye on him.

Poirot felt alarmed. In a moment, he felt, he would be told what was his complex. He decided to carry the war into the enemy's camp. He enjoyed the Countess Rossakoff's society partly because of her aristocratic provenance, and he was not going to have his enjoyment spoiled by a spectacled little girl with boiled gooseberry eyes and a degree in psychology!

"Do you know what I find astonishing?" he asked.

Alice Cunningham did not admit in so many words that she did not know. She contented herself with looking bored but indulgent.

Poirot went on: "It amazes me that you - who are young, and who could look pretty if you took the trouble - well, it amazes me that you do not take the trouble! You wear the heavy coat and skirt with the big pockets as though you were going to play the game of golf. But it is not here the golf links, it is the underground cellar with the temperature of 71 Fahrenheit, and your nose it is hot and shines, but you do not powder it, and the lipstick you put it on your mouth without interest, without emphasizing the curve of the lips! You are a woman, but you do

not draw attention to the fact of being a woman. And I say to you 'Why not?' It is a pity!"

For a moment he had the satisfaction of seeing Alice Cunningham look human. He even saw a spark of anger in her eyes. Then she regained her attitude of smiling contempt.

"My dear M. Poirot," she said, "I'm afraid you're out of touch with the modern ideology. It is fundamentals that matter - not the trappings."

She looked up as a dark and very beautiful young man came towards them.

"This is a most interesting type," she murmured with zest. "Paul Varesco! Lives on women and has strange depraved cravings! I want him to tell me more about a nursery governess who looked after him when he was three years old."

A moment or two later she was dancing with the young man. He danced divinely. As they drifted near Poirot's table, Poirot heard her say: "And after the summer at Bognor she gave you a toy crane? A crane - yes, that's very suggestive."

For a moment Poirot allowed himself to toy with the speculation that Miss Cunningham's interest in criminal types might lead one day to her mutilated body being found in a lonely wood. He did not like Alice Cunningham, but he was honest enough to realise that the reason for his dislike was the fact that she was so palpably unimpressed by Hercule Poirot! His vanity suffered!

Then he saw something that momentarily put Alice Cunningham out of his head. At a table on the opposite side of the floor sat a fair-haired young man. He wore evening dress, his whole demeanour was that of one who lives a life of ease and pleasure. Opposite him sat the right kind of expensive girl. He was gazing at her in a fatuous and foolish manner. Any one seeing them might have murmured: "The idle rich!" Nevertheless Poirot knew very well that the young man was neither rich nor idle. He was, in fact, Detective Inspector Charles Stevens, and it seemed probable to Poirot that Detective Inspector Stevens was here on business...

II

On the following morning Poirot paid a visit to Scotland Yard to his old friend Chief Inspector Japp.

Japp's reception of his tentative inquiries was unexpected.

"You old fox!" said Japp affectionately. "How you get on to these things beats me!"

"But I assure you I know nothing - nothing at all! It is just idle curiosity."

Japp said that Poirot could tell that to the Marines!

"You want to know all about this place Hell? Well, on the surface it's just another of these things. It's caught on! They must be making a lot of money, though of course the expenses are pretty high. There's a Russian woman ostensibly running it, calls herself the Countess Something or other -"

"I am acquainted with Countess Rossakoff," said Poirot coldly. "We are old friends."

"But she's just a dummy," Japp went on. "She didn't put up the money. It might be the head waiter chap, Aristide Papopolous - he's got an interest in it - but we don't believe it's really his show either. In fact we don't know whose show it is!"

"And Inspector Stevens goes there to find out?"

"Oh, you saw Stevens, did you? Lucky young dog landing a job like that at the taxpayer's expense! A fat lot he's found out so far!"

"What do you suspect there is to find out?"

"Dope! Drug racket on a large scale. And the dope's being paid for not in money, but in precious stones."

"Aha?"

"This is how it goes. Lady Blank - or the Countess of Whatnot - finds it hard to get hold of cash - and in any case doesn't want to draw large sums out of the Bank. But she's got jewels - family heirlooms sometimes! They're taken along to a place for 'cleaning' or 'resetting' -

there the stones are taken out of their settings and replaced with paste. The unset stones are sold over here or on the Continent. It's all plain sailing - there's been no robbery, no hue and cry after them. Say sooner or later it's discovered that a certain tiara or necklace is a fake? Lady Blank is all innocence and dismay - can't imagine how or when the substitution can have taken place - necklace has never been out of her possession! Sends the poor, perspiring police off on wild-goose chases after dismissed maids, or doubtful butlers, or suspicious window-cleaners.

"But we're not quite so dumb as these social birds think! We had several cases come up one after another - and we found a common factor - all the women showed signs of dope - nerves, irritability - twitching, pupils of eyes dilated, etcetera. Question was: Where were they getting the dope from and who was running the racket?"

"And the answer, you think, is this place Hell?"

"We believe it's the headquarters of the whole racket. We've discovered where the work on the jewellery is done - a place called Golconda Ltd. - respectable enough on the surface, high-class imitation jewellery. There's a nasty bit of work called Paul Varesco - ah, I see you know him?"

"I have seen him - in Hell."

"That's where I'd like to see him - in the real place! He's as bad as they make 'em - but women - even decent women - eat out of his hand! He's got some kind of connection with Golconda Ltd. and I'm pretty sure he's the man behind Hell. It's ideal for his purpose - everyone goes

there, society women, professional crooks - it's the perfect meeting place."

"You think the exchange - jewels for dope - takes place there?"

"Yes. We know the Golconda side of it - we want the other - the dope side. We want to know who's supplying the stuff and where it's coming from."

"And so far you have no idea?"

"I think it's the Russian woman - but we've no evidence. A few weeks ago we thought we were getting somewhere. Varesco went to the Golconda place, picked up some stones there and went straight from there to Hell. Stevens was watching him, but he didn't actually see him pass the stuff. When Varesco left we picked him up - the stones weren't on him. We raided the club, rounded up everybody! Result, no stones, no dope!"

"A fiasco, in fact?"

Japp winced. "You're telling me! Might have got in a bit of a jam, but luckily in the round up we got Peverel (you know, the Battersea murderer). Pure luck, he was supposed to have got away to Scotland. One of our smart sergeants spotted him from his photos. So all's well that ends well - kudos for us - terrific boost for the club - it's been more packed than ever since!"

Poirot said: "But it does not advance the dope inquiry. There is, perhaps, a place of concealment on the premises?"

"Must be. But we couldn't find it. Went over the place with a toothcomb. And between you and me, there's been an unofficial search as well -" he winked. "Strictly on the Q.T. Spot of breaking and entering. Not a success, our 'unofficial' man nearly got torn to pieces by that ruddy great dog! It sleeps on the premises."

"Aha, Cerberus?"

"Yes. Silly name for a dog - to call it after a packet of salt."

"Cerberus," murmured Poirot thoughtfully.

"Suppose you try your hand at it, Poirot," suggested Japp. "It's a pretty problem and worth doing. I hate the drug racket, destroys people body and soul. That really is Hell if you like!"

Poirot murmured meditatively: "It would round off things - yes. Do you know what the twelfth labour of Hercules was?"

"No idea."

"The Capture of Cerberus. It is appropriate, is it not?"

"Don't know what you're talking about, old man, but remember: 'Dog eats Man' is news." And Japp leaned back roaring with laughter.

III

"I wish to speak to you with the utmost seriousness," said Poirot.

The hour was early, the Club as yet nearly empty. The Countess and Poirot sat at a small table near the doorway.

"But I do not feel serious," she protested. "La petite Alice, she is always serious and, entre nous, I find it very boring. My poor Niki, what fun will he have? None."

"I entertain for you much affection," continued Poirot steadily. "And I do not want to see you in what is called the jam."

"But it is absurd what you say there! I am on top of the world, the money it rolls in!"

"You own this place?"

The Countess's eye became slightly evasive.

"Certainly," she replied.

"But you have a partner?"

"Who told you that?" asked the Countess sharply.

"Is your partner Paul Varesco?"

"Oh! Paul Varesco! What an idea!"

"He has a bad - a criminal record. Do you realise that you have criminals frequenting this place?"

The Countess burst out laughing.

"There speaks the bon bourgeois! Naturally I realise! Do you not see that that is half the attraction of this place? These young people from Mayfair - they get tired of seeing their own kind round them in the West End. They come here, they see the criminals; the thief, the blackmailer, the confidence trickster - perhaps, even, the murderer - the man who will be in the Sunday papers next week! It is exciting, that - they think they are seeing life! So does the prosperous man who all the week sells the knickers, the stockings, the corsets! What a change from his respectable life and his respectable friends! And then, a further thrill - there at a table, stroking his moustache, is the Inspector from Scotland Yard - an Inspector in tails!"

"So you knew that?" said Poirot softly.

Her eyes met his and he smiled.

"Mon cher ami, I am not so simple as you seem to suppose!"

"Do you also deal in drugs here?"

"Ah, ça no!" The Countess spoke sharply. "That would be an abomination!"

Poirot looked at her for a moment or two, then he sighed.

"I believe you," he said. "But in that case it is all the more necessary that you tell me who really owns this place."

"I own it," she snapped.

"On paper, yes. But there is someone behind you."

"Do you know, mon ami, I find you altogether too curious? Is he not much too curious, Dou-dou?"

Her voice dropped to a coo as she spoke the last words and she threw the duck bone from her plate to the big black hound who caught it with a ferocious snap of the jaws.

"What is it that you call that animal?" asked Poirot, diverted.

"C'est mon petit Dou-dou!"

"But it is ridiculous, a name like that!"

"But he is adorable! He is a police dog! He can do anything - anything - Wait!"

She rose, looked round her, and suddenly snatched up a plate with a large succulent steak which had just been deposited before a diner at a nearby table. She crossed to the marble niche and put the plate down in front of the dog, at the same time uttering a few words in Russian.

Cerberus gazed in front of him. The steak might not have existed.

"You see? And it is not just a matter of minutes! No, he will remain like that for hours if need be!"

Then she murmured a word and like lightning Cerberus bent his long neck and the steak disappeared as though by magic.

Vera Rossakoff flung her arms round the dog's neck and embraced him passionately, rising on tip-toe to do so.

"See how gentle he can be!" she cried. "For me, for Alice, for his friends - they can do what they like! But one has but to give him the word and Presto! I can assure you he would tear a - police inspector, for instance - into little pieces! Yes, into little pieces!"

She burst out laughing.

"I would have but to say the word -"

Poirot interrupted hastily. He mistrusted the Countess's sense of humour. Inspector Stevens might be in real danger.

"Professor Liskeard wants to speak to you."

The Professor was standing reproachfully at her elbow.

"You took my steak," he complained. "Why did you take my steak? It was a good steak!"

IV

"Thursday night, old man," said Japp. "That's when the balloon goes up. It's Andrews' pigeon, of course - Narcotic Squad - but he'll be delighted to have you horn in. No, thanks, I won't have any of your fancy sirops. I have to take care of my stomach. Is that whisky I see over there? That's more the ticket!"

Setting his glass down, he went on:

"We've solved the problem, I think. There's another way out at that Club - and we've found it!"

"Where?"

"Behind the grill. Part of it swings round."

"But surely you would see -"

"No, old boy. When the raid started, the lights went out - switched off at the main - and it took us a minute or two to get them turned on again. Nobody got out the front way because it was being watched, but it's clear now that somebody could have nipped out by the secret way with the doings. We've been examining the house behind the Club - and that's how we tumbled to the trick."

"And you propose to do - what?"

Japp winked. "Let it go according to plan - the police appear, the lights go out - and somebody's waiting on the other side of that secret door to see who comes through. This time we've got 'em!"

"Why Thursday?"

Again Japp winked. "We've got the Golconda pretty well taped now. There will be stuff going out of there on Thursday. Lady Carrington's emeralds."

"You permit," said Poirot, "that I too make one or two little arrangements?"

Sitting at his usual small table near the entrance on Thursday night Poirot studied his surroundings. As usual Hell was going with a swing!

The Countess was even more flamboyantly made up than usual if that was possible. She was being very Russian tonight, clapping her hands and screaming with laughter. Paul Varesco had arrived. Sometimes he wore faultless evening dress, sometimes, as tonight, he chose to present himself in a kind of apache get-up, tightly-buttoned coat, scarf round the neck. He looked vicious and attractive. Detaching himself from a stout, middle-aged woman plastered with diamonds, he leaned over Alice Cunningham who was sitting at a table writing busily in a little notebook and asked her to dance. The stout woman scowled at Alice and looked at Varesco with adoring eyes.

There was no adoration in Miss Cunningham's eyes. They gleamed with pure scientific interest, and Poirot caught fragments of their conversation as they danced past him. She had progressed beyond the nursery governess and was now seeking information about the matron at Paul's preparatory school.

When the music stopped, she sat down by Poirot looking happy and excited.

"Most interesting," she said. "Varesco will be one of the most important cases in my book. The symbolism is unmistakable. Trouble about the vests for instance - for vest read hair shirt with all its associations - and the whole thing becomes quite plain. You may say that he's a definitely criminal type but a cure can be effected -"

"That she can reform a rake,-" said Poirot, "has always been one of woman's dearest illusions!"

Alice Cunningham looked at him coldly.

"There is nothing personal about this, M. Poirot."

"There never is," said Poirot. "It is always pure disinterested altruism - but the object of it is usually an attractive member of the opposite sex. Are you interested, for instance, in where I went to school, or what was the attitude of the matron to me?"

"You are not a criminal type," said Miss Cunningham.

"Do you know a criminal type when you see one?"

"Certainly I do."

Professor Liskeard joined them. He sat down by Poirot.

"Are you talking about criminals? You should study the criminal code of Hammurabi, M. Poirot. 1800 BC. Most interesting. The man who is caught stealing during a fire shall be thrown into the fire."

He stared pleasurably ahead of him towards the electric grill.

"And there are older, Sumerian laws. If a wife hateth her husband and saith unto him, 'Thou art not my husband' they shall throw her into the river. Cheaper and easier than the divorce court. But if a husband says that to his wife he only has to pay her a certain measure of silver. Nobody throws him in the river."

"The same old story," said Alice Cunningham. "One law for the man and one for the woman."

"Women, of course, have a greater appreciation of monetary value," said the Professor thoughtfully. "You know," he added, "I like this place. I come here most evenings. I don't have to pay. The Countess arranged that - very nice of her - in consideration of my having advised her about the decorations, she says. Not that they're anything to do with me really - I'd no idea what she was asking me questions for - and naturally she and the artist have got everything quite wrong. I hope nobody will ever know I had the remotest connection with the dreadful things. I should never live it down. But she's a wonderful woman -

rather like a Babylonian, I always think. The Babylonians were good women of business, you know -"

The Professor's words were drowned in a sudden chorus. The word 'Police' was heard - women rose to their feet, there was a babel of sound. The lights went out and so did the electric grill.

As an undertone to the turmoil the Professor's voice went on tranquilly reciting various excerpts from the laws of Hammurabi.

When the lights went on again Hercule Poirot was halfway up the wide, shallow steps. The police officers by the door saluted him, and he passed out into the street and strolled to the corner. Just round the corner, pressed against the wall was a small and odoriferous man with a red nose. He spoke in an anxious, husky whisper.

"I'm 'ere guv'nor. Time for me to do my stuff?"

"Yes. Go on."

"There's an awful lot of coppers about!"

"That is all right. They've been told about you."

"I 'ope they won't interfere, that's all?"

"They will not interfere. You're sure you can accomplish what you have set out to do? The animal in question is both large and fierce."

"'E won't be fierce to me," said the little man confidently. "Not with what I've got 'ere! Any dog'll follow me to Hell for it!"

"In this case," murmured Hercule Poirot, "he has to follow you out of Hell!"

V

In the small hours of the morning the telephone rang. Poirot picked up the receiver.

Japp's voice said: "You asked me to ring you."

"Yes, indeed. Eh bien?"

"No dope - we got the emeralds."

"Where?"

"In Professor Liskeard's pocket."

"Professor Liskeard?"

"Surprises you, too? Frankly I don't know what to think! He looked as astonished as a baby, stared at them, said he hadn't the faintest idea how they got in his pocket, and dammit I believe he was speaking the

truth! Varesco could have slipped them into his pocket easily enough in the blackout. I can't see a man like old Liskeard being mixed up in this sort of business. He belongs to all these highfalutin' societies, why he's even connected with the British Museum! The only thing he ever spends money on is books, and musty old second-hand books at that. No, he doesn't fit. I'm beginning to think we're wrong about the whole thing - there never has been any dope in that Club."

"Oh, yes there has, my friend, it was there tonight. Tell me, did no one come out through your secret way?"

"Yes, Prince Henry of Scandenberg and his equerry - he only arrived in England yesterday. Vitamian Evans, the Cabinet Minister (devil of a job being a Labour Minister, you have to be so careful! Nobody minds a Tory politician spending money on riotous living because the taxpayers think it's his own money - but when it's a Labour man the public feel it's their money he's spending! And so it is in a manner of speaking.) Lady Beatrice Viner was the last - she's getting married the day after tomorrow to the priggish young Duke of Leominster. I don't believe any of that lot were mixed up in this."

"You believe rightly. Nevertheless, the dope was in the Club and someone took it out of the Club."

"Who did?"

"I did, mon ami," said Poirot softly.

He replaced the receiver, cutting off Japp's spluttering noises, as a bell trilled out. He went and opened the front door. The Countess Rossakoff sailed in.

"If it were not that we are, alas, too old, how compromising this would be!" she exclaimed. "You see, I have come as you told me to do in your note. There is, I think, a policeman behind me, but he can stay in the street. And now, my friend, what is it?"

Poirot gallantly relieved her of her fox furs.

"Why did you put those emeralds in Professor Liskeard's pocket?" he demanded. "Ce n'est pas gentille, ce que vous avez fait là!"

The Countess's eyes opened wide.

"Naturally, it was in your pocket I meant to put the emeralds!"

"Oh, in my pocket?"

"Certainly. I cross hurriedly to the table where you usually sit - but the lights they are out and I suppose by inadvertence I put them in the Professor's pocket."

"And why did you wish to put stolen emeralds in my pocket?"

"It seemed to me - I had to think quickly, you understand - the best thing to do!"

"Really, Vera, you are impayable!"

"But, dear friend, consider! The police arrive, the lights go out (our little private arrangement for the patrons who must not be embarrassed) and a hand takes my bag off the table. I snatch it back, but I feel through the velvet something hard inside. I slip my hand in, I find what I know by touch to be jewels and I comprehend at once who has put them there!"

"Oh you do?"

"Of course I do! It is that salaud! It is that lizard, that monster, that double-faced, double-crossing, squirming adder of a pig's son, Paul Varesco."

"The man who is your partner in Hell?"

"Yes, yes, it is he who owns the place, who puts up the money. Until now I do not betray him - I can keep faith, me! But now that he double-crosses me, that he tries to embroil me with the police - ah! now I will spit his name out - yes, spit it out!"

"Calm yourself," said Poirot, "and come with me into the next room."

He opened the door. It was a small room and seemed for a moment to be completely filled with dog. Cerberus had looked outsize even in the spacious premises of Hell. In the tiny dining-room of Poirot's service flat there seemed nothing else but Cerberus in the room. There was also, however, the small and odoriferous man.

"We've turned up here according to plan, guv'nor," said the little man in a husky voice.

"Dou-dou!" screamed the Countess. "My angel Dou-dou!"

Cerberus beat the floor with his tail - but he did not move.

"Let me introduce you to Mr William Higgs," shouted Poirot, above the thunder of Cerberus's tail. "A master in his profession. During the brouhaha tonight," went on Poirot, "Mr Higgs induced Cerberus to follow him up out of Hell."

"You induced him?" The Countess stared incredulously at the small rat-like figure. "But how? How?"

Mr Higgs dropped his eyes bashfully.

"'Ardly like to say afore a lady. But there's things no dogs won't resist. Follow me anywhere a dog will if I want 'im to. Of course you understand it won't work the same way with bitches - no, that's different, that is."

The Countess Rossakoff turned on Poirot.

"But why? Why?"

Poirot said slowly: "A dog trained for the purpose will carry an article in his mouth until he is commanded to loose it. He will carry it if need be for hours. Will you now tell your dog to drop what he holds?"

Vera Rossakoff stared, turned, and uttered two crisp words.

The great jaws of Cerberus opened. Then, it was really alarming, Cerberus's tongue seemed to drop out of his mouth!

Poirot stepped forward. He picked up a small package encased in pink, spongebag rubber. He unwrapped it. Inside it was a packet of white powder.

"What is it?" the Countess demanded sharply.

Poirot said softly: "Cocaine. Such a small quantity, it would seem - but enough to be worth thousands of pounds to those willing to pay for it. Enough to bring ruin and misery to several hundred people."

She caught her breath. She cried out: "And you think that I - but it is not so! I swear to you it is not so! In the past I have amused myself with the jewels, the bibelots, the little curiosities - it all helps one to live, you understand. And what I feel is, why not? Why should one person own a thing more than another?"

"Just what I feel about dogs," Mr Higgs chimed in.

"You have no sense of right or wrong," said Poirot sadly to the Countess.

She went on: "But drugs - that, no! For there one causes misery, pain, degeneration! I had no idea - no faintest idea - that my so charming, so innocent, so delightful little Hell was being used for that purpose!"

"I agree with you about dope," said Mr Higgs. "Doping of greyhounds - that's dirty, that is! I wouldn't never have nothing to do with anything like that, and I never 'ave 'ad!"

"But say you believe me, my friend," implored the Countess.

"But of course I believe you! Have I not taken time and trouble to convict the real organiser of the dope racket. Have I not performed the twelfth Labour of Hercules and brought Cerberus up from Hell to prove my case? For I tell you this, I do not like to see my friends framed - yes, framed - for it was you who were intended to take the rap if things went wrong! It was in your handbag the emeralds would have been found and if any one had been clever enough (like me) to suspect a hiding-place in the mouth of a savage dog - eh bien, he is your dog, is he not? Even if he has accepted la petite Alice to the point of obeying her orders also! Yes, you may well open your eyes! From the first I did not like that young lady with her scientific jargon and her coat and skirt with the big pockets. Yes, pockets. Unnatural that any woman should be so disdainful of her appearance! And what does she say to me - that it is fundamentals that count! Aha! what is fundamental is pockets. Pockets in which she can carry drugs and take away jewels - a little exchange easily made whilst she is dancing with her accomplice whom she pretends to regard as a psychological case. Ah, but what a cover! No one suspects the earnest, the scientific psychologist with a medical degree and spectacles. She can smuggle in drugs, and induce her rich patients to form the habit, and put up the money for a night club and arrange that it shall be run by someone with - shall we say, a little weakness in her past! But she despises Hercule Poirot, she thinks she can deceive him with her talk of nursery governesses and vests! Eh bien, I am ready for her. The lights go off. Quickly I rise from my table

and go to stand by Cerberus. In the darkness I hear her come. She opens his mouth and forces in the package, and I - delicately, unfelt by her, I snip with a tiny pair of scissors a little piece from her sleeve."

Dramatically he produced a sliver of material.

"You observe - the identical checked tweed - and I will give it to Japp to fit it back where it belongs - and make the arrest - and say how clever once more has been Scotland Yard."

The Countess Rossakoff stared at him in stupefaction. Suddenly she let out a wail like a foghorn.

"But my Niki - my Niki. This will be terrible for him -" She paused. "Or do you think not?"

"There are a lot of other girls in America," said Hercule Poirot.

"And but for you his mother would be in prison - in prison - with her hair cut off - sitting in a cell - and smelling of disinfectant! Ah, but you are wonderful - wonderful."

Surging forward she clasped Poirot in her arms and embraced him with Slavonic fervour. Mr Higgs looked on appreciatively. The dog Cerberus beat his tail upon the floor.

Into the midst of this scene of rejoicing came the trill of a bell.

"Japp!" exclaimed Poirot, disengaging himself from the Countess's arms.

"It would be better, perhaps, if I went into the other room," said the Countess.

She slipped through the connecting door. Poirot started towards the door to the hall.

"Guv'nor," wheezed Mr Higgs anxiously, "better look at yourself in the glass, 'adn't you?"

Poirot did so and recoiled. Lipstick and mascara ornamented his face in a fantastic medley.

"If that's Mr Japp from Scotland Yard, 'e'd think the worst - sure to," said Mr Higgs.

He added, as the bell pealed again, and Poirot strove feverishly to remove crimson grease from the points of his moustache:

"What do yer want me to do - 'ook it too? What about this 'ere 'Ell 'Ound?"

"If I remember rightly," said Hercule Poirot, "Cerberus returned to Hell."

"Just as you like," said Mr Higgs. "As a matter of fact I've taken a kind of fancy to 'im... Still, 'e's not the kind I'd like to pinch - not permanent - too noticeable, if you know what I mean. And think what he'd cost me in shin of beef or 'orseflesh! Eats as much as a young lion, I expect."

"From the Nemean Lion to the Capture of Cerberus," murmured Poirot. "It is complete."

VI

A week later Miss Lemon brought a bill to her employer.

"Excuse me, M. Poirot. Is it in order for me to pay this? Leonora, Florist. Red Roses. Eleven pounds, eight shillings and sixpence. Sent to Countess Vera Rossakoff, Hell, 13 End St, W.C.1."

As the hue of red roses, so were the cheeks of Hercule Poirot. He blushed, blushed to the eyeballs.

"Perfectly in order. Miss Lemon. A little - er, tribute - to - to an occasion. The Countesses son has just become engaged in America - to the daughter of his employer, a steel magnate. Red roses are - I seem to remember, her favourite flower."

"Quite," said Miss Lemon. "They're very expensive this time of year."

Hercule Poirot drew himself up.

"There are moments," he said, "when one does not economise."

Humming a little tune, he went out of the door. His step was light, almost sprightly. Miss Lemon stared after him. Her filing system was forgotten. All her feminine instincts were aroused.

"Good gracious," she murmured. "I wonder... Really - at his age!... Surely not..."

Three Blind Mice
Three Blind Mice
See how they run
See how they run
They all ran after the farmer's wife
She cut off their tails with a carving knife
Did you ever see such a sight in your life
As Three Blind Mice

***

It was very cold. The sky was dark and heavy with unshed snow.

A man in a dark overcoat, with his muffler pulled up round his face, and his hat pulled down over his eyes, came along Culver Street and went up the steps of number 74. He put his finger on the bell and heard it shrilling in the basement below.

Mrs Casey, her hands busy in the sink, said bitterly, "Drat that bell. Never any peace, there isn't."

Wheezing a little, she toiled up the basement stairs and opened the door.

The man standing silhouetted against the lowering sky outside asked in a whisper, "Mrs Lyon?"

"Second floor," said Mrs Casey. "You can go on up. Does she expect you?"

The man slowly shook his head.

"Oh, well, go on up and knock."

She watched him as he went up the shabbily carpeted stairs.

Afterward she said, he "gave her a funny feeling." But actually all she thought was that he must have a pretty bad cold only to be able to whisper like that - and no wonder with the weather what it was.

When the man got round the bend of the staircase he began to whistle softly. The tune he whistled was "Three Blind Mice."

Molly Davis stepped back into the road and looked up at the newly painted board by the gate.

MONKSWELL MANOR GUESTHOUSE

She nodded approval. It looked, it really did look, quite professional. Or, perhaps, one might say almost professional. The T of Guest House staggered uphill a little, and the end of Manor was slightly crowded, but on the whole Giles had made a wonderful job of it.

Giles was really very clever. There were so many things that he could do. She was always making fresh discoveries about this husband of hers. He said so little about himself that it was only by degrees that she was finding out what a lot of varied talents he had. An ex-naval man was always a "handy man," so people said.

Well, Giles would have need of all his talents in their new venture. Nobody could be more raw to the business of running a guest house than she and Giles. But it would be great fun. And it did solve the housing problem.

It had been Molly's idea. When Aunt Katherine died, and the lawyers wrote to her and informed her that her aunt had left her Monkswell Manor, the natural reaction of the young couple had been to sell it.

Giles had asked, "What is it like?"

And Molly had replied, "Oh, a big, rambling old house, full of stuffy, old-fashioned Victorian furniture. Rather a nice garden, but terribly overgrown since the war, because there's been only one old gardener left."

So they had decided to put the house on the market, and keep just enough furniture to furnish a small cottage or flat for themselves.

But two difficulties arose at once. First, there weren't any small cottages or flats to be found, and secondly, all the furniture was enormous.

"Well," said Molly, "we'll just have to sell it all. I suppose it will sell?" The solicitor assured them that nowadays anything would sell.

"Very probably," he said, "someone will buy it for a hotel or guest house in which case they might like to buy it with the furniture complete. Fortunately the house is in very good repair. The late Miss Emory had extensive repairs and modernizations done just before the

war, and there has been very little deterioration. Oh, yes, it's in good shape."

And it was then that Molly had had her idea.

"Giles," she said, "why shouldn't we run it as a guest house ourselves?"

At first her husband had scoffed at the idea, but Molly had persisted.

"We needn't take very many people - not at first. It's an easy house to run - it's got hot and cold water in the bedrooms and central heating and a gas cooker. And we can have hens and ducks and our own eggs, and vegetables."

"Who'd do all the work - isn't it very hard to get servants?"

"Oh, we'd have to do the work. But wherever we lived we'd have to do that. A few extra people wouldn't really mean much more to do. We'd probably get a woman to come in after a bit when we got properly started. If we had only five people, each paying seven guineas a week - " Molly departed into the realms of somewhat optimistic mental arithmetic.

"And think, Giles," she ended, "it would be our own house. With our own things. As it is, it seems to me it will be years before we can ever find anywhere to live."

That, Giles admitted, was true. They had had so little time together since their hasty marriage, that they were both longing to settle down in a home.

So the great experiment was set under way. Advertisements were put in the local paper and in the Times, and various answers came.

And now, today, the first of the guests was to arrive. Giles had gone off early in the car to try and obtain some army wire netting that had been advertised as for sale on the other side of the county.

Molly announced the necessity of walking to the village to make some last purchases.

The only thing that was wrong was the weather. For the last two days it had been bitterly cold, and now the snow was beginning to fall.

Molly hurried up the drive, thick, feathery flakes falling on her waterproofed shoulders and bright curly hair. The weather forecasts had been lugubrious in the extreme. Heavy snowfall was to be expected.

She hoped anxiously that all the pipes wouldn't freeze. It would be too bad if everything went wrong just as they started.

She glanced at her watch. Past teatime. Would Giles have got back yet? Would he be wondering where she was?

"I had to go to the village again for something I had forgotten," she would say. And he would laugh and say, "More tins?"

Tins were a joke between them. They were always on the lookout for tins of food. The larder was really quite nicely stocked now in case of emergencies.

And, Molly thought with a grimace as she looked up at the sky, it looked as though emergencies were going to present themselves very soon.

The house was empty. Giles was not back yet.

Molly went first into the kitchen, then upstairs, going round the newly prepared bedrooms. Mrs Boyle in the south room with the mahogany and the four-poster. Major Metcalf in the blue room with the oak. Mr Wren in the east room with the bay window. All the rooms looked very nice - and what a blessing that Aunt Katherine had had such a splendid stock of linen. Molly patted a counterpane into place and went downstairs again.

It was nearly dark. The house felt suddenly very quiet and empty. It was a lonely house, two miles from a village, two miles, as Molly put it, from anywhere.

She had often been alone in the house before - but she had never before been so conscious of being alone in it.

The snow beat in a soft flurry against the windowpanes. It made a whispery, uneasy sound.

Supposing Giles couldn't get back - supposing the snow was so thick that the car couldn't get through? Supposing she had to stay alone here - stay alone for days, perhaps.

She looked round the kitchen - a big, comfortable kitchen that seemed to call for a big, comfortable cook presiding at the kitchen table, her jaws moving rhythmically as she ate rock cakes and drank black tea - she should be flanked by a tall, elderly parlour-maid on one side and a round, rosy housemaid on the other, with a kitchen-maid at the other end of the table observing her betters with frightened eyes. And instead there was just herself, Molly Davis, playing a role that did not yet seem a very natural role to play.

Her whole life, at the moment, seemed unreal - Giles seemed unreal. She was playing a part - just playing a part.

A shadow passed the window, and she jumped - a strange man was coming through the snow. She heard the rattle of the side door. The stranger stood there in the open doorway, shaking off snow, a strange man, walking into the empty house. And then, suddenly, illusion fled.

"Oh Giles," she cried, "I'm so glad you've come!"

"Hullo, sweetheart! What filthy weather! Lord, I'm frozen."

He stamped his feet and blew through his hands.

Automatically Molly picked up the coat that he had thrown in a Giles-like manner onto the oak chest. She put it on a hanger, taking out of the stuffed pockets a muffler, a newspaper, a ball of string, and the

morning's correspondence which he had shoved in pell mell. Moving into the kitchen, she laid down the articles on the dresser and put the kettle on the gas.

"Did you get the netting?" she asked. "What ages you've been."

"It wasn't the right kind. Wouldn't have been any good for us. I went on to another dump, but that wasn't any good either. What have you been doing with yourself? Nobody turned up yet, I suppose?"

"Mrs Boyle isn't coming till tomorrow, anyway."

"Major Metcalf and Mr Wren ought to be here today."

"Major Metcalf sent a card to say he wouldn't be here till tomorrow."

"Then that leaves us and Mr Wren for dinner. What do you think he's like? Correct sort of retired civil servant is my idea."

"No, I think he's an artist."

"In that case," said Giles, "we'd better get a week's rent in advance."

"Oh, no, Giles, they bring luggage. If they don't pay we hang on to their luggage."

"And suppose their luggage is stones wrapped up in newspaper? The truth is, Molly, we don't in the least know what we're up against in this business. I hope they don't spot what beginners we are."

"Mrs Boyle is sure to," said Molly. "She's that kind of woman." "How do you know? You haven't seen her?"

Molly turned away. She spread a newspaper on the table, fetched some cheese, and set to work to grate it.

"What's this?" inquired her husband.

"It's going to be Welsh rarebit," Molly informed him.

"Bread crumbs and mashed potatoes and just a teeny-weeny bit of cheese to justify its name."

"Aren't you a clever cook?" said her admiring husband.

"I wonder. I can do one thing at a time. It's assembling them that needs so much practice. Breakfast is the worst."

"Why?"

"Because it all happens at once - eggs and bacon and hot milk and coffee and toast. The milk boils over, or the toast burns, or the bacon frizzles, or the eggs go hard. You have to be as active as a scalded cat watching everything at once."

"I shall have to creep down unobserved tomorrow morning and watch this scalded-cat impersonation."

"The kettle's boiling," said Molly. "Shall we take the tray into the library and hear the wireless? It's almost time for the news."

"As we seem to be going to spend almost the whole of our time in the kitchen, we ought to have a wireless there, too."

"Yes. How nice kitchens are. I love this kitchen. I think it's far and away the nicest room in the house. I like the dresser and the plates, and I simply love the lavish feeling that an absolutely enormous kitchen range gives you - though, of course, I'm thankful I haven't got to cook on it."

"I suppose a whole year's fuel ration would go in one day."

"Almost certainly, I should say. But think of the great joints that were roasted in it - sirloins of beef and saddles of mutton. Colossal copper preserving-pans full of homemade strawberry jam with pounds and pounds of sugar going into it. What a lovely, comfortable age the Victorian age was. Look at the furniture upstairs, large and solid and rather ornate - but, oh! - the heavenly comfort of it, with lots of room for the clothes one used to have, and every drawer sliding in and out so easily. Do you remember that smart modern flat we were lent? Everything built in and sliding - only nothing slid - it always stuck. And the doors pushed shut - only they never stayed shut, or if they did shut they wouldn't open."

"Yes, that's the worst of gadgets. If they don't go right, you're sunk."
"Well, come on, let's hear the news."

The news consisted mainly of grim warnings about the weather, the usual deadlock in foreign affairs, spirited bickerings in Parliament, and a murder in Culver Street, Paddington.

"Ugh," said Molly, switching it off. "Nothing but misery. I'm not going to hear appeals for fuel economy all over again. What do they expect you to do, sit and freeze? I don't think we ought to have tried to start a guest house in the winter. We ought to have waited until the spring." She added in a different tone of voice, "I wonder what the woman was like who was murdered."

"Mrs Lyon?"

"Was that her name? I wonder who wanted to murder her and why."

"Perhaps she had a fortune under the floor boards."

"When it says the police are anxious to interview a man 'seen in the vicinity' does that mean he's the murderer?"

"I think it's usually that. Just a polite way of putting it."

The shrill note of a bell made them both jump.

"That's the front door," said Giles. "Enter - a murderer," he added facetiously.

"It would be, of course, in a play. Hurry up. It must be Mr Wren. Now we shall see who's right about him, you or me."

Mr Wren and a flurry of snow came in together with a rush. All that Molly, standing in the library door, could see of the newcomer was his silhouette against the white world outside.

How alike, thought Molly, were all men in their livery of civilization. Dark overcoat, gray hat, muffler round the neck.

In another moment Giles had shut the front door against the elements, Mr Wren was unwinding his muffler and casting down his suitcase and flinging off his hat - all, it seemed, at the same time, and also talking. He had a high-pitched, almost querulous voice and stood revealed in the light of the hall as a young man with a shock of light, sunburned hair and pale, restless eyes.

"Too, too frightful," he was saying. "The English winter at its worst - a reversion to Dickens - Scrooge and Tiny Tim and all that. One had to be so terribly hearty to stand up to it all. Don't you think so? And I've had a terrible cross-country journey from Wales. Are you Mrs Davis? But how delightful!"

Molly's hand was seized in a quick, bony clasp.

"Not at all as I'd imagined you. I'd pictured you, you know, as an Indian army general's widow. Terrifically grim and memsahibish - and Benares whatnot - a real Victorian whatnot. Heavenly, simply heavenly - Have you got any wax flowers? Or birds of paradise? Oh, but I'm simply going to love this place. I was afraid, you know, it would be very Olde Worlde - very, very Manor House - failing the Benares brass, I mean. Instead, it's marvellous - real Victorian bedrock respectability. Tell me, have you got one of those beautiful sideboards - mahogany - purple-plummy-mahogany with great carved fruits?"

"As a matter of fact," said Molly, rather breathless under this torrent of words, "we have." "No! Can I see it? At once. In here?"

His quickness was almost disconcerting. He had turned the handle of the dining-room door, and clicked on the light. Molly followed him in, conscious of Giles's disapproving profile on her left.

Mr Wren passed his long bony fingers over the rich carving of the massive sideboard with little cries of appreciation. Then he turned a reproachful glance upon his hostess.

"No big mahogany dining-table? All these little tables dotted about instead?" "We thought people would prefer it that way," said Molly.

"Darling, of course you're quite right. I was being carried away by my feeling for period. Of course, if you had the table, you'd have to have the right family round it. Stern, handsome father with a beard - prolific, faded mother, eleven children, a grim governess, and somebody called 'poor Harriet' - the poor relation who acts as general helper and is very, very grateful for being given a good home. Look at that grate - think of the flames leaping up the chimney and blistering poor Harriet's back."

"I'll take your suitcase upstairs," said Giles. "East room?"

"Yes," said Molly.

Mr Wren skipped out into the hall again as Giles went upstairs.

"Has it got a four-poster with little chintz roses?" he asked.

"No, it hasn't," said Giles and disappeared round the bend of the staircase.

"I don't believe your husband is going to like me," said Mr Wren. "What's he been in? The navy?"

"Yes"

"Yes.

"I thought so. They're much less tolerant than the army and the air force. How long have you been married? Are you very much in love with him?"

"Perhaps you'd like to come up and see your room."

"Yes, of course that was impertinent. But I did really want to know. I mean, it's interesting, don't you think, to know all about people? What they feel and think, I mean, not just who they are and what they do."

"I suppose," said Molly in a demure voice, "you are Mr Wren?"

The young man stopped short, clutched his hair in both hands and tugged at it.

"But how frightful -1 never put first things first. Yes, I'm Christopher Wren - now, don't laugh. My parents were a romantic couple. They hoped I'd be an architect. So they thought it a splendid idea to christen me Christopher - halfway home, as it were."

"And are you an architect?" asked Molly, unable to help smiling.

"Yes, I am," said Mr Wren triumphantly. "At least I'm nearly one. I'm not fully qualified yet. But it's really a remarkable example of wishful thinking coming off for once. Mind you, actually the name will be a handicap. I shall never be the Christopher Wren. However, Chris Wren's Pre-Fab Nests may achieve fame."

Giles came down the stairs again, and Molly said, "I'll show you your room now, Mr Wren."

When she came down a few minutes later, Giles said, "Well, did he like the pretty oak furniture?"

"He was very anxious to have a four-poster, so I gave him the rose room instead." Giles grunted and murmured something that ended, "... young twerp."

"Now, look here, Giles," Molly assumed a severe demeanour. "This isn't a house party of guests we're entertaining. This is business. Whether you like Christopher Wren or not -"

"I don't," Giles interjected.

"- has nothing whatever to do with it. He's paying seven guineas a week, and that's all that matters."

"If he pays it, yes."

"He's agreed to pay it. We've got his letter."

"Did you transfer that suitcase of his to the rose room?"

"He carried it, of course."

"Very gallant. But it wouldn't have strained you. There's certainly no question of stones wrapped up in newspaper. It's so light that there seems to me there's probably nothing in it."

"Ssh, here he comes," said Molly warningly.

Christopher Wren was conducted to the library which looked, Molly thought, very nice, indeed, with its big chairs and its log fire. Dinner, she told him, would be in half an hour's time.

In reply to a question, she explained that there were no other guests at the moment. In that case, Christopher said, how would it be if he came into the kitchen and helped?

"I can cook you an omelette if you like," he said engagingly.

The subsequent proceedings took place in the kitchen, and Christopher helped with the washing up.

Somehow, Molly felt, it was not quite the right start for a conventional guest house - and Giles had not liked it at all. Oh, well, thought Molly, as she fell asleep, tomorrow when the others came it would be different.

The morning came with dark skies and snow. Giles looked grave, and Molly's heart fell. The weather was going to make everything very difficult.

Mrs Boyle arrived in the local taxi with chains on the wheels, and the driver brought pessimistic reports of the state of the road.

"Drifts afore nightfall," he prophesied.

Mrs Boyle herself did not lighten the prevailing gloom. She was a large, forbidding-looking woman with a resonant voice and a masterful manner. Her natural aggressiveness had been heightened by a war career of persistent and militant usefulness.

"If I had not believed this was a running concern, I should never have come," she said. "I naturally thought it was a well-established guest house, properly run on scientific lines."

"There is no obligation for you to remain if you are not satisfied, Mrs Boyle," said Giles. "No, indeed, and I shall not think of doing so."

"Perhaps, Mrs Boyle," said Giles, "you would like to ring up for a taxi. The roads are not yet blocked. If there has been any misapprehension it would, perhaps, be better if you went elsewhere." He added, "We have had so many applications for rooms that we shall be able to fill your place quite easily - indeed, in future we are charging a higher rate for our rooms."

Mrs Boyle threw him a sharp glance. "I am certainly not going to leave before I have tried what the place is like. Perhaps you would let me

have a rather large bath towel, Mrs Davis. I am not accustomed to drying myself on a pocket handkerchief."

Giles grinned at Molly behind Mrs Boyle's retreating back. "Darling, you were wonderful," said Molly. "The way you stood up to her." "Bullies soon climb down when they get their own medicine," said Giles. "Oh, dear," said Molly. "I wonder how she'll get on with Christopher Wren." "She won't," said Giles.

And, indeed, that very afternoon, Mrs Boyle remarked to Molly, "That's a very peculiar young man," with distinct disfavour in her voice.

The baker arrived looking like an Arctic explorer and delivered the bread with the warning that his next call, due in two days' time, might not materialize.

"Hold-ups everywhere," he announced. "Got plenty of stores in, I hope?"

"Oh, yes," said Molly. "We've got lots of tins. I'd better take extra flour, though."

She thought vaguely that there was something the Irish made called soda bread. If the worst came to the worst she could probably make that.

The baker had also brought the papers, and she spread them out on the hall table. Foreign affairs had receded in importance. The weather and the murder of Mrs Lyon occupied the front page.

She was staring at the blurred reproduction of the dead woman's features when Christopher Wren's voice behind her said, "Rather a sordid murder, don't you think? Such a drab-looking woman and such a drab street. One can't feel, can one, that there is any story behind it?"

"I've no doubt," said Mrs Boyle with a snort, "that the creature got no more than she deserved."

"Oh." Mr Wren turned to her with engaging eagerness. "So you think it's definitely a sex crime, do you?"

"I suggested nothing of the kind, Mr Wren."

"But she was strangled, wasn't she? I wonder -" he held out his long white hands - "what it would feel like to strangle anyone."

"Really, Mr Wren!"

Christopher moved nearer to her, lowering his voice. "Have you considered, Mrs Boyle, just what it would feel like to be strangled?"

Mrs Boyle said again, even more indignantly, "Really, Mr Wren!"

Molly read hurriedly out, '"The man the police are anxious to interview was wearing a dark overcoat and a light Homburg hat, was of medium height, and wore a woolen scarf.'"

"In fact," said Christopher Wren, "he looked just like everybody else." He laughed. "Yes," said Molly. "Just like everybody else."

In his room at Scotland Yard, Inspector Parminter said to Detective Sergeant Kane, "I'll see those two workmen now."

"Yes, sir."

"What are they like?"

"Decent class workingmen. Rather slow reactions. Dependable."

"Right." Inspector Parminter nodded.

Presently two embarrassed-looking men in their best clothes were shown into his room.

Parminter summed them up with a quick eye. He was an adept at setting people at their ease.

"So you think you've some information that might be useful to us on the Lyon case," he said. "Good of you to come along. Sit down. Smoke?"

He waited while they accepted cigarettes and lit up.

"Pretty awful weather outside."

"It is that, sir."

"Well, now, then - let's have it."

The two men looked at each other, embarrassed now that it came to the difficulties of narration.

"Go ahead, Joe," said the bigger of the two.

Joe went ahead. "It was like this, see. We 'adn't got a match."

"Where was this?"

"Jarman Street - we was working on the road there - gas mains."

Inspector Parminter nodded. Later he would get down to exact details of time and place. Jarman Street, he knew was in the close vicinity of Culver Street where the tragedy had taken place.

"You hadn't got a match," he repeated encouragingly.

"No. Finished my box, I 'ad, and Bill's lighter wouldn't work, and so I spoke to a bloke as was passing. 'Can you give us a match, mister?' I says. Didn't think nothing particular, I didn't, not then. He was just passing - like lots of others -1 just 'appened to arsk 'im."

Again Parminter nodded.

"Well, he give us a match, 'e did. Didn't say nothing. 'Cruel cold,' Bill said to 'im, and he just answered, whispering-like, 'Yes, it is.' Got a cold on his chest, I thought. He was all wrapped up, anyway. 'Thanks mister,' I says and gives him back his matches, and he moves off quick, so quick that when I sees 'e'd dropped something, it's almost too late to call 'im back. It was a little notebook as he must 'ave pulled

out of 'is pocket when he got the matches out. 'Hi, mister/ I calls after 'im, 'you've dropped something.' But he didn't seem to hear - he just quickens up and bolts round the corner, didn't 'e, Bill?"

"That's right," agreed Bill. "Like a scurrying rabbit."

"Into the Harrow Road, that was, and it didn't seem as we'd catch up with him there, not the rate 'e was going, and, anyway, by then it was a bit late - it was only a little book, not a wallet or anything like that - maybe it wasn't important. 'Funny bloke,' I says. 'His hat pulled down over his eyes, and all buttoned up - like a crook on the pictures,' I says to Bill, didn't I, Bill?"

"That's what you said," agreed Bill.

"Funny I should have said that, not that I thought anything at the time. Just in a hurry to get home, that's what I thought, and I didn't blame 'im. Not 'arf cold, it was!"

"Not' arf," agreed Bill.

"So I says to Bill, 'Let's 'ave a look at this little book and see if it's important.' Well, sir, I took a look. 'Only a couple of addresses,' I says to Bill. Seventy-Four Culver Street and some blinking manor 'ouse."

"Ritzy," said Bill with a snort of disapproval.

Joe continued his tale with a certain gusto now that he had got wound up.

'"Seventy-Four Culver Street,' I says to Bill. 'That's just round the corner from 'ere. When we knock off, we'll take it round' - and then I sees something written across the top of the page. 'What's this?' I says to Bill. And he takes it and reads it out. '"Three blind mice" -must be off 'is Knocker,' he says - and just at that very moment - yes, it was that very moment, sir, we 'ears some woman yelling, 'Murder!' a couple of streets away!"

Joe paused at this artistic climax.

"Didn't half yell, did she?" he resumed. '"Here,' I says to Bill, 'you nip along.' And by and by he comes back and says there's a big crowd and the police are there and some woman's had her throat cut or been strangled and that was the landlady who found her, yelling for the police. 'Where was it?' I says to him. 'In Culver Street,' he says. 'What number?' I asks, and he says he didn't rightly notice."

Bill coughed and shuffled his feet with the sheepish air of one who has not done himself justice.

"So I says, 'We'll nip around and make sure,' and when we finds it's number seventy-four we talked it over, and 'Maybe,' Bill says, 'the address in the notebook's got nothing to do with it,' and I says as maybe it has, and, anyway, after we've talked it over and heard the police want to interview a man who left the 'ouse about that time, well, we come along 'ere and ask if we can see the gentleman who's handling the case, and I'm sure I 'ope as we aren't wasting your time."

"You acted very properly," said Parminter approvingly. "You've brought the notebook with you? Thank you. Now -"

His questions became brisk and professional. He got places, times, dates - the only thing he did not get was a description of the man who had dropped the notebook. Instead he got the same description as he had already got from a hysterical landlady, the description of a hat pulled down over the eyes, a buttoned-up coat, a muffler swathed round the lower part of a face, a voice that was only a whisper, gloved hands.

When the men had gone he remained staring down at the little book lying open on his table. Presently it would go to the appropriate department to see what evidence, if any, of fingerprints it might reveal. But now his attention was held by the two addresses and by the line of small handwriting along the top of the page.

He turned his head as Sergeant Kane came into the room. "Come here, Kane. Look at this."

Kane stood behind him and let out a low whistle as he read out, "'Three Blind Mice!' Well, I'm dashed!"

"Yes." Parminter opened a drawer and took out a half sheet of notepaper which he laid beside the notebook on his desk. It had been found pinned carefully to the murdered woman.

On it was written, This is the first. Below was a childish drawing of three mice and a bar of music.

Kane whistled the tune softly. Three Blind Mice, See how they run -

"That's it, all right. That's the signature tune."

"Crazy, isn't it, sir?"

"Yes." Parminter frowned. "The identification of the woman is quite certain?"

"Yes, sir. Here's the report from the fingerprints department. Mrs Lyon, as she called herself, was really Maureen Gregg. She was released from Holloway two months ago on completion of her sentence."

Parminter said thoughtfully, "She went to Seventy-Four Culver Street calling herself Maureen Lyon. She occasionally drank a bit and she had been known to bring a man home with her once or twice. She displayed no fear of anything or anyone. There's no reason to believe she thought herself in any danger. This man rings the bell, asks for her, and is told by the landlady to go up to the second floor. She can't describe him, says only that he was of medium height and seemed to have a bad cold and lost his voice. She went back again to the basement and heard nothing of a suspicious nature. She did not hear the man go out. Ten minutes or so later she took tea to her lodger and discovered her strangled."

"This wasn't a casual murder, Kane. It was carefully planned."

He paused and then added abruptly, "I wonder how many houses there are in England called Monkswell Manor?"

"There might be only one, sir."

"That would probably be too much luck. But get on with it. There's no time to lose."

The sergeant's eye rested appreciatively on two entries in the notebook - 74 Culver Street; Monkswell Manor. He said, "So you think - "

Parminter said swiftly, "Yes. Don't you?"

"Could be. Monkswell Manor - now where - Do you know, sir, I could swear I've seen that name quite lately."

"Where?"

"That's what I'm trying to remember. Wait a minute - Newspaper - Times. Back page. Wait a minute - Hotels and boarding-houses - Half a sec, sir - it's an old one. I was doing the crossword."

He hurried out of the room and returned in triumph, "Here you are, sir, look." The inspector followed the pointing finger.

"Monkswell Manor, Harpleden, Berks." He drew the telephone toward him. "Get me the Berkshire County police."

With the arrival of Major Metcalf, Monkswell Manor settled into its routine as a going concern. Major Metcalf was neither formidable like Mrs Boyle, nor erratic like Christopher Wren. He was a stolid, middle-aged man of spruce military appearance, who had done most of his service in India. He appeared satisfied with his room and its furniture,

and while he and Mrs Boyle did not actually find mutual friends, he had known cousins of friends of hers - "the Yorkshire branch," out in Poonah. His luggage, however, two heavy pigskin cases, satisfied even Giles's suspicious nature.

Truth to tell, Molly and Giles did not have much time for speculating about their guests. Between them, dinner was cooked, served, eaten, and washed up satisfactorily. Major Metcalf praised the coffee, and Giles and Molly retired to bed, tired but triumphant - to be roused about two in the morning by the persistent ringing of a bell.

"Damn," said Giles. "It's the front door. What on earth -"

"Hurry up," said Molly. "Go and see."

Casting a reproachful glance at her, Giles wrapped his dressing-gown round him and descended the stairs. Molly heard the bolts being drawn back and a murmur of voices in the hall. Presently, driven by curiosity, she crept out of bed and went to peep from the top of the stairs. In the hall below, Giles was assisting a bearded stranger out of a snow-covered overcoat. Fragments of conversation floated up to her.

"Brrr." It was an explosive foreign sound. "My fingers are so cold I cannot feel them. And my feet -" A stamping sound was heard.

"Come in here." Giles threw open the library door. "It's warm. You'd better wait here while I get a room ready."

"I am indeed fortunate," said the stranger politely.

Molly peered inquisitively through the banisters. She saw an elderly man with a small black beard and Mephistophelean eyebrows. A man who moved with a young and jaunty step in spite of the gray at his temples.

Giles shut the library door on him and came quickly up the stairs. Molly rose from her crouching position.

"Who is it?" she demanded.

Giles grinned. "Another guest for the guest house. Car overturned in a snowdrift. He got himself out and was making his way as best he could - it's a howling blizzard still, listen to it - along the road when he saw our board. He said it was like an answer to prayer."

"You think he's-all right?"

"Darling, this isn't the sort of night for a housebreaker to be doing his rounds."

"He's a foreigner, isn't he?"

"Yes. His name's Paravicini. I saw his wallet -1 rather think he showed it on purpose -simply crammed with notes. Which room shall we give him?"

"The green room. It's all tidy and ready. We'll just have to make up the bed."

"I suppose I'll have to lend him pajamas. All his things are in the car. He said he had to climb out through the window."

Molly fetched sheets, pillowcases, and towels.

As they hurriedly made the bed up, Giles said, "It's coming down thick. We're going to be snowed up, Molly, completely cut off. Rather exciting in a way, isn't it?"

"I don't know," said Molly doubtfully. "Do you think I can make soda bread, Giles?" "Of course you can. You can make anything," said her loyal husband.

"I've never tried to make bread. It's the sort of thing one takes for granted. It may be new or it may be stale but it's just something the baker brings. But if we're snowed up there won't be a baker."

"Nor a butcher, nor a postman. No newspapers. And probably no telephone." "Just the wireless telling us what to do?" "At any rate we make our own electric light."

"You must run the engine again tomorrow. And we must keep the central heating well stoked."

"I suppose our next lot of coke won't come in now. We're very low."

"Oh, bother. Giles, I feel we are in for a simply frightful time. Hurry up and get Para -whatever his name is. I'll go back to bed."

Morning brought confirmation of Giles's forebodings. Snow was piled five feet high, drifting up against the doors and windows. Outside it was still snowing. The world was white, silent, and - in some subtle way - menacing.

Mrs Boyle sat at breakfast. There was no one else in the dining-room. At the adjoining table, Major Metcalf's place had been cleared away. Mr Wren's table was still laid for breakfast. One early riser, presumably, and one late one. Mrs Boyle herself knew definitely that there was only one proper time for breakfast, nine o'clock.

Mrs Boyle had finished her excellent omelette and was champing toast between her strong white teeth. She was in a grudging and undecided mood. Monkswell Manor was not at all what she had imagined it would be. She had hoped for bridge, for faded spinsters whom she could impress with her social position and connections, and to whom she could hint at the importance and secrecy of her war service.

The end of the war had left Mrs Boyle marooned, as it were, on a desert shore. She had always been a busy woman, talking fluently of efficiency and organization. Her vigor and drive had prevented people asking whether she was, indeed, a good or efficient organizer.

War activities had suited her down to the ground. She had bossed people and bullied people and worried heads of departments and, to give her her due, had at no time spared herself. Subservient women had run to and fro, terrified of her slightest frown. And now all that exciting hustling life was over. She was back in private life, and her former private life had vanished.

Her house, which had been requisitioned by the army, needed thorough repairing and redecorating before she could return to it, and the difficulties of domestic help made a return to it impracticable in any case. Her friends were largely scattered and dispersed.

Presently, no doubt, she would find her niche, but at the moment it was a case of marking time. A hotel or a boarding-house seemed the answer. And she had chosen to come to Monkswell Manor.

She looked round her disparagingly.

Most dishonest, she said to herself, not to have told me they were only just starting.

She pushed her plate farther away from her. The fact that her breakfast had been excellently cooked and served, with good coffee and homemade marmalade, in a curious way annoyed her still more. It had deprived her of a legitimate cause of complaint. Her bed, too, had been comfortable, with embroidered sheets and a soft pillow. Mrs Boyle liked comfort, but she also liked to find fault. The latter was, perhaps, the stronger passion of the two.

Rising majestically, Mrs Boyle left the dining-room, passing in the doorway that very extraordinary young man with the red hair. He was wearing this morning a checked tie of virulent green - a woollen tie.

Preposterous, said Mrs Boyle to herself. Quite preposterous.

The way he looked at her, too, sideways out of those pale eyes of his - she didn't like it. There was something upsetting - unusual - about that faintly mocking glance.

Unbalanced mentally, I shouldn't wonder, said Mrs Boyle to herself.

She acknowledged his flamboyant bow with a slight inclination of her head and marched into the big drawing-room. Comfortable chairs here, particularly the large rose-colored one. She had better make it clear that that was to be her chair. She deposited her knitting on it as a precaution and walked over and laid a hand on the radiators. As she had suspected, they were only warm, not hot. Mrs Boyle's eye gleamed militantly. She could have something to say about that.

She glanced out of the window. Dreadful weather - quite dreadful. Well, she wouldn't stay here long - not unless more people came and made the place amusing.

Some snow slid off the roof with a soft whooshing sound. Mrs Boyle jumped. "No," she said out loud. "I shan't stay here long."

Somebody laughed - a faint, high chuckle. She turned her head sharply. Young Wren was standing in the doorway looking at her with that curious expression of his.

No," he said. "I don't suppose you will."

Major Metcalf was helping Giles to shovel away snow from the back door. He was a good worker, and Giles was quite vociferous in his expressions of gratitude.

"Good exercise," said Major Metcalf. "Must get exercise every day. Got to keep fit, you know."

So the major was an exercise fiend. Giles had feared as much. It went with his demand for breakfast at half past seven.

As though reading Giles's thoughts, the major said, "Very good of your missus to cook me an early breakfast. Nice to get a new-laid egg, too."

Giles had risen himself before seven, owing to the exigencies of hotel-keeping. He and Molly had had boiled eggs and tea and had set to on the sitting-rooms. Everything was spick-and-span. Giles could not help thinking that if he had been a guest in his own establishment, nothing would have dragged him out of bed on a morning such as this until the last possible moment.

The major, however, had been up and breakfasted, and roamed about the house, apparently full of energy seeking an outlet.

Well, thought Giles, there's plenty of snow to shovel.

He threw a sideways glance at his companion. Not an easy man to place, really. Hardbitten, well over middle age, something queerly watchful about the eyes. A man who was giving nothing away. Giles wondered why he had come to Monkswell Manor.

Demobilized, probably, and no job to go to.

Mr Paravicini came down late. He had coffee and a piece of toast - a frugal Continental breakfast.

He somewhat disconcerted Molly when she brought it to him by rising to his feet, bowing in an exaggerated manner, and exclaiming, "My charming hostess? I am right, am I not?"

Molly admitted rather shortly that he was right. She was in no mood for compliments at this hour.

"And why," she said, as she piled crockery recklessly in the sink, "everybody has to have their breakfast at a different time - It's a bit hard."

She slung the plates into the rack and hurried upstairs to deal with the beds. She could expect no assistance from Giles this morning. He had to clear a way to the boiler house and to the henhouse.

Molly did the beds at top speed and admittedly in the most slovenly manner, smoothing sheets and pulling them up as fast as she could.

She was at work on the baths when the telephone rang.

Molly first cursed at being interrupted, then felt a slight feeling of relief that the telephone at least was still in action, as she ran down to answer it. She arrived in the library a little breathless and lifted the receiver.

"Yes?"

A hearty voice with a slight but pleasant country burr asked, "Is that Monkswell Manor?"

"Monkswell Manor Guest House."

"Can I speak to Commander David, please?"

"I'm afraid he can't come to the telephone just now," said Molly. "This is Mrs Davis. Who is speaking, please?"

"Superintendent Hogben, Berkshire Police."

Molly gave a slight gasp. She said, "Oh, yes - er - yes?"

"Mrs Davis, rather an urgent matter has arisen. I don't wish to say very much over the telephone, but I have sent Detective Sergeant Trotter out to you, and he should be there any minute now."

"But he won't get here. We're snowed up - completely snowed up. The roads are impassable."

There was no break in the confidence of the voice at the other end.

"Trotter will get to you, all right," it said. "And please impress upon your husband, Mrs Davis, to listen very carefully to what Trotter has to tell you, and to follow his instructions implicitly. That's all."

"But, Superintendent Hogben, what -"

But there was a decisive click. Hogben had clearly said all he had to say and rung off. Molly waggled the telephone rest once or twice, then gave up. She turned as the door opened.

"Oh, Giles darling, there you are."

Giles had snow on his hair and a good deal of coal grime on his face. He looked hot.

"What is it, sweetheart? I've filled the coal scuttles and brought in the wood. I'll do the hens next and then have a look at the boiler. Is that right? What's the matter, Molly? You looked scared."

"Giles, it was the police."

"The police?" Giles sounded incredulous.

"Yes, they're sending out an inspector or a sergeant or something."

"But why? What have we done?"

"I don't know. Do you think it could be that two pounds of butter we had from Ireland?"

Giles was frowning. "I did remember to get the wireless license, didn't I?"

"Yes, it's in the desk. Giles, old Mrs Bidlock gave me five of her coupons for that old tweed coat of mine. I suppose that's wrong - but I

think it's perfectly fair. I'm a coat less so why shouldn't I have the coupons? Oh, dear, what else is there we've done?"

"I had a near shave with the car the other day. But it was definitely the other fellow's fault. Definitely."

"We must have done something," wailed Molly.

"The trouble is that practically everything one does nowadays is illegal," said Giles gloomily. "That's why one has a permanent feeling of guilt. Actually I expect it's something to do with running this place. Running a guest house is probably chock-full of snags we've never heard of."

"I thought drink was the only thing that mattered. We haven't given anyone anything to drink. Otherwise, why shouldn't we run our own house any way we please?"

"I know. It sounds all right. But as I say, everything's more or less forbidden nowadays."

"Oh, dear," sighed Molly. "I wish we'd never started. We're going to be snowed up for days, and everybody will be cross and they'll eat all our reserves of tins -"

"Cheer up, sweetheart," said Giles. "We're having a bad break at the moment, but it will pan out all right."

He kissed the top of her head rather absentmindedly and, releasing her, said in a different voice, "You know, Molly, come to think of it, it

must be something pretty serious to send a police sergeant trekking out here in all this." He waved a hand toward the snow outside. He said, "It must be something really urgent -"

As they stared at each other, the door opened, and Mrs Boyle came in.

"Ah, here you are, Mr Davis," said Mrs Boyle. "Do you know the central heating in the drawing-room is practically stone-cold?"

"I'm sorry, Mrs Boyle. We're rather short of coke and -"

Mrs Boyle cut in ruthlessly. "I am paying seven guineas a week here - seven guineas. And I do not expect to freeze."

Giles flushed. He said shortly, "I'll go and stoke it up." He went out of the room, and Mrs Boyle turned to Molly.

"If you don't mind my saying so, Mrs Davis, that is a very extraordinary young man you have staying here. His manners - and his ties - And does he never brush his hair?"

"He's an extremely brilliant young architect," said Molly.

"I beg your pardon?"

"Christopher Wren is an architect and -"

"My dear young woman," snapped Mrs Boyle, "I have naturally heard of Sir Christopher Wren. Of course he was an architect. He built St.

Paul's. You young people seem to think that education came in with the Education Act."

"I meant this Wren. His name is Christopher. His parents called him that because they hoped he'd be an architect. And he is - or nearly - one, so it turned out all right."

"Humph," Mrs Boyle snorted. "It sounds a very fishy story to me. I should make some inquiries about him if I were you. What do you know about him?"

"Just as much as I know about you, Mrs Boyle - which is that both you and he are paying us seven guineas a week. That's really all that I need to know, isn't it? And all that concerns me. It doesn't matter to me whether I like my guests, or whether -" Molly looked very steadily at Mrs Boyle - "or whether I don't."

Mrs Boyle flushed angrily. "You are young and inexperienced and should welcome advice from someone more knowledgeable than yourself. And what about this queer foreigner? When did he arrive?"

"In the middle of the night."

"Indeed. Most peculiar. Not a very conventional hour."

"To turn away bona fide travellers would be against the law, Mrs Boyle." Molly added sweetly. "You may not be aware of that."

"All I can say is that this Paravicini, or whatever he calls himself, seems to me -" "Beware, beware, dear lady. You talk of the devil and then -"

Mrs Boyle jumped as though it had been indeed the devil who addressed her. Mr Paravicini, who had minced quietly in without either of the two women noticing him, laughed and rubbed his hands together with a kind of elderly satanic glee.

"You startled me," said Mrs Boyle. "I did not hear you come in."

"I come in on tiptoe, so," said Mr Paravicini, "nobody ever hears me come and go. That I find very amusing. Sometimes I overhear things. That, too, amuses me." He added softly, "But I do not forget what I hear."

Mrs Boyle said rather feebly, "Indeed? I must get my knitting -1 left it in the drawing-room."

She went out hurriedly. Molly stood looking at Mr Paravicini with a puzzled expression. He approached her with a kind of hop and skip.

"My charming hostess looks upset." Before she could prevent it, he picked up her hand and kissed it. "What is it, dear lady?"

Molly drew back a step. She was not sure that she liked Mr Paravicini much. He was leering at her like an elderly satyr.

"Everything is rather difficult this morning," she said lightly. "Because of the snow."

"Yes." Mr Paravicini turned his head round to look out of the window. "Snow makes everything very difficult, does it not? Or else it makes things very easy."

"I don't know what you mean."

"No," he said thoughtfully. "There is quite a lot that you do not know. I think, for one thing, that you do not know very much about running a guest house."

Molly's chin went up belligerently. "I daresay we don't. But we mean to make a go of it."

"Bravo, bravo."

"After all," Molly's voice betrayed slight anxiety, "I'm not such a very bad cook -"

"You are, without doubt, an enchanting cook," said Mr Paravicini.

What a nuisance foreigners were, thought Molly.

Perhaps Mr Paravicini read her thoughts. At all events his manner changed. He spoke quietly and quite seriously.

"May I give you a little word of warning, Mrs Davis? You and your husband must not be too trusting, you know. Have you references with these guests of yours?"

"Is that usual?" Molly looked troubled. "I thought people just -just came."

"It is advisable always to know a little about the people who sleep under your roof." He leaned forward and tapped her on the shoulder in a minatory kind of way. "Take myself, for example. I turn up in the middle of the night. My car, I say, is overturned in a snowdrift. What do you know of me? Nothing at all. Perhaps you know nothing, either, of your other guests."

"Mrs Boyle -" began Molly, but stopped as that lady herself re-entered the room, knitting in hand.

"The drawing-room is too cold. I shall sit in here." She marched toward the fireplace. Mr Paravicini pirouetted swiftly ahead of her. "Allow me to poke the fire for you."

Molly was struck, as she had been the night before, by the youthful jauntiness of his step. She noticed that he always seemed careful to keep his back to the light, and now, as he knelt, poking the fire, she thought she saw the reason for it. Mr Paravicini's face was cleverly but decidedly "made up."

So the old idiot tried to make himself look younger than he was, did he? Well, he didn't succeed. He looked all his age and more. Only the youthful walk was incongruous.

Perhaps that, too, had been carefully counterfeited.

She was brought back from speculation to the disagreeable realities by the brisk entrance of Major Metcalf.

"Mrs Davis. I'm afraid the pipes of the - er -" he lowered his voice modestly, "downstairs cloakroom are frozen."

"Oh, dear," groaned Molly. "What an awful day. First the police and then the pipes."

Mr Paravicini dropped the poker into the grate with a clatter. Mrs Boyle stopped knitting.

Molly, looking at Major Metcalf, was puzzled by his sudden stiff immobility and by the indescribable expression on his face. It was an expression she could not place. It was as though all emotion had been drained out of it, leaving something carved out of wood behind.

He said in a short, staccato voice, "Police, did you say?"

She was conscious that behind the stiff immobility of his demeanour, some violent emotion was at work. It might have been fear or alertness or excitement - but there was something. This man, she said to herself, could be dangerous.

He said again, and this time his voice was just mildly curious, "What's that about the police?"

"They rang up," said Molly. "Just now. To say they're sending a sergeant out here." She looked toward the window. "But I shouldn't think he'll ever get here," she said hopefully.

"Why are they sending the police here?" He took a step nearer to her, but before she could reply the door opened, and Giles came in.

"This ruddy coke's more than half stones," he said angrily. Then he added sharply, "Is anything the matter?"

Major Metcalf turned to him. "I hear the police are coming out here," he said. "Why?"

"Oh, that's all right," said Giles. "No one can ever get through in this. Why, the drifts are five feet deep. The road's all banked up. Nobody will get here today."

And at that moment there came distinctly three loud taps on the window.

It startled them all. For a moment or two they did not locate the sound. It came with the emphasis and menace of a ghostly warning. And then, with a cry, Molly pointed to the French window. A man was standing there tapping on the pane, and the mystery of his arrival was explained by the fact that he wore skis.

With an exclamation, Giles crossed the room, fumbled with the catch, and threw open the French window.

"Thank you, sir," said the new arrival. He had a slightly common, cheerful voice and a well-bronzed face.

"Detective Sergeant Trotter," he announced himself.

Mrs Boyle peered at him over her knitting with disfavour.

"You can't be a sergeant," she said disapprovingly. "You're too young."

The young man, who was indeed very young, looked affronted at this criticism and said in a slightly annoyed tone, "I'm not quite as young as I look, madam."

His eye roved over the group and picked out Giles.

"Are you Mr Davis? Can I get these skis off and stow them somewhere?"

"Of course, come with me."

Mrs Boyle said acidly as the door to the hall closed behind them, "I suppose that's what we pay our police force for, nowadays, to go round enjoying themselves at winter sports."

Paravicini had come close to Molly. There was quite a hiss in his voice as he said in a quick, low voice, "Why did you send for the police, Mrs Davis?"

She recoiled a little before the steady malignity of his glance. This was a new Mr Paravicini. For a moment she felt afraid. She said helplessly, "But I didn't. I didn't."

And then Christopher Wren came excitedly through the door, saying in a high penetrating whisper, "Who's that man in the hall? Where did he come from? So terribly hearty and all over snow."

Mrs Boyle's voice boomed out over the click of her knitting-needles. "You may believe it or not, but that man is a policeman. A policeman - skiing!"

The final disruption of the lower classes had come, so her manner seemed to say.

Major Metcalf murmured to Molly, "Excuse me, Mrs Davis, but may I use your telephone?"

"Of course, Major Metcalf."

He went over to the instrument, just as Christopher Wren said shrilly, "He's very handsome, don't you think so? I always think policemen are terribly attractive."

"Hullo, hullo -" Major Metcalf was rattling the telephone irritably. He turned to Molly. "Mrs Davis, this telephone is dead, quite dead." "It was all right just now. I -"

She was interrupted. Christopher Wren was laughing, a high, shrill, almost hysterical laugh. "So we're quite cut off now. Quite cut off. That's funny, isn't it?"

"I don't see anything to laugh at," said Major Metcalf stiffly. "No, indeed," said Mrs Boyle.

Christopher was still in fits of laughter. "It's a private joke of my own," he said. "Hsh," he put his finger to his lips, "the sleuth is coming."

Giles came in with Sergeant Trotter. The latter had got rid of his skis and brushed off the snow and was holding in his hand a large notebook and pencil. He brought an atmosphere of unhurried judicial procedure with him.

"Molly," said Giles, "Sergeant Trotter wants a word with us alone." Molly followed them both out of the room. "We'll go in the study," Giles said.

They went into the small room at the back of the hall which was dignified by that name. Sergeant Trotter closed the door carefully behind him.

"What have we done, Sergeant?" Molly demanded plaintively.

"Done?" Sergeant Trotter stared at her. Then he smiled broadly. "Oh," he said. "It's nothing of that kind, madam. I'm sorry if there's been a misapprehension of any kind. No, Mrs Davis, it's something quite different. It's more a matter of police protection, if you understand me."

Not understanding him in the least, they both looked at him inquiringly.

Sergeant Trotter went on fluently, "It relates to the death of Mrs Lyon, Mrs Maureen Lyon, who was murdered in London two days ago. You may have read about the case."

"Yes," said Molly.

"The first thing I want to know is if you were acquainted with this Mrs Lyon?"

"Never heard of her," said Giles, and Molly murmured concurrence.

"Well, that's rather what we expected. But as a matter of fact Lyon wasn't the murdered woman's real name. She had a police record, and her fingerprints were on file, so we were able to identify her without any difficulty. Her real name was Gregg; Maureen Gregg. Her late husband, John Gregg, was a farmer who resided at Longridge Farm not very far from here. You may have heard of the Longridge Farm case."

The room was very still. Only one sound broke the stillness, a soft, unexpected plop as snow slithered off the roof and fell to the ground outside. It was a secret, almost sinister sound.

Trotter went on. "Three evacuee children were billeted on the Greggs at Longridge Farm in 1940. One of those children subsequently died as the result of criminal neglect and ill-treatment. The case made quite a sensation, and the Greggs were both sentenced to terms of imprisonment. Gregg escaped on his way to prison, he stole a car and had a crash while trying to evade the police. He was killed outright. Mrs Gregg served her sentence and was released two months ago."

"And now she's been murdered," said Giles. "Who do they think did it?"

But Sergeant Trotter was not to be hurried. "You remember the case, sir?" he asked.

Giles shook his head. "In 1940 I was a midshipman serving in the Mediterranean."

"I -1 do remember hearing about it, I think," said Molly rather breathlessly. "But why do you come to us? What have we to do with it?"

"It's a question of your being in danger, Mrs Davis!" "Danger?" Giles spoke incredulously.

"It's like this, sir. A notebook was picked up near the scene of the crime. In it were written two addresses. The first was Seventy-Four Culver Street."

"Where the woman was murdered?" Molly put in.

"Yes" Mrs Davis. The other address was Monkswell Manor."

"What?" Molly's tone was incredulous. "But how extraordinary."

"Yes. That's why Superintendent Hogben thought it imperative to find out if you knew of any connection between you, or between this house, and the Longridge Farm case."

"There's nothing - absolutely nothing," said Giles. "It must be some coincidence."

Sergeant Trotter said gently, "Superintendent Hogben doesn't think it is a coincidence. He'd have come himself if it had been at all possible. Under the weather conditions, and as I'm an expert skier, he sent me with instructions to get full particulars of everyone in this house, to report back to him by phone, and to take all measures I thought expedient for the safety of the household."

Giles said sharply. "Safety? Good Lord, man, you don't think somebody is going to be killed here?"

Trotter said apologetically, "I didn't want to upset the lady, but yes, that is just what Superintendent Hogben does think."

"But what earthly reason could there be -"

Giles broke off, and Trotter said, "That's just what I'm here to find out."

"But the whole thing's crazy."

"Yes, sir, but it's because it's crazy that it's dangerous."

Molly said, "There's something more you haven't told us yet, isn't there, Sergeant?"

"Yes, madam. At the top of the page in the notebook was written, 'Three Blind Mice.' Pinned to the dead woman's body was a paper with 'This is the first' written on it. And below it a drawing of three mice and a bar of music. The music was the tune of the nursery rhyme 'Three Blind Mice.'"

Molly sang softly:

"Three Blind Mice,

See how they run.

They all ran after the farmer's wife!

She -"

She broke off. "Oh, it's horrible - horrible. There were three children, weren't there?" "Yes, Mrs Davis. A boy of fifteen, a girl of fourteen, and the boy of twelve who died." "What happened to the others?"

"The girl was, I believe, adopted by someone. We haven't been able to trace her. The boy would be just on twenty-three now. We've lost track of him. He was said to have always been a bit - queer. He joined up in the army at eighteen. Later he deserted. Since then he's disappeared. The army psychiatrist says definitely that he's not normal."

"You think that it was he who killed Mrs Lyon?" Giles asked. "And that he's a homicidal maniac and may turn up here for some unknown reason?"

"We think that there must be a connection between someone here and the Longridge Farm business. Once we can establish what that connection is, we will be forearmed. Now you state, sir, that you yourself have no connection with that case. The same goes for you, Mrs Davis?"

"I - oh, yes -yes."

"Perhaps you will tell me exactly who else there is in the house?"

They gave him the names. Mrs Boyle. Major Metcalf. Mr Christopher Wren. Mr Paravicini.

He wrote them down in his notebook.

"Servants?"

"We haven't any servants," said Molly. "And that reminds me, I must go and put the potatoes on."

She left the study abruptly.

Trotter turned to Giles. "What do you know about these people, sir?"

"I - We -" Giles paused. Then he said quietly, "Really, we don't know anything about them, Sergeant Trotter. Mrs Boyle wrote from a Bournemouth hotel. Major Metcalf from Leamington. Mr Wren from a private hotel in South Kensington. Mr Paravicini just turned up out of the blue - or rather out of the white - his car overturned in a snowdrift near here. Still, I suppose they'll have identity cards, ration books, that sort of thing?"

"I shall go into all that, of course."

"In a way it's lucky that the weather is so awful," said Giles. "The murderer can't very well turn up in this, can he?"

"Perhaps he doesn't need to, Mr Davis."

"What do you mean?"

Sergeant Trotter hesitated for a moment and then he said, "You've got to consider, sir, that he may be here already."

Giles stared at him. "What do you mean?"

"Mrs Gregg was killed two days ago. All your visitors here have arrived since then, Mr Davis."

"Yes, but they'd booked beforehand - some time beforehand - except for Paravicini." Sergeant Trotter sighed. His voice sounded tired. "These crimes were planned in advance."

"Crimes? But only one crime has happened yet. Why are you sure that there will be another?"

"That it will happen - no. I hope to prevent that. That it will be attempted, yes."

"But then - if you're right," Giles spoke excitedly, "there's only one person it could be. There's only one person who's the right age. Christopher Wren!"

Sergeant Trotter had joined Molly in the kitchen.

"I'd be glad, Mrs Davis, if you would come with me to the library. I want to make a general statement to everyone. Mr Davis has kindly gone to prepare the way -"

"All right - just let me finish these potatoes. Sometimes I wish Sir Walter Raleigh had never discovered the beastly things."

Sergeant Trotter preserved a disapproving silence. Molly said apologetically, "I can't really believe it, you see - It's so fantastic -"

"It isn't fantastic, Mrs Davis - It's just plain facts."

"You have a description of the man?" Molly asked curiously.

"Medium height, slight build, wore a dark overcoat and a light hat, spoke in a whisper, his face was hidden by a muffler. You see - that might be anybody." He paused and added, "There are three dark overcoats and light hats hanging up in your hall here, Mrs Davis."

"I don't think any of these people came from London."

"Didn't they, Mrs Davis?" With a swift movement Sergeant Trotter moved to the dresser and picked up a newspaper.

"The Evening Standard of February 19th. Two days ago. Someone brought that paper here, Mrs Davis."

"But how extraordinary." Molly stared, some faint chord of memory stirred. "Where can that paper have come from?"

"You mustn't take people always at their face value, Mrs Davis. You don't really know anything about these people you have admitted to your house." He added, "I take it you and Mr Davis are new to the guest-house business?"

"Yes, we are," Molly admitted. She felt suddenly young, foolish, and childish.

"You haven't been married long, perhaps, either?"

"Just a year." She blushed slightly. "It was all rather sudden."

"Love at first sight," said Sergeant Trotter sympathetically.

Molly felt quite unable to snub him. "Yes," she said, and added in a burst of confidence, "we'd only known each other a fortnight."

Her thoughts went back over those fourteen days of whirlwind courtship. There hadn't been any doubts -they had both known. In a worrying, nerve-racked world, they had found the miracle of each other. A little smile came to her lips.

She came back to the present to find Sergeant Trotter eying her indulgently. "Your husband doesn't come from these parts, does he?" "No," said Molly vaguely. "He comes from Lincolnshire."

She knew very little of Giles's childhood and upbringing. His parents were dead, and he always avoided talking about his early days. He had had, she fancied, an unhappy childhood.

"You're both very young, if I may say so, to run a place of this kind," said Sergeant Trotter.

"Oh, I don't know. I'm twenty-two and -"

She broke off as the door opened and Giles came in.

"Everything's all set. I've given them a rough outline," he said. "I hope that's all right, Sergeant?"

"Saves time," said Trotter. "Are you ready, Mrs Davis?"

Four voices spoke at once as Sergeant Trotter entered the library.

Highest and shrillest was that of Christopher Wren declaring that this was too, too thrilling and he wasn't going to sleep a wink tonight, and please, please could we have all the gory details?

A kind of double-bass accompaniment came from Mrs Boyle. "Absolute outrage - sheer incompetence - police have no business to let murderers go roaming about the countryside."

Mr Paravicini was eloquent chiefly with his hands. His gesticulations were more eloquent than his words, which were drowned by Mrs Boyle's double bass. Major Metcalf could be heard in an occasional short staccato bark. He was asking for facts.

Trotter waited a moment or two, then he held up an authoritative hand and, rather surprisingly, there was silence.

"Thank you," he said. "Now, Mr Davis has given you an outline of why I'm here. I want to know one thing, and one thing only, and I want to know it quick. Which of you has some connection with the Longridge Farm case?"

The silence was unbroken. Four blank faces looked at Sergeant Trotter. The emotions of a few moments back - excitement, indignation, hysteria, inquiry, were wiped away as a sponge wipes out the chalk marks on a slate.

Sergeant Trotter spoke again, more urgently. "Please understand me. One of you, we have reason to believe, is in danger - deadly danger. I have got to know which one of you it is!"

And still no one spoke or moved.

Something like anger came into Trotter's voice. "Very well - I'll ask you one by one. Mr Paravicini?"

A very faint smile flickered across Mr Paravicini's face. He raised his hands in a protesting foreign gesture.

"But I am a stranger in these parts, Inspector. I know nothing, but nothing, of these local affairs of bygone years."

Trotter wasted no time. He snapped out, "Mrs Boyle?"

"Really I don't see why -1 mean - why should I have anything to do with such a distressing business?"

"Mr Wren?"

Christopher said shrilly, "I was a mere child at the time. I don't remember even hearing about it."

"Major Metcalf?"

The Major said abruptly, "Read about it in the papers. I was stationed at Edinburgh at the time."

"That's all you have to say - any of you?" Silence again.

Trotter gave an exasperated sigh. "If one of you gets murdered," he said, "you'll only have yourself to blame." He turned abruptly and went out of the room.

"My dears," said Christopher. "How melodramatic!" He added, "He's very handsome, isn't he? I do admire the police. So stern and hard-boiled. Quite a thrill, this whole business. 'Three Blind Mice.' How does the tune go?"

He whistled the air softly, and Molly cried out involuntarily, "Don't!"

He whirled round on her and laughed. "But, darling," he said, "it's my signature tune. I've never been taken for a murderer before and I'm getting a tremendous kick out of it!"

"Melodramatic rubbish," said Mrs Boyle. "I don't believe a word of it."

Christopher's light eyes danced with an impish mischief. "But just wait, Mrs Boyle," he lowered his voice, "till I creep up behind you and you feel my hands round your throat."

Molly flinched.

Giles said angrily, "You're upsetting my wife, Wren. It's a damned poor joke, anyway."

"It's no joking matter," said Metcalf.

"Oh, but it is," said Christopher. "That's just what it is - a madman's joke. That's what makes it so deliciously macabre."

He looked round at them and laughed again. "If you could just see your faces," he said. Then he went swiftly out of the room.

Mrs Boyle recovered first. "A singularly ill-mannered and neurotic young man," she said. "Probably a conscientious objector."

"He tells me he was buried during an air raid for forty-eight hours before being dug out," said Major Metcalf. "That accounts for a good deal, I daresay."

"People have so many excuses for giving way to nerves," said Mrs Boyle acidly. "I'm sure I went through as much as anybody in the war, and my nerves are all right."

"Perhaps that's just as well for you, Mrs Boyle," said Metcalf.

"What do you mean?"

Major Metcalf said quietly, "I think you were actually the billeting officer for this district in 1940, Mrs Boyle."

He looked at Molly who gave a grave nod. "That is so, isn't it?"

An angry flush appeared on Mrs Boyle's face. "What of it?" she demanded.

Metcalf said gravely, "You were responsible for sending three children to Longridge Farm."

"Really, Major Metcalf, I don't see how I can be held responsible for what happened. The Farm people seemed very nice and were most anxious to have the children. I don't see that I was to blame in any way - or that I can be held responsible -" Her voice trailed off.

Giles said sharply, "Why didn't you tell Sergeant Trotter this?"

"No business of the police," snapped Mrs Boyle. "I can look after myself."

Major Metcalf said quietly, "You'd better watch out."

Then he, too, left the room.

Molly murmured, "Of course, you were the billeting officer. I remember."

"Molly, did you know?" Giles stared at her.

"You had the big house on the common, didn't you?"

"Requisitioned," said Mrs Boyle. "And completely ruined," she added bitterly. "Devastated. Iniquitous."

Then, very softly, Mr Paravicini began to laugh. He threw his head back and laughed without restraint.

"You must forgive me," he gasped. "But, indeed. I find all this most amusing. I enjoy myself - yes, I enjoy myself greatly."

Sergeant Trotter re-entered the room at that moment. He threw a glance of disapproval at Mr Paravicini. "I'm glad," he said acidly, "that everyone finds this so funny."

"I apologize, my dear Inspector. I do apologize. I am spoiling the effect of your solemn warning."

Sergeant Trotter shrugged his shoulders. "I've done my best to make the position clear," he said. "And I'm not an inspector. I'm only a sergeant. I'd like to use the telephone, please, Mrs Davis."

"I abase myself," said Mr Paravicini. "I creep away."

Far from creeping, he left the room with that jaunty and youthful step that Molly had noticed before.

"He's an odd fish," said Giles.

"Criminal type"," said Trotter. "Wouldn't trust him a yard."

"Oh," said Molly. "You think he - but he's far too old - Or is he old at all? He uses make up -quite a lot of it. And his walk is young. Perhaps, he's made up to look old. Sergeant Trotter, do you think -"

Sergeant Trotter snubbed her severely. "We shan't get anywhere with unprofitable speculation, Mrs Davis," he said. "I must report to Superintendent Hogben."

He crossed to the telephone.

"But you can't," said Molly. "The telephone's dead."

"What?" Trotter swung round.

The sharp alarm in his voice impressed them all. "Dead? Since when?"

"Major Metcalf tried it just before you came."

"But it was all right before that. You got Superintendent Hogben's message?"

"Yes. I suppose - since then - the line's down - with the snow."

But Trotter's face remained grave. "I wonder," he said. "It may have been - cut."

Molly stared. "You think so?"

"I'm going to make sure."

He hurried out of the room. Giles hesitated, then went after him.

Molly exclaimed, "Good heavens! Nearly lunch time, I must get on - or we'll have nothing to eat."

As she rushed from the room, Mrs Boyle muttered, "Incompetent chit! What a place. I shan't pay seven guineas for this kind of thing."

Sergeant Trotter bent down, following the wires. He asked Giles, "Is there an extension?" "Yes, in our bedroom upstairs. Shall I go up and see there?"

"If you please."

Trotter opened the window and leaned out, brushing snow from the sill. Giles hurried up the stairs.

Mr Paravicini was in the big drawing-room. He went across to the grand piano and opened it. Sitting on the music stool, he picked out a tune softly with one finger.

Three Blind Mice, See how they run...

Christopher Wren was in his bedroom. He moved about it, whistling briskly. Suddenly the whistle wavered and died. He sat down on the edge of the bed He buried his face in his hands and began to sob. He murmured childishly, "I can't go on."

Then his mood changed. He stood up, squared his shoulders. "I've got to go on," he said. "I've got to go through with it."

Giles stood by the telephone in his and Molly's room. He bent down toward the skirting. One of Molly's gloves lay there. He picked it up. A pink bus ticket dropped out of it. Giles stood looking down at it as it fluttered to the ground. Watching it, his face changed. It might have been a different man who walked slowly, as though in a dream, to the door, opened it, and stood a moment peering along the corridor toward the head of the stairs.

Molly finished the potatoes, threw them into the pot, and set the pot on the fire. She glanced into the oven. Everything was all set, going according to plan.

On the kitchen table was the two-day-old copy of the Evening Standard. She frowned as she looked at it. If she could only just remember -

Suddenly her hands went to her eyes. "Oh, no," said Molly. "Oh, no!"

Slowly she took her hands away. She looked round the kitchen like someone looking at a strange place. So warm and comfortable and spacious, with its faint savory smell of cooking.

"Oh, no," she said again under her breath.

She moved slowly, like a sleepwalker, toward the door into the hall. She opened it. The house was silent except for someone whistling.

That tune -

Molly shivered and retreated. She waited a minute or two, glancing once more round the familiar kitchen. Yes, everything was in order and progressing. She went once more toward the kitchen door.

Major Metcalf came quietly down the back stairs. He waited a moment or two in the hall, then he opened the big cupboard under the stairs and peered in. Everything seemed quiet. Nobody about. As good a time as any to do what he had set out to do -

Mrs Boyle, in the library, turned the knobs of the radio with some irritation.

Her first attempt had brought her into the middle of a talk on the origin and significance of nursery rhymes. The last thing she wanted to hear. Twirling impatiently, she was informed by a cultured voice: "The psychology of fear must be thoroughly understood. Say you are alone in a room. A door opens softly behind you -"

A door did open.

Mrs Boyle, with a violent start, turned sharply.

"Oh, it's you," she said with relief. "Idiotic programs they have on this thing. I can't find anything worth listening to!"

"I shouldn't bother to listen, Mrs Boyle."

Mrs Boyle snorted. "What else is there for me to do?" she demanded. "Shut up in a house with a possible murderer - not that I believe that melodramatic story for a moment -"

"Don't you, Mrs Boyle?" "Why - what do you mean -"

The belt of the raincoat was slipped round her neck so quickly that she hardly realized its significance. The knob of the radio amplifier was turned higher. The lecturer on the psychology of fear shouted his learned remarks into the room and drowned what incidental noises there were attendant on Mrs Boyle's demise.

But there wasn't much noise. The killer was too expert for that.

They were all huddled in the kitchen. On the gas cooker the potatoes bubbled merrily. The savory smell from the oven of steak and kidney pie was stronger than ever.

Four shaken people stared at each other, the fifth, Molly, white and shivering, sipped at the glass of whisky that the sixth, Sergeant Trotter, had forced her to drink.

Sergeant Trotter himself, his face set and angry, looked round at the assembled people. Just five minutes had elapsed since Molly's terrified screams had brought him and the others racing to the library.

"She'd only just been killed when you got to her, Mrs Davis," he said. "Are you sure you didn't see or hear anybody as you came across the hall?"

"Whistling," said Molly faintly. "But that was earlier. I think - I'm not sure -1 think I heard a door shut - softly, somewhere - just as I - as I - went into the library."

"Which door?"

"I don't know."

"Think, Mrs Davis - try and think - upstairs - downstairs - right, left?"

"I don't know, I tell you," cried Molly. "I'm not even sure I heard anything."

"Can't you stop bullying her?" said Giles angrily. "Can't you see she's all in?"

"I'm investigating a murder, Mr Davis -1 beg your pardon - Commander Davis."

"I don't use my war rank, Sergeant."

"Quite so, sir." Trotter paused, as though he had made some subtle point. "As I say, I'm investigating a murder. Up to now nobody has taken this thing seriously. Mrs Boyle didn't. She held out on me with information. You all held out on me. Well, Mrs Boyle is dead. Unless we get to the bottom of this - and quickly, mind, there may be another death."

"Another? Nonsense. Why?"

"Because," said Sergeant Trotter gravely, "there were three little blind mice."

Giles said incredulously, "A death for each of them? But there would have to be a connection -1 mean another connection with the case."

"Yes, there would have to be that." "But why another death here?"

"Because there were only two addresses in the notebook. There was only one possible victim at Seventy-Four Culver Street. She's dead. But at Monkswell Manor there is a wider field."

"Nonsense, Trotter. It would be a most unlikely coincidence that there should be two people brought here by chance, both of them with a share in the Longridge Farm case."

"Given certain circumstances, it wouldn't be so much of a coincidence. Think it out, Mr Davis." He turned toward the others. "I've had your accounts of where you all were when Mrs Boyle was killed. I'll check them over. You were in your room, Mr Wren, when you heard Mrs Davis scream?"

"Yes, Sergeant."

"Mr Davis, you were upstairs in your bedroom examining the telephone extension there?"

"Yes," said Giles.

"Mr Paravicini was in the drawing-room playing tunes on the piano. Nobody heard you, by the way, Mr Paravicini?"

"I was playing very, very softly, Sergeant, just with one finger." "What tune was it?"

"'Three Blind Mice,' Sergeant." He smiled. "The same tune that Mr Wren was whistling upstairs. The tune that's running through everybody's head."

"It's a horrid tune," said Molly.

"How about the telephone wire?" asked Metcalf. "Was it deliberately cut?"

"Yes, Major Metcalf. A section had been cut out just outside the dining-room window -1 had just located the break when Mrs Davis screamed."

"But it's crazy. How can he hope to get away with it?" demanded Christopher shrilly. The sergeant measured him carefully with his eye.

"Perhaps he doesn't very much care about that," he said. "Or again, he may be quite sure he's too clever for us. Murderers get like that." He added, "We take a psychology course, you know, in our training. A schizophrenic's mentality is very interesting."

"Shall we cut out the long words?" said Giles.

"Certainly, Mr Davis. Two six-letter words are all that concern us at the moment. One's 'murder' and the other's 'danger.' That's what we've got to concentrate upon. Now, Major Metcalf, let me be quite clear about your movements. You say you were in the cellar -Why?"

"Looking around," said the major. "I looked in that cupboard place under the stairs and then I noticed a door there and I opened it and saw a flight of steps, so I went down there. Nice cellar you've got," he said to Giles. "Crypt of an old monastery, I should say."

"We're not engaged in antiquarian research, Major Metcalf. We're investigating a murder. Will you listen a moment, Mrs Davis? I'll leave the kitchen door open." He went out; a door shut with a faint creak. "Is that what you heard, Mrs Davis?" he asked as he reappeared in the open doorway.

"I - it does sound like it."

"That was the cupboard under the stairs. It could be, you know, that after killing Mrs Boyle, the murderer, retreating across the hall, heard you coming out of the kitchen, and slipped into the cupboard, pulling the door to after him."

"Then his fingerprints will be on the inside of the cupboard," cried Christopher. "Mine are there already," said Major Metcalf.

"Quite so," said Sergeant Trotter. "But we've a satisfactory explanation for those, haven't we?" he added smoothly.

"Look here, Sergeant," said Giles, "admittedly you're in charge of this affair. But this is my house, and in a certain degree I feel responsible for the people staying in it. Oughtn't we to take precautionary measures?"

"Such as, Mr Davis?"

"Well, to be frank, putting under restraint the person who seems pretty clearly indicated as the chief suspect."

He looked straight at Christopher Wren.

Christopher Wren sprang forward, his voice rose, shrill and hysterical. "It's not true! It's not true! You're all against me. Everyone's always against me. You're going to frame me for this. It's persecution - persecution -"

"Steady on, lad," said Major Metcalf.

"It's all right, Chris." Molly came forward. She put her hand on his arm. "Nobody's against you. Tell him it's all right," she said to Sergeant Trotter.

"We don't frame people," said Sergeant Trotter. "Tell him you're not going to arrest him."

"I'm not going to arrest anyone. To do that, I need evidence. There's no evidence - at present."

Giles cried out, "I think you're crazy, Molly. And you, too, Sergeant. There's only one person who fits the bill, and-"

"Wait, Giles, wait -" Molly broke in. "Oh, do be quiet. Sergeant Trotter, can I - can I speak to you a minute?"

"I'm staying," said Giles. "No, Giles, you, too, please."

Giles's face grew as dark as thunder. He said, "I don't know what's come over you, Molly." He followed the others out of the room, banging the door behind him. "Yes, Mrs Davis, what is it?"

"Sergeant Trotter, when you told us about the Longridge Farm case, you seemed to think that it must be the eldest boy who is - responsible for all this. But you don't know that?"

"That's perfectly true, Mrs Davis. But the probabilities lie that way - mental instability, desertion from the army, psychiatrist's report."

"Oh, I know, and therefore it all seems to point to Christopher. But I don't believe it is Christopher. There must be other - possibilities. Hadn't those three children any relations -parents, for instance?"

"Yes. The mother was dead. But the father was serving abroad." "Well, what about him? Where is he now?"

"We've no information. He obtained his demobilization papers last year." "And if the son was mentally unstable, the father may have been, too." "That is so."

"So the murderer may be middle-aged or old. Major Metcalf, remember, was frightfully upset when I told him the police had rung up. He really was."

Sergeant Trotter said quietly, "Please believe me, Mrs Davis, I've had all the possibilities in mind since the beginning. The boy, Jim - the father - even the sister. It could have been a woman, you know. I haven't overlooked anything. I may be pretty sure in my own mind -but I don't know - yet. It's very hard really to know about anything or anyone - especially in these days. You'd be surprised what we see in the police force. With marriages, especially. Hasty marriages - war marriages. There's no background, you see. No families or relations to meet. People accept each other's word. Fellow says he's a fighter pilot or an army major - the girl believes him implicitly. Sometimes she doesn't find out for a year or two that he's an absconding bank clerk with a wife and family, or an army-deserter."

He paused and went on.

"I know quite well what's in your mind, Mrs Davis. There's just one thing I'd like to say to you. The murderer's enjoying himself. That's the one thing I'm quite sure of."

He went toward the door.

Molly stood very straight and still, a red flush burning in her cheeks. After standing rigid for a moment or two, she moved slowly toward the stove, knelt down, and opened the oven door. A savory, familiar smell came toward her. Her heart lightened. It was as though suddenly she

had been wafted back into the dear, familiar world of everyday things. Cooking, housework, homemaking, ordinary prosaic living.

So, from time immemorial women had cooked food for their men. The world of danger -of madness, receded. Woman, in her kitchen, was safe - eternally safe.

The kitchen door opened. She turned her head as Christopher Wren entered. He was a little breathless.

"My dear," he said. "Such ructions! Somebody's stolen the sergeant's skis!" "The sergeant's skis? But why should anyone want to do that?"

"I really can't imagine. I mean, if the sergeant decided to go away and leave us, I should imagine that the murderer would be only too pleased. I mean, it really doesn't make sense, does it?"

"Giles put them in the cupboard under the stairs."

"Well, they're not there now. Intriguing, isn't it?" He laughed gleefully. "The sergeant's awfully angry about it. Snapping like a turtle. He's been pitching into poor Major Metcalf. The old boy sticks to it that he didn't notice whether they were there or not when he looked into the cupboard just before Mrs Boyle was murdered. Trotter says he must have noticed. If you ask me," Christopher lowered his voice and leaned forward, "this business is beginning to get Trotter down."

"It's getting us all down," said Molly.

"Not me. I find it most stimulating. It's all so delightfully unreal."

Molly said sharply, "You wouldn't say that if - if you'd been the one to find her. Mrs Boyle, I mean. I keep thinking of it -1 can't forget it. Her face - all swollen and purple -"

She shivered. Christopher came across to her. He put a hand on her shoulder. "I know. I'm an idiot. I'm sorry. I didn't think."

A dry sob rose in Molly's throat. "It seemed all right just now - cooking - the kitchen," she spoke confusedly, incoherently. "And then suddenly - it was all back again - like a nightmare."

There was a curious expression on Christopher Wren's face as he stood there looking down on her bent head.

"I see," he said. "I see." He moved away. "Well, I'd better clear out and - not interrupt you."

Molly cried, "Don't go!" just as his hand was on the door handle.

He turned round, looking at her questioningly. Then he came slowly back.

"Do you really mean that?"

"Mean what?"

"You definitely don't want me to - go?"

"No, I tell you. I don't want to be alone. I'm afraid to be alone."

Christopher sat down by the table. Molly bent to the oven, lifted the pie to a higher shelf, shut the oven door, and came and joined him.

"That's very interesting," said Christopher in a level voice.

"What is?"

"That you're not afraid to be - alone with me. You're not, are you?"

She shook her head. "No, I'm not."

"Why aren't you afraid, Molly?"

"I don't know - I'm not."

"And yet I'm the only person who - fits the bill. One murderer as per schedule."

"No," said Molly. "There are - other possibilities, I've been talking to Sergeant Trotter about them."

"Did he agree with you?"

"He didn't disagree," said Molly slowly.

Certain words sounded over and over again in her head. Especially that last phrase: 'I know exactly what's in your mind, Mrs Davis.' But did he? Could he possibly know? He had said, too, 'that the murderer was enjoying himself.' Was that true?

She said to Christopher, "You're not exactly enjoying yourself, are you? In spite of what you said just now."

"Good God, no," said Christopher, staring. "What a very odd thing to say."

"Oh, I didn't say it. Sergeant Trotter did. I hate that man! He - he puts things into your head - things that aren't true - that can't possibly be true."

She put her hands to her head, covering her eyes with them. Very gently Christopher took those hands away.

"Look here, Molly/' he said, "what is all this?"

She let him force her gently into a chair by the kitchen table. His manner was no longer hysterical or childish.

"What's the matter, Molly?" he said.

Molly looked at him - a long appraising glance. She asked irrelevantly, "How long have I known you, Christopher? Two days?"

"Just about. You're thinking, aren't you, that though it's such a short time, we seem to know each other rather well."

"Yes - it's odd, isn't it?"

"Oh, I don't know. There's a kind of sympathy between us. Possibly because we've both -been up against it."

It was not a question. It was a statement. Molly let it pass. She said very quietly, and again it was a statement rather than a question, "Your name isn't really Christopher Wren, is it."

"No"

"No."

"Why did you -"

"Choose that? Oh, it seemed rather a pleasant whimsy. They used to jeer at me and call me Christopher Robin at school. Robin - Wren - association of ideas, I suppose."

"What's your real name?"

Christopher said quietly, "I don't think we'll go into that. It wouldn't mean anything to you. I'm not an architect. Actually, I'm a deserter from the army."

Just for a moment swift alarm leaped into Molly's eyes.

Christopher saw it. "Yes," he said. "Just like our unknown murderer. I told you I was the only one the specification fitted."

"Don't be stupid," said Molly. "I told you I didn't believe you were the murderer. Go on -tell me about yourself. What made you desert - nerves?"

"Being afraid, you mean? No, curiously enough, I wasn't afraid - not more than anyone else, that is to say. Actually I got a reputation for being rather cool under fire. No, it was something quite different It was - my mother."

"Your mother?"

"Yes - you see, she was killed - in an air raid. Buried. They - they had to dig her out. I don't know what happened to me when I heard about it -1 suppose I went a little mad. I thought, you see, it happened to me. I felt I had to get home quickly and - and dig myself out -1 can't explain - it was all confused." He lowered his head to his hands and spoke in a muffled voice. "I wandered about a long time, looking for her - or for myself -1 don't know which. And then, when my mind cleared up, I was afraid to go back - or to report -1 knew I could never explain. Since then, I've just been - nothing."

He stared at her, his young face hollow with despair.

"You mustn't feel like that," said Molly gently. "You can start again."

"Can one ever do that?"

"Of course - you're quite young."

"Yes, but you see - I've come to the end."

"No," said Molly. "You haven't come to the end, you only think you have. I believe everyone has that feeling once, at least, in their lives - that it's the end, that they can't go on."

"You've had it, haven't you, Molly? You must have - to be able to speak like that."

"Yes."

"What was yours?"

"Mine was just what happened to a lot of people. I was engaged to a young fighter pilot -and he was killed."

"Wasn't there more to it than that?"

"I suppose there was. I'd had a nasty shock when I was younger. I came up against something that was rather cruel and beastly. It predisposed me to think that life was always - horrible. When Jack was killed it just confirmed my belief that the whole of life was cruel and treacherous."

"I know. And then, I suppose," said Christopher, watching her, "Giles came along." "Yes."

He saw the smile, tender, almost shy, that trembled on her mouth. "Giles came -everything felt right and safe and happy - Giles!"

The smile fled from her lips. Her face was suddenly stricken. She shivered as though with cold.

"What's the matter, Molly? What's frightening you? You are frightened, aren't you?"

She nodded.

"And it's something to do with Giles? Something he's said or done?"

"It's not Giles, really. It's that horrible man!"

"What horrible man?" Christopher was surprised. "Paravicini?"

"No, no. Sergeant Trotter."

"Sergeant Trotter?"

"Suggesting things - hinting things - putting horrible thoughts into my mind about Giles -thoughts that I didn't know were there. Oh, I hate him -1 hate him."

Christopher's eyebrows rose in slow surprise.

"Giles? Giles! Yes, of course, he and I are much of an age. He seems to me much older than I am - but I suppose he isn't, really. Yes, Giles might fit the bill equally well. But look here, Molly, that's all nonsense. Giles was down here with you the day that woman was killed in London."

Molly did not answer.

Christopher looked at her sharply. "Wasn't he here?"

Molly spoke breathlessly, the words coming out in an incoherent jumble. "He was out all day - in the car - he went over to the other side of the county about some wire netting in a sale there - at least that's what he said - that's what I thought - until - until -"

"Until what?"

Slowly Molly's hand reached out and traced the date of the Evening Standard that covered a portion of the kitchen table.

Christopher looked at it and said, "London edition, two days ago."

"It was in Giles's pocket when he came back. He - he must have been in London."

Christopher stared. He stared at the paper and he stared at Molly. He pursed up his lips and began to whistle, then checked himself abruptly. It wouldn't do to whistle that tune just now.

Choosing his words very carefully, and avoiding her eye, he said, "How much do you actually - know about Giles?"

"Don't," cried Molly. "Don't! That's just what that beast Trotter said - or hinted. That women often didn't know anything about the men that they married - especially in wartime. They - they just took the man's own account of himself."

That's true enough, I suppose."

"Don't you say it, too! I can't bear it. It's just because we're all in such a state, so worked up. We'd - we'd believe any fantastic suggestion - It's not true! I -"

She stopped. The kitchen door had opened.

Giles came in. There was rather a grim look on his face. "Am I interrupting anything?" he asked.

Christopher slipped from the table. "I'm just taking a few cookery lessons," he said.

"Indeed? Well, look here, Wren, tete-a-tetes aren't very healthy things at the present time. You keep out of the kitchen, do you hear?"

"Oh, but surely-"

"You keep away from my wife, Wren. She's not going to be the next victim."

"That," said Christopher, "is just what I'm worrying about."

If there was significance in the words, Giles did not apparently notice them. He merely turned a rather darker shade of brick-red. "I'll do the worrying," he said. "I can look after my own wife. Get the hell out of here."

Molly said in a clear voice, "Please go, Christopher. Yes - really."

Christopher moved slowly toward the door. "I shan't go very far," he said, and the words were addressed to Molly and held a very definite meaning.

"Will you get out of here?"

Christopher gave a high childish giggle. "Aye, aye, Commander," he said.

The door shut behind him. Giles turned on Molly.

"For God's sake, Molly, haven't you got any sense? Shut in here alone with a dangerous homicidal maniac!"

"He isn't the -" she changed her phrase quickly - "he isn't dangerous. Anyway, I'm on my guard. I can - look after myself."

Giles laughed unpleasantly. "So could Mrs Boyle."

"Oh, Giles, don't."

"Sorry, my dear. But I'm het up. That wretched boy. What you see in him I can't imagine."

Molly said slowly, "I'm sorry for him."

"Sorry for a homicidal lunatic?"

Molly gave him a curious glance. "I could be sorry for a homicidal lunatic," she said.

"Calling him Christopher, too. Since when have you been on Christian-name terms?"

"Oh Giles, don't be ridiculous. Everyone always uses Christian names nowadays. You know they do."

"Even after a couple of days? But perhaps it's more than that. Perhaps you knew Mr Christopher Wren, the phony architect, before he came here? Perhaps you suggested to him that he should come here? Perhaps you cooked it all up between you?"

Molly stared at him. "Giles, have you gone out of your mind? What on earth are you suggesting?"

"I'm suggesting that Christopher Wren is an old friend, that you're on rather closer terms with him than you'd like me to know."

"Giles, you must be crazy!"

"I suppose you'll stick to it that you never saw him until he walked in here. Rather odd that he should come and stay in an out-of-the-way place like this, isn't it?"

"Is it any odder than that Major Metcalf and - and Mrs Boyle should?"

"Yes-I think it is. I've always read that these murdering loonies had a peculiar fascination for women. Looks as though it were true. How did you get to know him? How long has this been going on?"

"You're being absolutely absurd, Giles. I never saw Christopher Wren until he arrived here."

"You didn't go up to London to meet him two days ago and fix up to meet here as strangers?"

"You know perfectly well, Giles, I haven't been up to London for weeks."

"Haven't you? That's interesting." He fished a fur-lined glove out of his pocket and held it out.

"That's one of the gloves you were wearing day before yesterday, isn't it? The day I was over at Sailham getting the netting."

"The day you were over at Sailham getting the netting," said Molly, eying him steadily. "Yes, I wore those gloves when I went out."

"You went to the village, you said. If you only went to the village, what is this doing inside that glove?"

Accusingly, he held out a pink bus ticket.

There was a moment's silence.

"You went to London," said Giles.

"All right," said Molly. Her chin shot up. "I went to London."

"To meet this chap Christopher Wren."

"No, not to meet Christopher."

"Then why did you go?"

"Just at the moment, Giles," said Molly, "I'm not going to tell you."

"Meaning you'll give yourself time to think up a good story!"

"I think," said Molly, "that I hate you!"

"I don't hate you," said Giles slowly. "But I almost wish I did. I simply feel that -1 don't know you any more -1 don't know anything about you."

"I feel the same," said Molly. "You - you're just a stranger. A man who lies to me -" "When have I ever lied to you?"

Molly laughed. "Do you think I believed that story of yours about the wire netting? You were in London, too, that day."

"I suppose you saw me there," said Giles. "And you didn't trust me enough -" "Trust you? I'll never trust anyone - ever- again."

Neither of them had noticed the soft opening of the kitchen door. Mr Paravicini gave a little cough.

"So embarrassing," he murmured. "I do hope you young people are not both saying just a little more than you mean. One is so apt to in these lovers' quarrels."

"Lovers' quarrels," said Giles derisively. "That's good."

"Quite so, quite so," said Mr Paravicini. "I know just how you feel. I have been through all this myself when I was a younger man. But what I came to say was that the inspector person is simply insisting that we should all come into the drawing-room. It appears that he has an idea." Mr Paravicini sniggered gently. "The police have a clue - yes, one hears that frequently. But an idea? I very much doubt it. A zealous and painstaking officer, no doubt, our Sergeant Trotter, but not, I think, over-endowed with brains."

"Go on, Giles," said Molly. "I've got the cooking to see to. Sergeant Trotter can do without me."

"Talking of cooking," said Mr Paravicini, skipping nimbly across the kitchen to Molly's side, "have you ever tried chicken livers served on toast that has been thickly spread with foie gras and a very thin rasher of bacon smeared with French mustard?"

"One doesn't see much foie gras nowadays," said Giles, "Come on, Paravicini."

"Shall I stay and assist you, dear lady?"

"You come along to the drawing-room, Paravicini," said Giles.

Mr Paravicini laughed softly.

"Your husband is afraid for you. Quite natural. He doesn't fancy the idea of leaving you alone with me. It is my sadistic tendencies he fears - not my dishonorable ones. I yield to force." He bowed gracefully and kissed the tips of his fingers.

Molly said uncomfortably, "Oh, Mr Paravicini, I'm sure -"

Mr Paravicini shook his head. He said to Giles, "You're very wise, young man. Take no chances. Can I prove to you - or to the inspector for that matter - that I am not a homicidal maniac? No, I cannot. Negatives are such difficult things to prove."

He hummed cheerfully.

Molly flinched. "Please Mr Paravicini - not that horrible tune."

"'Three Blind Mice' - so it was! The tune has got into my head. Now I come to think of it, it is a gruesome little rhyme. Not a nice little rhyme at all. But children like gruesome things. You may have noticed that? That rhyme is very English - the bucolic, cruel English countryside. 'She cut off their tails with a carving-knife.' Of course a child would love that -I could tell you things about children -"

"Please don't," said Molly faintly, "I think you're cruel, too." Her voice rose hysterically. "You laugh and smile - you're like a cat playing with a mouse - playing -"

She began to laugh.

"Steady, Molly," said Giles. "Come along, we'll all go into the drawing-room together. Trotter will be getting impatient. Never mind the cooking. Murder is more important than food."

"I'm not sure that I agree with you," said Mr Paravicini as he followed them with little skipping steps. "The condemned man ate a hearty breakfast - that's what they always say."

Christopher Wren joined them in the hall and received a scowl from Giles. He looked at Molly with a quick, anxious glance, but Molly, her head held high, walked looking straight ahead of her. They marched almost like a procession to the drawing-room door. Mr Paravicini brought up the rear with his little skipping steps.

Sergeant Trotter and Major Metcalf were standing waiting in the drawing-room. The major was looking sulky. Sergeant Trotter was looking flushed and energetic.

"That's right," he said, as they entered. "I wanted you all together. I want to make a certain experiment - and for that I shall require your co-operation."

"Will it take long?" Molly asked. "I'm rather busy in the kitchen. After all, we've got to have a meal sometime."

"Yes," said Trotter. "I appreciate that, Mrs Davis. But, if you'll excuse me, there are more important things than meals! Mrs Boyle, for instance, won't need another meal."

"Really, Sergeant," said Major Metcalf, "that's an extraordinarily tactless way of putting things."

"I'm sorry, Major Metcalf, but I want everyone to cooperate in this." "Have you found your skis, Sergeant Trotter?" asked Molly.

The young man reddened. "No, I have not, Mrs Davis. But I may say I have a very shrewd suspicion who took them. And of why they were taken. I won't say any more at present."

"Please don't," begged Mr Paravicini. "I always think explanations should be kept to the very end - that exciting last chapter, you know."

"This isn't a game, sir."

"Isn't it? Now there I think you're wrong. I think it is a game - to somebody."

"The murderer is enjoying himself," murmured Molly softly.

The others looked at her in astonishment. She flushed.

"I'm only quoting what Sergeant Trotter said to me."

Sergeant Trotter did not look too pleased. "It's all very well, Mr Paravicini, mentioning last chapters and speaking as though this was a mystery thriller," he said. "This is real. This is happening."

"So long," said Christopher Wren, fingering his neck gingerly, "as it doesn't happen to me."

"Now, then," said Major Metcalf. "None of that, young fellow. The sergeant here is going to tell us just what he wants us to do."

Sergeant Trotter cleared his throat. His voice became official.

"I took certain statements from you all a short time ago," he said. "Those statements related to your positions at the time when the murder of Mrs Boyle occurred. Mr Wren and Mr Davis were in their separate bedrooms. Mrs Davis was in the kitchen. Major Metcalf was in the cellar. Mr Paravicini was here in this room -"

He paused and then went on.

"Those are the statements you made. I have no means of checking those statements. They may be true - they may not. To put it quite clearly - four of those statements are true - but one of them is false. Which one?"

He looked from face to face. Nobody spoke.

"Four of you are speaking the truth - one is lying. I have a plan that may help me to discover the liar. And if I discover that one of you lied to me - then I know who the murderer is."

Giles said sharply, "Not necessarily. Someone might have lied -for some other reason." "I rather doubt that, Mr Davis."

"But what's the idea, man? You've just said you've no means of checking these statements?"

"No, but supposing everyone was to go through these movements a second time." "Bah," said Major Metcalf disparagingly. "Reconstruction of the crime. Foreign idea."

"Not a reconstruction of the crime, Major Metcalf. A reconstruction of the movements of apparently innocent persons."

"And what do you expect to learn from that?"

"You will forgive me if I don't make that clear just at the moment."

"You want," asked Molly, "a repeat performance?"

"More or less, Mrs Davis."

There was a silence. It was, somehow, an uneasy silence.

It's a trap, thought Molly. It's a trap - but I don't see how -

You might have thought that there were five guilty people in the room, instead of one guilty and four innocent ones. One and all cast doubtful sideways glances at the assured, smiling young man who proposed this innocent-sounding maneuver.

Christopher burst out shrilly, "But I don't see -1 simply can't see - what you can possibly hope to find out - just by making people do the same thing they did before. It seems to me just nonsense!"

"Does it, Mr Wren?"

"Of course," said Giles slowly, "what you say goes, Sergeant. We'll co-operate. Are we all to do exactly what we did before?"

"The same actions will be performed, yes."

A faint ambiguity in the phrase made Major Metcalf look up sharply.

Sergeant Trotter went on.

"Mr Paravicini has told us that he sat at the piano and played a certain tune. Perhaps, Mr Paravicini, you would kindly show us exactly what you did do?"

"But certainly, my dear Sergeant."

Mr Paravicini skipped nimbly across the room to the grand piano and settled himself on the music stool.

"The maestro at the piano will play the signature tune to a murder," he said with a flourish.

He grinned, and with elaborate mannerisms he picked out with one finger the tune of "Three Blind Mice."

He's enjoying himself, thought Molly. He's enjoying himself.

In the big room the soft, muted notes had an almost eerie effect.

"Thank you, Mr Paravicini," said Sergeant Trotter. "That, I take it, is exactly how you played the tune on the - former occasion?"

"Yes, Sergeant, it is. I repeated it three times."

Sergeant Trotter turned to Molly. "Do you play the piano, Mrs Davis?"
"Yes, Sergeant Trotter."

"Could you pick out the tune, as Mr Paravicini has done, playing it in exactly the same manner?"

"Certainly I could."

"Then will you go and sit at the piano and be ready to do so when I give the signal?"

Molly looked slightly bewildered. Then she crossed slowly to the piano.

Mr Paravicini rose from the piano stool with a shrill protest. "But, Sergeant, I understood that we were each to repeat our former roles. I was at the piano here."

"The same actions will be performed as on the former occasion - but they will not necessarily be performed by the same people."

"I - don't see the point of that," said Giles.

"There is a point, Mr Davis. It is a means of checking up on the original statements - and I may say of one statement in particular. Now, then,

please. I will assign you your various stations. Mrs Davis will be here - at the piano. Mr Wren, will you kindly go to the kitchen? Just keep an eye on Mrs Davis's dinner. Mr Paravicini, will you go to Mr Wren's bedroom? There you can exercise your musical talents by whistling 'Three Blind Mice' just as he did. Major Metcalf, will you go up to Mr Davis's bedroom and examine the telephone there? And you, Mr Davis, will you look into the cupboard in the hall and then go down to the cellar?"

There was a moment's silence. Then four people moved slowly toward the door. Trotter followed them. He looked over his shoulder.

"Count up to fifty and then begin to play, Mrs Davis," he said.

He followed the others out. Before the door closed Molly heard Mr Paravicini's voice say shrilly, "I never knew the police were so fond of parlor games."

"Forty-eight, forty-nine, fifty."

Obediently, the counting finished, Molly began to play. Again the soft cruel little tune crept out into the big, echoing room.

Three Blind Mice See how they run...

Molly felt her heart beating faster and faster. As Paravicini had said, it was a strangely haunting and gruesome little rhyme. It had that childish incomprehension of pity which is so terrifying if met with in an adult.

Very faintly, from upstairs, she could hear the same tune being whistled in the bedroom above - Paravicini enacting the part of Christopher Wren.

Suddenly, next door, the wireless went on in the library. Sergeant Trotter must have set that going. He himself, then, was playing the part of Mrs Boyle.

But why? What was the point of it all? Where was the trap? For there was a trap, of that she was certain.

A draft of cold air blew across the back of her neck. She turned her head sharply. Surely the door had opened. Someone had come into the room - No, the room was empty. But suddenly she felt nervous - afraid. If someone should come in. Supposing Mr Paravicini should skip round the door, should come skipping over to the piano, his long fingers twitching and twisting -

"So you are playing your own funeral march, dear lady, a happy thought -" Nonsense -don't be stupid - don't imagine things. Besides, you can hear him whistling over your head, just as he can hear you.

She almost took her fingers off the piano as the idea came to her! Nobody had heard Mr Paravicini playing. Was that the trap? Was it, perhaps, possible that Mr Paravicini hadn't been playing at all? That he had been, not in the drawing-room, but in the library. In the library, strangling Mrs Boyle? He had been annoyed, very annoyed, when Trotter had arranged for her to play. He had laid stress on the softness with which he had picked out the tune. Of course, he had emphasized the softness in the hopes that it would be too soft to be heard outside

the room. Because if anyone heard it this time who hadn't heard it last time - why then, Trotter would have got what he wanted - the person who had lied.

The door of the drawing-room opened. Molly, strung up to expect Paravicini, nearly screamed. But it was only Sergeant Trotter who entered, just as she finished the third repetition of the tune.

"Thank you, Mrs Davis," he said.

He was looking extremely pleased with himself, and his manner was brisk and confident.

Molly took her hands from the keys. "Have you got what you wanted?" she asked.

"Yes, indeed." His voice was exultant. "I've got exactly what I wanted."

"Which? Who?"

"Don't you know, Mrs Davis? Come, now - it's not so difficult. By the way, you've been, if I may say so, extraordinarily foolish. You've left me hunting about for the third victim. As a result, you've been in serious danger."

"Me? I don't know what you mean."

"I mean that you haven't been honest with me, Mrs Davis. You held out on me -just as Mrs Boyle held out on me."

"I don't understand."

"Oh, yes, you do. Why, when I first mentioned the Longridge Farm case, you knew all about it. Oh, yes, you did. You were upset. And it was you who confirmed that Mrs Boyle was the billeting officer for this part of the country. Both you and she came from these parts. So when I began to speculate who the third victim was likely to be, I plumped at once for you. You'd shown firsthand knowledge of the Longridge Farm business. We policemen aren't so dumb as we look, you know."

Molly said in a low voice, "You don't understand. I didn't want to remember."

"I can understand that." His voice changed a little. "Your maiden name was Wainwright, wasn't it?"

"Yes."

"And you're just a little older than you pretend to be. In 1940, when this thing happened, you were the schoolteacher at Abbeyvale school."

"No!"

"Oh, yes, you were, Mrs Davis."

"I wasn't, I tell you."

"The child who died managed to get a letter posted to you. He stole a stamp. The letter begged for help - help from his kind teacher. It's a

teacher's business to find out why a child doesn't come to school. You didn't find out. You ignored the poor little devil's letter."

"Stop." Molly's cheeks were flaming. "It's my sister you are talking about. She was the schoolmistress. And she didn't ignore his letter. She was ill - with pneumonia. She never saw the letter until after the child was dead. It upset her dreadfully - dreadfully - she was a terribly sensitive person. But it wasn't her fault. It's because she took it to heart so dreadfully that I've never been able to bear being reminded of it. It's been a nightmare to me, always."

Molly's hands went to her eyes, covering them. When she took them away, Trotter was staring at her.

He said softly, "So it was your sister. Well, after all -" He gave a sudden queer smile. "It doesn't much matter, does it? Your sister - my brother - "

He took something out of his pocket. He was smiling now, happily.

Molly stared at the object he held. "I always thought the police didn't carry revolvers," she said.

"The police don't," said the young man. He went on, "But you see, Mrs Davis, I'm not a policeman. I'm Jim. I'm Georgie's brother. You thought I was a policeman because I rang up from the call box in the village and said that Sergeant Trotter was on his way. Then I cut the telephone wires outside the house when I got here, so that you shouldn't be able to ring back to the police station."

Molly stared at him. The revolver was pointing at her now.

"Don't move, Mrs Davis - and don't scream - or I pull the trigger at once."

He was still smiling. It was, Molly realized with horror, a child's smile. And his voice, when he spoke, was becoming a child's voice.

"Yes," he said, "I'm Georgie's brother. Georgie died at Longridge Farm. That nasty woman sent us there, and the farmer's wife was cruel to us, and you wouldn't help us - three little blind mice. I said then I'd kill you all when I grew up. I meant it. I've thought of it ever since." He frowned suddenly. "They bothered me a lot in the army - that doctor kept asking me questions -1 had to get away. I was afraid they'd stop me doing what I wanted to do. But I'm grown up now. Grown-ups can do what they like."

Molly pulled herself together. Talk to him, she said to herself. Distract his mind. "But, Jim, listen." she said. "You'll never get safely away."

His face clouded over. "Somebody's hidden my skis. I can't find them." He laughed. "But I daresay it will be all right. It's your husband's revolver. I took it out of his drawer. I daresay they'll think he shot you. Anyway -1 don't much care. It's been such fun - all of it Pretending! That woman in London, her face when she recognized me. That stupid woman this morning!"

He nodded his head.

Clearly, with eerie effect, came a whistle. Someone whistling the tune of "Three Blind Mice."

Trotter started, the revolver wavered - a voice shouted, "Down, Mrs Davis."

Molly dropped to the floor as Major Metcalf, rising from behind the concealment of the sofa by the door flung himself upon Trotter. The revolver went off - and the bullet lodged in one of the somewhat mediocre oil paintings dear to the heart of the late Miss Emory.

A moment later, all was pandemonium - Giles rushed in, followed by Christopher and Mr Paravicini.

Major Metcalf, retaining his grasp of Trotter, spoke in short explosive sentences.

"Came in while you were playing - slipped behind the sofa - I've been on to him from the beginning - that's to say, I knew he wasn't a police officer. I'm a police officer - Inspector Tanner. We arranged with Metcalf I should take his place. Scotland Yard thought it advisable to have someone on the spot. Now, my lad -" He spoke quite gently to the now docile Trotter. "You come with me. No one will hurt you. You'll be all right. We'll look after you."

In a piteous child's voice the bronzed young man asked, "Georgie won't be angry with me?"

Metcalf said, "No. Georgie won't be angry."

He murmured to Giles as he passed him, "Mad as a hatter, poor devil." They went out together. Mr Paravicini touched Christopher Wren on the arm. "You, also, my friend," he said, "come with me."

Giles and Molly, left alone, looked at each other. In another moment they were in each other's arms.

"Darling," said Giles, "you're sure he didn't hurt you?"

"No, no, I'm quite all right. Giles, I've been so terribly mixed up. I almost thought you - why did you go to London that day?"

"Darling, I wanted to get you an anniversary present, for tomorrow. I didn't want you to know."

"How extraordinary! I went to London to get you a present and I didn't want you to know."

"I was insanely jealous of that neurotic ass. I must have been mad. Forgive me, darling." The door opened, and Mr Paravicini skipped in in his goatlike way. He was beaming.

"Interrupting the reconciliation - Such a charming scene - But, alas, I must bid you adieu. A police jeep has managed to get through. I shall persuade them to take me with them." He bent and whispered mysteriously in Molly's ear, "I may have a few embarrassments in the near future - but I am confident I can arrange matters, and if you should receive a case -with a goose, say, a turkey, some tins of foie gras, a ham - some nylon stockings, yes? Well, you understand, it will

be with my compliments to a very charming lady. Mr Davis, my check is on the hall table."

He kissed Molly's hand and skipped to the door.

"Nylons?" murmured Molly, "Foie gras? Who is Mr Paravicini? Santa Claus?"

"Black-market style, I suspect," said Giles.

Christopher Wren poked a diffident head in. "My dears," he said, "I hope I'm not intruding, but there's a terrible smell of burning from the kitchen. Ought I to do something about it?"

With an anguished cry of "My pie!" Molly fled from the room.

Contents:

The Adventure of the Christmas Pudding

The Mystery of the Spanish Chest

The Under Dog

Four-and-Twenty Blackbirds

The Dream

Greenshaw's Folly

FOREWORD BY AGATHA CHRISTIE

This book of Christmas fare may be described as "The Chef's Selection." I am the Chef!

There are two main courses: The Adventure of the Christmas Pudding and The Mystery of the Spanish Chest; a selection of Entrées: Greenshaw's Folly, The Dream, and The Under Dog; and a Sorbet: Four-and-Twenty Blackbirds.

The Mystery of the Spanish Chest may be described as a Hercule Poirot Special. It is a case in which he considers he was at his best! Miss Marple, in her turn, has always been pleased with her perspicuity in Greenshaw's Folly.

The Adventure of the Christmas Pudding is an indulgence of my own, since it recalls to me, very pleasurably, the Christmases of my youth.

After my father's death, my mother and I always spent Christmas with my brother-in-law's family in the north of England - and what superb Christmases they were for a child to remember! Abney Hall had everything! The garden boasted a waterfall, a stream, and a tunnel under the drive! The Christmas fare was of gargantuan proportions. I was a skinny child, appearing delicate, but actually of robust health and perpetually hungry! The boys of the family and I used to vie with each other as to who could eat most on Christmas Day. Oyster Soup and Turbot went down without undue zest, but then came Roast Turkey, Boiled Turkey and an enormous Sirloin of Beef. The boys and I had two helpings of all three! We then had Plum Pudding, Mince-pies, Trifle and every kind of dessert. During the afternoon we ate chocolates solidly. We neither felt, nor were, sick! How lovely to be eleven years old and greedy!

What a day of delight from "Stockings" in bed in the morning, Church and all the Christmas hymns, Christmas dinner, Presents, and the final Lighting of the Christmas Tree!

And how deep my gratitude to the kind and hospitable hostess who must have worked so hard to make Christmas Day a wonderful memory to me still in my old age.

So let me dedicate this book to the memory of Abney Hall, its kindness and its hospitality.

And a happy Christmas to all who read this book.

Agatha Christie

THE ADVENTURE OF THE CHRISTMAS PUDDING

"I regret exceedingly..." said M. Hercule Poirot.

He was interrupted. Not rudely interrupted. The interruption was suave, dexterous, persuasive rather than contradictory.

"Please don't refuse offhand, M. Poirot. There are grave issues of State. Your cooperation will be appreciated in the highest quarters."

"You are too kind," Hercule Poirot waved a hand, "but I really cannot undertake to do as you ask. At this season of the year..."

Again Mr Jesmond interrupted. "Christmas time," he said, persuasively. "An old-fashioned Christmas in the English countryside."

Hercule Poirot shivered. The thought of the Christmas countryside at this season of the year did not attract him.

"A good old-fashioned Christmas!" Mr Jesmond stressed it.

"Me - I am not an Englishman," said Hercule Poirot. "In my country, Christmas, it is for the children. The New Year, that is what we celebrate."

"Ah," said Mr Jesmond, "but Christmas in England is a great institution and I assure you at Kings Lacey you would see it at its best. It's a wonderful old house, you know. Why, one wing of it dates from the fourteenth century."

Again Poirot shivered. The thought of a fourteenth-century English manor house filled him with apprehension. He had suffered too often in the historic country houses of England. He looked round appreciatively at his comfortable modern flat with its radiators and the latest patent devices for excluding any kind of draught.

"In the winter," he said firmly, "I do not leave London."

"I don't think you quite appreciate, Mr Poirot, what a very serious matter this is." Mr Jesmond glanced at his companion and then back at Poirot.

Poirot's second visitor had up to now said nothing but a polite and formal "How do you do." He sat now, gazing down at his well-polished shoes, with an air of the utmost dejection on his coffee-coloured face. He was a young man, not more than twenty-three, and he was clearly in a state of complete misery.

"Yes, yes," said Hercule Poirot. "Of course the matter is serious. I do appreciate that. His Highness has my heartfelt sympathy."

"The position is one of the utmost delicacy," said Mr Jesmond.

Poirot transferred his gaze from the young man to his older companion. If one wanted to sum up Mr Jesmond in a word, the

word would have been discretion. Everything about Mr Jesmond was discreet. His well-cut but inconspicuous clothes, his pleasant, well-bred voice which rarely soared out of an agreeable monotone, his light-brown hair just thinning a little at the temples, his pale serious face. It seemed to Hercule Poirot that he had known not one Mr Jesmond but a dozen Mr Jesmonds in his time, all using sooner or later the same phrase - "a position of the utmost delicacy."

"The police," said Hercule Poirot, "can be very discreet, you know."

Mr Jesmond shook his head firmly.

"Not the police," he said. "To recover the - er - what we want to recover will almost inevitably involve taking proceedings in the law courts and we know so little. We suspect, but we do not know."

"You have my sympathy," said Hercule Poirot again.

If he imagined that his sympathy was going to mean anything to his two visitors, he was wrong. They did not want sympathy, they wanted practical help. Mr Jesmond began once more to talk about the delights of an English Christmas.

"It's dying out, you know," he said, "the real old-fashioned type of Christmas. People spend it at hotels nowadays. But an English Christmas with all the family gathered round, the children and their stockings, the Christmas tree, the turkey and plum pudding, the crackers. The snow-man outside the window..."

In the interests of exactitude, Hercule Poirot intervened.

"To make a snow-man one has to have the snow," he remarked severely. "And one cannot have snow to order, even for an English Christmas."

"I was talking to a friend of mine in the meteorological office only today," said Mr Jesmond, "and he tells me that it is highly probable there will be snow this Christmas."

It was the wrong thing to have said. Hercule Poirot shuddered more forcefully than ever.

"Snow in the country!" he said. "That would be still more abominable. A large, cold, stone manor house."

"Not at all," said Mr Jesmond. "Things have changed very much in the last ten years or so. Oil-fired central heating."

"They have oil-fired central heating at Kings Lacey?" asked Poirot. For the first time he seemed to waver.

Mr Jesmond seized his opportunity. "Yes, indeed," he said, "and a splendid hot water system. Radiators in every bedroom. I assure you, my dear M. Poirot, Kings Lacey is comfort itself in the winter time. You might even find the house too warm."

"That is most unlikely," said Hercule Poirot.

With practised dexterity Mr Jesmond shifted his ground a little.

"You can appreciate the terrible dilemma we are in," he said, in a confidential manner.

Hercule Poirot nodded. The problem was, indeed, not a happy one. A young potentate-to-be, the only son of the ruler of a rich and important native State had arrived in London a few weeks ago. His country had been passing through a period of restlessness and discontent. Though loyal to the father whose way of life had remained persistently Eastern, popular opinion was somewhat dubious of the younger generation. His follies had been Western ones and as such looked upon with disapproval.

Recently, however, his betrothal had been announced. He was to marry a cousin of the same blood, a young woman who, though educated at Cambridge, was careful to display no Western influences in her own country. The wedding day was announced and the young prince had made a journey to England, bringing with him some of the famous jewels of his house to be reset in appropriate modern settings by Cartier. These had included a very famous ruby which had been removed from its cumbersome old-fashioned necklace and had been given a new look by the famous jewellers. So far so good, but after this came the snag. It was not to be supposed that a young man possessed of much wealth and convivial tastes, should not commit a few follies of the pleasanter type. As to that there would have been no censure. Young princes were supposed to amuse themselves in this fashion. For the prince to take the girl friend of the moment for a walk down Bond Street and bestow upon her an emerald bracelet or a diamond clip as a reward for the pleasure she had afforded him would have been regarded as quite natural and suitable, corresponding in fact to the

Cadillac cars which his father invariably presented to his favourite dancing girl of the moment.

But the prince had been far more indiscreet than that. Flattered by the lady's interest, he had displayed to her the famous ruby in its new setting, and had finally been so unwise as to accede to her request to be allowed to wear it just for one evening!

The sequel was short and sad. The lady had retired from their supper table to powder her nose. Time passed. She did not return. She had left the establishment by another door and since then had disappeared into space. The important and distressing thing was that the ruby in its new setting had disappeared with her.

These were the facts that could not possibly be made public without the most dire consequences. The ruby was something more than a ruby, it was a historical possession of great significance, and the circumstances of its disappearance were such that any undue publicity about them might result in the most serious political consequences.

Mr Jesmond was not the man to put these facts into simple language. He wrapped them up, as it were, in a great deal of verbiage. Who exactly Mr Jesmond was, Hercule Poirot did not know. He had met other Mr Jesmonds in the course of his career. Whether he was connected with the Home Office, the Foreign Office or some more discreet branch of public service was not specified. He was acting in the interests of the Commonwealth. The ruby must be recovered.

M. Poirot, so Mr Jesmond delicately insisted, was the man to recover it.

"Perhaps - yes," Hercule Poirot admitted, "but you can tell me so little. Suggestion - suspicion - all that is not very much to go upon."

"Come now, Monsieur Poirot, surely it is not beyond your powers. Ah, come now."

"I do not always succeed."

But this was mock modesty. It was clear enough from Poirot's tone that for him to undertake a mission was almost synonymous with succeeding in it.

"His Highness is very young," Mr Jesmond said. "It will be sad if his whole life is to be blighted for a mere youthful indiscretion."

Poirot looked kindly at the downcast young man. "It is the time for follies, when one is young," he said encouragingly, "and for the ordinary young man it does not matter so much. The good papa, he pays up; the family lawyer, he helps to disentangle the inconvenience; the young man, he learns by experience and all ends for the best. In a position such as yours, it is hard indeed. Your approaching marriage..."

"That is it. That is it exactly." For the first time words poured from the young man. "You see she is very, very serious. She takes life very seriously. She has acquired at Cambridge many very serious ideas. There is to be education in my country. There are to be

schools. There are to be many things. All in the name of progress, you understand, of democracy. It will not be, she says, like it was in my father's time. Naturally she knows that I will have diversions in London, but not the scandal. No! It is the scandal that matters. You see it is very, very famous, this ruby. There is a long trail behind it, a history. Much bloodshed - many deaths!"

"Deaths," said Hercule Poirot thoughtfully. He looked at Mr Jesmond. "One hopes," he said, "it will not come to that?"

Mr Jesmond made a peculiar noise rather like a hen who has decided to lay an egg and then thought better of it.

"No, no, indeed," he said, sounding rather prim. "There is no question, I am sure, of anything of that kind."

"You cannot be sure," said Hercule Poirot. "Whoever has the ruby now, there may be others who want to gain possession of it, and who will not stick at a trifle, my friend."

"I really don't think," said Mr Jesmond, sounding more prim than ever, "that we need enter into speculations of that kind. Quite unprofitable."

"Me," said Hercule Poirot, suddenly becoming very foreign, "me, I explore all the avenues, like the politicians."

Mr Jesmond looked at him doubtfully. Pulling himself together, he said, "Well, I can take it that is settled, M. Poirot? You will go to Kings Lacey?"

"And how do I explain myself there?" asked Hercule Poirot.

Mr Jesmond smiled with confidence.

"That, I think, can be arranged very easily," he said. "I can assure you that it will all seem quite natural. You will find the Laceys most charming. Delightful people."

"And you do not deceive me about the oil-fired central heating?"

"No, no, indeed." Mr Jones sounded quite pained. "I assure you you will find every comfort."

"Tout confort moderne," murmured Poirot to himself, reminiscently. "Eh bien," he said, "I accept."

II

The temperature in the long drawing-room at Kings Lacey was a comfortable sixty-eight as Hercule Poirot sat talking to Mrs Lacey by one of the big mullioned windows. Mrs Lacey was engaged in needlework. She was not doing petit point or embroidering flowers upon silk. Instead, she appeared to be engaged in the prosaic task of hemming dishclothes. As she sewed she talked in a soft reflective voice that Poirot found very charming.

"I hope you will enjoy our Christmas party here, M. Poirot. It's only the family, you know. My granddaughter and a grandson and a friend of his and Bridget who's my great-niece, and Diana who's a cousin and David Welwyn who is a very old friend. Just a family party. But Edwina Morecombe said that that's what you really wanted to see. An old-fashioned Christmas. Nothing could be more old-fashioned than we are! My husband, you know, absolutely lives in the past. He likes everything to be just as it was when he was a boy of twelve years old, and used to come here for his holidays." She smiled to herself. "All the same old things, the Christmas tree and the stockings hung up and the oyster soup and the turkey - two turkeys, one boiled and one roast - and the plum pudding with the ring and the bachelor's button and all the rest of it in it. One can't have sixpences nowadays because they're not pure silver any more. But all the old desserts, the Elvas plums and Carlsbad plums and almonds and raisins, and crystallised fruit and ginger. Dear me, I sound like a catalogue from Fortnum and Mason!"

"You arouse my gastronomic juices, Madame."

"I expect we'll all have frightful indigestion by tomorrow evening," said Mrs Lacey. "One isn't used to eating so much nowadays, is one?"

She was interrupted by some loud shouts and whoops of laughter outside the window. She glanced out.

"I don't know what they're doing out there. Playing some game or other, I suppose. I've always been so afraid, you know, that these young people would be bored by our Christmas here. But not at all,

it's just the opposite. Now my own son and daughter and their friends, they used to be rather sophisticated about Christmas. Say it was all nonsense and too much fuss and it would be far better to go out to a hotel somewhere and dance. But the younger generation seem to find all this terribly attractive. Besides," added Mrs Lacey practically, "schoolboys and schoolgirls are always hungry, aren't they? I think they must starve them at these schools. After all, one does know children of that age each eat about as much as three strong men."

Poirot laughed and said, "It is most kind of you and your husband, Madame, to include me in this way in your family party."

"Oh, we're both delighted, I'm sure," said Mrs Lacey. "And if you find Horace a little gruff," she continued, "pay no attention. It's just his manner, you know."

What her husband, Colonel Lacey, had actually said was: "Can't think why you want one of these damned foreigners here cluttering up Christmas? Why can't we have him some other time? Can't stick foreigners! All right, all right, so Edwina Morecombe wished him on us. What's it got to do with her, I should like to know? Why doesn't she have him for Christmas?"

"Because you know very well," Mrs Lacey had said, "that Edwina always goes to Claridge's."

Her husband had looked at her piercingly and said, "Not up to something, are you, Em?"

"Up to something?" said Em, opening very blue eyes. "Of course not. Why should I be?"

Old Colonel Lacey laughed, a deep, rumbling laugh. "I wouldn't put it past you, Em," he said. "When you look your most innocent is when you are up to something."

Revolving these things in her mind, Mrs Lacey went on: "Edwina said she thought perhaps you might help us... I'm sure I don't know quite how, but she said that friends of yours had once found you very helpful in - in a case something like ours. I - well, perhaps you don't know what I'm talking about?"

Poirot looked at her encouragingly. Mrs Lacey was close on seventy, as upright as a ramrod, with snow-white hair, pink cheeks, blue eyes, a ridiculous nose and a determined chin.

"If there is anything I can do I shall only be too happy to do it," said Poirot. "It is, I understand, a rather unfortunate matter of a young girl's infatuation."

Mrs Lacey nodded. "Yes. It seems extraordinary that I should - well, want to talk to you about it. After all, you are a perfect stranger..."

"And a foreigner," said Poirot, in an understanding manner.

"Yes," said Mrs Lacey, "but perhaps that makes it easier, in a way. Anyhow, Edwina seemed to think that you might perhaps know something - how shall I put it - something useful about this young Desmond Lee-Wortley."

Poirot paused a moment to admire the ingenuity of Mr Jelmond and the ease with which he had made use of Lady Morecombe to further his own purposes.

"He has not, I understand, a very good reputation, this young man?" he began delicately.

"No, indeed, he hasn't! A very bad reputation! But that's no help so far as Sarah is concerned. It's never any good, is it, telling young girls that men have a bad reputation? It - it just spurs them on!"

"You are so very right," said Poirot.

"In my young day," went on Mrs Lacey. "(Oh dear, that's a very long time ago!) We used to be warned, you know, against certain young men, and of course it did heighten one's interest in them, and if one could possibly manage to dance with them, or to be alone with them in a dark conservatory..." she laughed. "That's why I wouldn't let Horace do any of the things he wanted to do."

"Tell me," said Poirot, "exactly what it is that troubles you?"

"Our son was killed in the war," Mrs Lacey. "My daughter-in-law died when Sarah was born so that she has always been with us, and we've brought her up. Perhaps we've brought her up unwisely - I don't know. But we thought we ought always to leave her as free as possible."

"That is desirable, I think," said Poirot. "One cannot go against the spirit of the times."

"No," said Mrs Lacey, "that's just what I felt about it. And, of course, girls nowadays do do these sort of things."

Poirot looked at her inquiringly.

"I think the way one expresses it," said Mrs Lacey, "is that Sarah has got in with what they call the coffee-bar set. She won't go to dances or come out properly or be a deb or anything of that kind. Instead she has two rather unpleasant rooms in Chelsea down by the river and wears these funny clothes that they like to wear, and black stockings or bright green ones. Very thick stockings. (So prickly, I always think!) And she goes about without washing or combing her hair."

"Ça, c'est tout à fait naturelle," said Poirot. "It is the fashion of the moment. They grow out of it."

"Yes, I know," said Mrs Lacey. "I wouldn't worry about that sort of thing. But you see she's taken up with this Desmond Lee-Wortley and he really has a very unsavoury reputation. He lives more or less on well-to-do girls. They seem to go quite mad about him. He very nearly married the Hope girl, but her people got her made a ward of court or something. And of course that's what Horace wants to do. He says he must do it for her protection. But I don't think it's really a good idea, M. Poirot. I mean, they'll just run away together and go to Scotland or Ireland or the Argentine or somewhere and either get married or else live together without getting married. And

although it may be contempt of court and all that - well, it isn't really an answer, is it, in the end? Especially if a baby's coming. One has to give in then, and let them get married. And then, nearly always, it seems to me, after a year or two there's a divorce. And then the girl comes home and usually after a year or two she marries someone so nice he's almost dull and settles down. But it's particularly sad, it seems to me, if there is a child, because it's not the same thing, being brought up by a stepfather, however nice. No, I think it's much better if we did as we did in my young days. I mean the first young man one fell in love with was always someone undesirable. I remember I had a horrible passion for a young man called - now what was his name now? - how strange it is, I can't remember his Christian name at all! Tibbitt, that was his surname. Young Tibbitt. Of course, my father more or less forbade him the house, but he used to get asked to the same dances, and we used to dance together. And sometimes we'd escape and sit out together and occasionally friends would arrange picnics to which we both went. Of course, it was all very exciting and forbidden and one enjoyed it enormously. But one didn't go to the well, to the lengths that girls go nowadays. And so, after a while, the Mr Tibbitts faded out. And do you know, when I saw him four years later I was surprised what I could ever have seen in him! He seemed to be such a dull young man. Flashy, you know. No interesting conversation."

"One always thinks the days of one's own youth are best," said Poirot, somewhat sententiously.

"I know," said Mrs Lacey. "It's tiresome, isn't it? I mustn't be tiresome. But all the same I don't want Sarah, who's a dear girl really, to marry Desmond Lee-Wortley. She and David Welwyn, who

is staying here, were always such friends and so fond of each other, and we did hope, Horace and I, that they would grow up and marry. But of course she just finds him dull now, and she's absolutely infatuated with Desmond."

"I do not quite understand, Madame," said Poirot. "You have him here now, staying in the house, this Desmond Lee-Wortley?"

"That's my doing," said Mrs Lacey. "Horace was all for forbidding her to see him and all that. Of course, in Horace's day, the father or guardian would have called round at the young man's lodgings with a horse whip! Horace was all for forbidding the fellow the house, and forbidding the girl to see him. I told him that was quite the wrong attitude to take. 'No,' I said. 'Ask him down here. We'll have him down for Christmas with the family party.' Of course, my husband said I was mad! But I said, 'At any rate, dear, let's try it. Let her see him in our atmosphere and our house and we'll be very nice to him and very polite, and perhaps then he'll seem less interesting to her'!"

"I think, as they say, you have something there, Madame," said Poirot. "I think your point of view is very wise. Wiser than your husband's."

"Well, I hope it is," said Mrs Lacey doubtfully. "It doesn't seem to be working much yet. But of course he's only been here a couple of days." A sudden dimple showed in her wrinkled cheek. "I'll confess something to you, M. Poirot. I myself can't help liking him. I don't mean I really like him, with my mind, but I can feel the charm all right. Oh yes, I can see what Sarah sees in him. But I'm an old

enough woman and have enough experience to know that he's absolutely no good. Even if I do enjoy his company. Though I do think," added Mrs Lacey, rather wistfully, "he has some good points. He asked if he might bring his sister here, you know. She's had an operation and was in hospital. He said it was so sad for her being in a nursing home over Christmas and he wondered if it would be too much trouble if he could bring her with him. He said he'd take all her meals up to her and all that. Well now, I do think that was rather nice of him, don't you, M. Poirot?"

"It shows a consideration," said Poirot, thoughtfully, "which seems almost out of character."

"Oh, I don't know. You can have family affections at the same time as wishing to prey on a rich young girl. Sarah will be very rich, you know, not only with what we leave her - and of course that won't be very much because most of the money goes with the place to Colin, my grandson. But her mother was a very rich woman and Sarah will inherit all her money when she's twenty-one. She's only twenty now. No, I do think it was nice of Desmond to mind about his sister. And he didn't pretend she was anything very wonderful or that. She's a shorthand typist, I gather - does secretarial work in London. And he's been as good as his word and does carry up trays to her. Not all the time, of course, but quite often. So I think he has some nice points. But all the same," said Mrs Lacey with great decision, "I don't want Sarah to marry him."

"From all I have heard and been told," said Poirot, "that would indeed be a disaster."

"Do you think it would be possible for you to help us in any way?" asked Mrs Lacey.

"I think it is possible, yes," said Hercule Poirot, "but I do not wish to promise too much. For the Mr Desmond Lee-Wortleys of this world are clever, Madame. But do not despair. One can, perhaps, do a little something. I shall at any rate, put forth my best endeavours, if only in gratitude for your kindness in asking me here for this Christmas festivity." He looked round him. "And it cannot be so easy these days to have Christmas festivities."

"No, indeed," Mrs Lacey sighed. She leaned forward. "Do you know, M. Poirot, what I really dream of - what I would love to have?"

"But tell me, Madame."

"I simply long to have a small, modern bungalow. No, perhaps not a bungalow exactly, but a small, modern, easy to run house built somewhere in the park here, and live in it with an absolutely up-to-date kitchen and no long passages. Everything easy and simple."

"It is a very practical idea, Madame."

"It's not practical for me," said Mrs Lacey. "My husband adores this place. He loves living here. He doesn't mind being slightly uncomfortable, he doesn't mind the inconveniences and he would hate, simply hate, to live in a small modern house in the park!"

"So you sacrifice yourself to his wishes?"

Mrs Lacey drew herself up. "I do not consider it a sacrifice, M. Poirot," she said. "I married my husband with the wish to make him happy. He has been a good husband to me and made me very happy all these years, and I wish to give happiness to him."

"So you will continue to live here," said Poirot.

"It's not really too uncomfortable," said Mrs Lacey.

"No, no," said Poirot, hastily. "On the contrary, it is most comfortable. Your central heating and your bath water are perfection."

"We spend a lot of money in making the house comfortable to live in," said Mrs Lacey. "We were able to sell some land. Ripe for development, I think they call it. Fortunately right out of sight of the house on the other side of the park. Really rather an ugly bit of ground with no nice view, but we got a very good price for it. So that we have been able to have as many improvements as possible."

"But the service, Madame?"

"Oh, well, that presents less difficulty than you might think. Of course, one cannot expect to be looked after and waited upon as one used to be. Different people come in from the village. Two women in the morning, another two to cook lunch and wash it up, and different ones again in the evening. There are plenty of people who want to come and work for a few hours a day. Of course for Christmas we are very lucky. My dear Mrs Ross always comes in

every Christmas. She is a wonderful cook, really first-class. She retired about ten years ago, but she comes in to help us in any emergency. Then there is dear Peverell."

"Your butler?"

"Yes. He is pensioned off and lives in the little house near the lodge, but he is so devoted, and he insists on coming to wait on us at Christmas. Really, I'm terrified, M. Poirot, because he's so old and so shaky that I feel certain that if he carries anything heavy he will drop it. It's really an agony to watch him. And his heart is not good and I'm afraid of his doing too much. But it would hurt his feelings dreadfully if I did not let him come. He hems and hahs and makes disapproving noises when he sees the state our silver is in and within three days of being here, it is all wonderful again. Yes. He is a dear faithful friend." She smiled at Poirot. "So you see, we are all set for a happy Christmas. A white Christmas, too," she added as she looked out of the window. "See? It is beginning to snow. Ah, the children are coming in. You must meet them, M. Poirot."

Poirot was introduced with due ceremony. First, to Colin and Michael, the schoolboy grandson and his friend, nice polite lads of fifteen, one dark, one fair. Then to their cousin, Bridget, a black-haired girl of about the same age with enormous vitality.

"And this is my granddaughter, Sarah," said Mrs Lacey.

Poirot looked with some interest at Sarah, an attractive girl with a mop of red hair; her manner seemed to him nervy and a trifle defiant, but she showed real affection for her grandmother.

"And this is Mr Lee-Wortley."

Mr Lee-Wortley wore a fisherman's jersey and tight black jeans; his hair was rather long and it seemed doubtful whether he had shaved that morning. In contrast to him was a young man introduced as David Welwyn, who was solid and quiet, with a pleasant smile, and rather obviously addicted to soap and water. There was one other member of the party, a handsome, rather intense-looking girl who was introduced as Diana Middleton.

Tea was brought in. A hearty meal of scones, crumpets, sandwiches and three kinds of cake. The younger members of the party appreciated the tea. Colonel Lacey came in last, remarking in a noncommittal voice:

"Hey, tea? Oh yes, tea."

He received his cup of tea from his wife's hand, helped himself to two scones, cast a look of aversion at Desmond Lee-Wortley and sat down as far away from him as he could. He was a big man with bushy eyebrows and a red, weather-beaten face. He might have been taken for a farmer rather than the lord of the manor.

"Started to snow," he said. "It's going to be a white Christmas all right."

After tea the party dispersed.

"I expect they'll go and play with their tape recorders now," said Mrs Lacey to Poirot. She looked indulgently after her grandson as he left the room. Her tone was that of one who says "The children are going to play with their toy soldiers."

"They're frightfully technical, of course," she said, "and very grand about it all."

The boys and Bridget, however, decided to go along to the lake and see if the ice on it was likely to make skating possible.

"I thought we could have skated on it this morning," said Colin. "But old Hodgkins said no. He's always so terribly careful."

"Come for a walk, David," said Diana Middleton, softly. David hesitated for half a moment, his eyes on Sarah's red head. She was standing by Desmond Lee-Wortley, her hand on his arm, looking up into his face.

"All right," said David Welwyn, "yes, let's."

Diana slipped a quick hand through his arm and they turned towards the door into the garden. Sarah said:

"Shall we go, too, Desmond? It's fearfully stuffy in the house."

"Who wants to walk?" said Desmond. "I'll get my car out. We'll go along to the Speckled Boar and have a drink."

Sarah hesitated for a moment before saying:

"Let's go to Market Ledbury to the White Hart. It's much more fun."

Though for all the world she would not have put it into words, Sarah had an instinctive revulsion from going down to the local pub with Desmond. It was, somehow, not in the tradition of Kings Lacey. The women of Kings Lacey had never frequented the bar of the Speckled Boar. She had an obscure feeling that to go there would be to let old Colonel Lacey and his wife down. And why not? Desmond Lee-Wortley would have said. For a moment of exasperation Sarah felt that he ought to know why not! One didn't upset such old darlings as Grandfather and dear old Em unless it was necessary. They'd been very sweet, really, letting her lead her own life, not understanding in the least why she wanted to live in Chelsea in the way she did, but accepting it. That was due to Em of course. Grandfather would have kicked up no end of a row.

Sarah had no illusions about her grandfather's attitude. It was not his doing that Desmond had been asked to stay at Kings Lacey. That was Em, and Em was a darling and always had been.

When Desmond had gone to fetch his car, Sarah popped her head into the drawing-room again.

"We're going over to Market Ledbury," she said. "We thought we'd have a drink there at the White Hart."

There was a slight amount of defiance in her voice, but Mrs Lacey did not seem to notice it.

"Well, dear," she said, "I'm sure that will be very nice. David and Diana have gone for a walk, I see. I'm so glad. I really think it was a brainwave on my part to ask Diana here. So sad being left a widow so young - only twenty-two - I do hope she marries again soon."

Sarah looked at her sharply. "What are you up to, Em?"

"It's my little plan," said Mrs Lacey gleefully. "I think she's just right for David. Of course I know he was terribly in love with you, Sarah dear, but you'd no use for him and I realise that he isn't your type. But I don't want him to go on being unhappy, and I think Diana will really suit him."

"What a matchmaker you are, Em," said Sarah.

"I know," said Mrs Lacey. "Old women always are. Diana's quite keen on him already, I think. Don't you think she'd be just right for him?"

"I shouldn't say so," said Sarah. "I think Diana's far too - well, too intense, too serious. I should think David would find it terribly boring being married to her."

"Well, we'll see," said Mrs Lacey. "Anyway, you don't want him, do you, dear?"

"No, indeed," said Sarah, very quickly. She added, in a sudden rush, "You do like Desmond, don't you, Em?"

"I'm sure he's very nice indeed," said Mrs Lacey.

"Grandfather doesn't like him," said Sarah.

"Well, you could hardly expect him to, could you?" said Mrs Lacey reasonably, "but I dare say he'll come round when he gets used to the idea. You mustn't rush him, Sarah dear. Old people are very slow to change their minds and your grandfather is rather obstinate."

"I don't care what Grandfather thinks or says," said Sarah. "I shall get married to Desmond whenever I like!"

"I know, dear, I know. But do try and be realistic about it. Your grandfather could cause a lot of trouble, you know. You're not of age yet. In another year you can do as you please. I expect Horace will have come round long before that."

"You're on my side aren't you, darling?" said Sarah. She flung her arms round her grandmother's neck and gave her an affectionate kiss.

"I want you to be happy," said Mrs Lacey. "Ah! there's your young man bringing his car round. You know, I like these very tight trousers these young men wear nowadays. They look so smart only, of course, it does accentuate knock knees."

Yes, Sarah thought, Desmond had got knock knees, she had never noticed it before...

"Go on, dear, enjoy yourself," said Mrs Lacey.

She watched her go out to the car, then, remembering her foreign guest, she went along to the library. Looking in, however, she saw that Hercule Poirot was taking a pleasant little nap, and smiling to herself, she went across the hall and out into the kitchen to have a conference with Mrs Ross.

"Come on, beautiful," said Desmond. "Your family cutting up rough because you're coming out to a pub? Years behind the times here, aren't they?"

"Of course they're not making a fuss," said Sarah, sharply as she got into the car.

"What's the idea of having that foreign fellow down? He's a detective, isn't he? What needs detecting here?"

"Oh, he's not here professionally," said Sarah. "Edwina Morecombe, my godmother, asked us to have him. I think he's retired from professional work long ago."

"Sounds like a broken-down old cab horse," said Desmond.

"He wanted to see an old-fashioned English Christmas, I believe," said Sarah vaguely.

Desmond laughed scornfully. "Such a lot of tripe, that sort of thing," he said. "How you can stand it I don't know."

Sarah's red hair was tossed back and her aggressive chin shot up.

"I enjoy it!" she said defiantly.

"You can't, baby. Let's cut the whole thing tomorrow. Go over to Scarborough or somewhere."

"I couldn't possibly do that."

"Why not?"

"Oh, it would hurt their feelings."

"Oh, bilge! You know you don't enjoy this childish sentimental bosh."

"Well, not really perhaps, but..." Sarah broke off. She realised with a feeling of guilt that she was looking forward a good deal to the Christmas celebration. She enjoyed the whole thing, but she was ashamed to admit that to Desmond. It was not the thing to enjoy Christmas and family life. Just for a moment she wished that Desmond had not come down here at Christmas time. In fact, she almost wished that Desmond had not come down here at all. It was much more fun seeing Desmond in London than here at home.

In the meantime the boys and Bridget were walking back from the lake, still discussing earnestly the problems of skating. Flecks of snow had been falling, and looking up at the sky it could be prophesied that before long there was going to be a heavy snowfall.

"It's going to snow all night," said Colin. "Bet you by Christmas morning we have a couple of feet of snow."

The prospect was a pleasurable one. "Let's make a snow-man," said Michael.

"Good lord," said Colin. "I haven't made a snow-man since - well, since I was about four years old."

"I don't believe it's a bit easy to do," said Bridget. "I mean, you have to know how."

"We might make an effigy of M. Poirot," said Colin. "Give it a big black moustache. There is one in the dressing-up box."

"I don't see, you know," said Michael thoughtfully, "how M. Poirot could ever have been a detective. I don't see how he'd ever be able to disguise himself."

"I know," said Bridget, "and one can't imagine him running about with a microscope and looking for clues or measuring footprints."

"I've got an idea," said Colin. "Let's put on a show for him!"

"What do you mean, a show?" asked Bridget.

"Well, arrange a murder for him."

"What a gorgeous idea," said Bridget. "Do you mean a body in the snow - that sort of thing?"

"Yes. It would make him feel at home, wouldn't it?"

Bridget giggled.

"I don't know that I'd go as far as that."

"If it snows," said Colin, "we'll have the perfect setting. A body and footprints - we'll have to think that out rather carefully and pinch one of Grandfather's daggers and make some blood."

They came to a halt and oblivious to the rapidly falling snow, entered into an excited discussion.

"There's a paintbox in the old schoolroom. We could mix up some blood - crimson-lake, I should think."

"Crimson-lake's a bit too pink, I think," said Bridget. "It ought to be a bit browner."

"Who's going to be the body?" asked Michael.

"I'll be the body," said Bridget quickly.

"Oh, look here," said Colin, "I thought of it."

"Oh, no, no," said Bridget, "it must be me. It's got to be a girl. It's more exciting. Beautiful girl lying lifeless in the snow."

"Beautiful girl! Ah-ha," said Michael in derision.

"I've got black hair, too," said Bridget.

"What's that got to do with it?"

"Well, it'll show up so well on the snow and I shall wear my red pyjamas."

"If you wear red pyjamas, they won't show the bloodstains," said Michael in a practical manner.

"But they'd look so effective against the snow," said Bridget, "and they've got white facings, you know, so the blood could be on that. Oh, won't it be gorgeous? Do you think he will really be taken in?"

"He will if we do it well enough," said Michael. "We'll have just your footprints in the snow and one other person's going to the body and coming away from it - a man's, of course. He won't want to disturb them, so he won't know that you're not really dead. You don't think," Michael stopped, struck by a sudden idea. The others looked at him. "You don't think he'll be annoyed about it?"

"Oh, I shouldn't think so," said Bridget, with facile optimism. "I'm sure he'll understand that we've just done it to entertain him. A sort of Christmas treat."

"I don't think we ought to do it on Christmas Day," said Colin reflectively. "I don't think Grandfather would like that very much."

"Boxing Day then," said Bridget.

"Boxing Day would be just right," said Michael.

"And it'll give us more time, too," pursued Bridget. "After all, there are a lot of things to arrange. Let's go and have a look at all the props."

They hurried into the house.

III

The evening was a busy one. Holly and mistletoe had been brought in in large quantities and a Christmas tree had been set up at one end of the dining-room. Everyone helped to decorate it, to put up the branches of holly behind pictures and to hang mistletoe in a convenient position in the hall.

"I had no idea anything so archaic still went on," murmured Desmond to Sarah with a sneer.

"We've always done it," said Sarah, defensively.

"What a reason!"

"Oh, don't be tiresome, Desmond. I think it's fun."

"Sarah my sweet, you can't!"

"Well, not not really perhaps but I do in a way."

"Who's going to brave the snow and go to midnight mass?" asked Mrs Lacey at twenty minutes to twelve.

"Not me," said Desmond. "Come on, Sarah."

With a hand on her arm he guided her into the library and went over to the record case.

"There are limits, darling," said Desmond. "Midnight mass!"

"Yes," said Sarah. "Oh yes."

With a good deal of laughter, donning of coats and stamping of feet, most of the others got off. The two boys, Bridget, David and Diana set out for the ten minutes' walk to the church through the falling snow. Their laughter died away in the distance.

"Midnight mass!" said Colonel Lacey, snorting. "Never went to midnight mass in my young days. Mass, indeed! Popish, that is! Oh, I beg your pardon, M. Poirot."

Poirot waved a hand. "It is quite all right. Do not mind me."

"Matins is good enough for anybody, I should say," said the colonel. "Proper Sunday morning service. 'Hark the herald angels sing,' and all the good old Christmas hymns. And then back to Christmas dinner. That's right, isn't it, Em?"

"Yes, dear," said Mrs Lacey. "That's what we do. But the young ones enjoy the midnight service. And it's nice, really, that they want to go."

"Sarah and that fellow don't want to go."

"Well, there dear, I think you're wrong," said Mrs Lacey. "Sarah, you know, did want to go, but she didn't like to say so."

"Beats me why she cares what that fellow's opinion is."

"She's very young, really," said Mrs Lacey placidly. "Are you going to bed, M. Poirot? Good night. I hope you'll sleep well."

"And you, Madame? Are you not going to bed yet?"

"Not just yet," said Mrs Lacey. "I've got the stockings to fill, you see. Oh, I know they're all practically grown up, but they do like their stockings. One puts jokes in them! Silly little things. But it all makes for a lot of fun."

"You work very hard to make this a happy house at Christmas time," said Poirot. "I honour you."

He raised her hand to his lips in a courtly fashion.

"Hm," grunted Colonel Lacey, as Poirot departed. "Flowery sort of fellow. Still he appreciates you."

Mrs Lacey dimpled up at him. "Have you noticed, Horace, that I'm standing under the mistletoe?" she asked with the demureness of a girl of nineteen.

Hercule Poirot entered his bedroom. It was a large room well provided with radiators. As he went over toward the big four-poster bed he noticed an envelope lying on his pillow. He opened it and drew out a piece of paper. On it was a shakily printed message in capital letters.

"DON'T EAT NONE OF THE PLUM PUDDING. ONE AS WISHES YOU WELL."

Hercule Poirot stared at it. His eyebrows rose. "Cryptic," he murmured, "and most unexpected."

IV

Christmas dinner took place at 2 p.m. and was a feast indeed. Enormous logs crackled merrily in the wide fireplace and above their crackling rose the babel of many tongues talking together. Oyster soup had been consumed, two enormous turkeys had come and gone, mere carcasses of their former selves. Now, the supreme moment, the Christmas pudding was brought in, in state! Old Peverell, his hands and his knees shaking with the weakness of eighty years, permitted no one but himself to bear it in. Mrs Lacey

sat, her hands pressed together in nervous apprehension. One Christmas, she felt sure, Peverell would fall down dead. Having either to take the risk of letting him fall down dead or of hurting his feelings to such an extent that he would probably prefer to be dead than alive, she had so far chosen the former alternative. On a silver dish the Christmas pudding reposed in its glory. A large football of a pudding, a piece of holly stuck in it like a triumphant flag and glorious flames of blue and red rising round it. There was a cheer and cries of "Ooh-ah."

One thing Mrs Lacey had done: prevailed upon Peverell to place the pudding in front of her so that she could help it rather than hand it in turn round the table. She breathed a sigh of relief as it was deposited safely in front of her. Rapidly the plates were passed round, flames still licking the portions.

"Wish, M. Poirot," cried Bridget. "Wish before the flame goes. Quick, Gran darling, quick."

Mrs Lacey leant back with a sigh of satisfaction. Operation Pudding had been a success. In front of everyone was a helping with flames still licking. There was a momentary silence all round the table as everyone wished hard.

There was nobody to notice the rather curious expression on the face of M. Poirot as he surveyed the portion of pudding on his plate. "Don't eat none of the plum pudding." What on earth did that sinister warning mean? There could be nothing different about his portion of plum pudding from that of everyone else! Sighing as he

admitted himself baffled - and Hercule Poirot never liked to admit himself baffled - he picked up his spoon and fork.

"Hard sauce, M. Poirot?"

Poirot helped himself appreciatively to hard sauce.

"Swiped my best brandy again, eh, Em?" said the colonel good-humouredly from the other end of the table. Mrs Lacey twinkled at him.

"Mrs Ross insists on having the best brandy, dear," she said. "She says it makes all the difference."

"Well, well," said Colonel Lacey, "Christmas comes but once a year and Mrs Ross is a great woman. A great woman and a great cook."

"She is indeed," said Colin. "Smashing plum pudding, this. Mmmm." He filled an appreciative mouth.

Gently, almost gingerly, Hercule Poirot attacked his portion of pudding. He ate a mouthful. It was delicious! He ate another. Something tinkled faintly on his plate. He investigated with a fork. Bridget, on his left, came to his aid.

"You've got something, M. Poirot," she said. "I wonder what it is."

Poirot detached a little silver object from the surrounding raisins that clung to it.

"Oooh," said Bridget, "it's the bachelor's button! M. Poirot's got the bachelor's button!"

Hercule Poirot dipped the small silver button into the finger-glass of water that stood by his plate, and washed it clear of pudding crumbs.

"It is very pretty," he observed.

"That means you're going to be a bachelor, M. Poirot," explained Colin helpfully.

"That is to be expected," said Poirot gravely. "I have been a bachelor for many long years and it is unlikely that I shall change that status now."

"Oh, never say die," said Michael. "I saw in the paper that someone of ninety-five married a girl of twenty-two the other day."

"You encourage me," said Hercule Poirot.

Colonel Lacey uttered a sudden exclamation. His face became purple and his hand went to his mouth.

"Confound it, Emmeline," he roared, "why on earth do you let the cook put glass in the pudding?"

"Glass!" cried Mrs Lacey, astonished.

Colonel Lacey withdrew the offending substance from his mouth. "Might have broken a tooth," he grumbled. "Or swallowed the damn' thing and had appendicitis."

He dropped the piece of glass into the finger-bowl, rinsed it and held it up.

"God bless my soul," he ejaculated, "It's a red stone out of one of the cracker brooches." He held it aloft.

"You permit?"

Very deftly M. Poirot stretched across his neighbour, took it from Colonel Lacey's fingers and examined it attentively. As the squire had said, it was an enormous red stone the colour of a ruby. The light gleamed from its facets as he turned it about. Somewhere around the table a chair was pushed sharply back and then drawn in again.

"Phew!" cried Michael. "How wizard it would be if it was real."

"Perhaps it is real," said Bridget hopefully.

"Oh, don't be an ass, Bridget. Why a ruby of that size would be worth thousands and thousands of pounds. Wouldn't it, M. Poirot?"

"It would indeed," said Poirot.

"But what I can't understand," said Mrs Lacey, "is how it got into the pudding."

"Oooh," said Colin, diverted by his last mouthful, "I've got the pig. It isn't fair."

Bridget chanted immediately, "Colin's got the pig! Colin's got the pig! Colin is the greedy guzzling pig!"

"I've got the ring," said Diana in a clear, high voice.

"Good for you, Diana. You'll be married first, of us all."

"I've got the thimble," wailed Bridget.

"Bridget's going to be an old maid," chanted the two boys. "Yah, Bridget's going to be an old maid."

"Who's got the money?" demanded David. "There's a real ten shilling piece, gold, in this pudding. I know. Mrs Ross told me so."

"I think I'm the lucky one," said Desmond Lee-Wortley.

Colonel Lacey's two next door neighbours heard him mutter, "Yes, you would be."

"I've got a ring, too," said David. He looked across at Diana. "Quite a coincidence, isn't it?"

The laughter went on. Nobody noticed that M. Poirot carelessly, as though thinking of something else, had dropped the red stone into his pocket.

Mince-pies and Christmas dessert followed the pudding. The older members of the party then retired for a welcome siesta before the tea-time ceremony of the lighting of the Christmas tree. Hercule Poirot, however, did not take a siesta. Instead, he made his way to the enormous old-fashioned kitchen.

"It is permitted," he asked, looking round and beaming, "that I congratulate the cook on this marvellous meal that I have just eaten?"

There was a moment's pause and then Mrs Ross came forward in a stately manner to meet him. She was a large woman, nobly built with all the dignity of a stage duchess. Two lean grey-haired women were beyond in the scullery washing up and a tow-haired girl was moving to and fro between the scullery and the kitchen. But these were obviously mere myrmidons. Mrs Ross was the queen of the kitchen quarters.

"I am glad to hear you enjoyed it, sir," she said graciously.

"Enjoyed it!" cried Hercule Poirot. With an extravagant foreign gesture he raised his hand to his lips, kissed it, and wafted the kiss to the ceiling. "But you are a genius, Mrs Ross! A genius! Never have I tasted such a wonderful meal. The oyster soup..." he made an expressive noise with his lips. "- and the stuffing. The chestnut stuffing in the turkey, that was quite unique in my experience."

"Well, it's funny that you should say that, sir," said Mrs Ross graciously. "It's a very special recipe, that stuffing. It was given me

by an Austrian chef that I worked with many years ago. But all the rest," she added, "is just good, plain English cooking."

"And is there anything better?" demanded Hercule Poirot.

"Well, it's nice of you to say so, sir. Of course, you being a foreign gentleman might have preferred the continental style. Not but what I can't manage continental dishes too."

"I am sure, Mrs Ross, you could manage anything! But you must know that English cooking - good English cooking, not the cooking one gets in the second-class hotels or the restaurants - is much appreciated by gourmets on the continent, and I believe I am correct in saying that a special expedition was made to London in the early eighteen hundreds, and a report sent back to France of the wonders of the English puddings. 'We have nothing like that in France,' they wrote. 'It is worth making a journey to London just to taste the varieties and excellencies of the English puddings.' And above all puddings," continued Poirot, well launched now on a kind of rhapsody, "is the Christmas plum pudding, such as we have eaten today. That was a homemade pudding, was it not? Not a bought one?"

"Yes, indeed, sir. Of my own making and my own recipe such as I've made for many, many years. When I came here Mrs Lacey said that she'd ordered a pudding from a London store to save me the trouble. But no, Madam, I said, that may be kind of you but no bought pudding from a store can equal a homemade Christmas one. Mind you," said Mrs Ross, warming to her subject like the artist she was, "it was made too soon before the day. A good Christmas

pudding should be made some weeks before and allowed to wait. The longer they're kept, within reason, the better they are. I mind now that when I was a child and we went to church every Sunday, we'd start listening for the collect that begins 'Stir up O Lord we beseech thee' because that collect was the signal, as it were, that the puddings should be made that week. And so they always were. We had the collect on the Sunday, and that week sure enough my mother would make the Christmas puddings. And so it should have been here this year. As it was, that pudding was only made three days ago, the day before you arrived, sir. However, I kept to the old custom. Everyone in the house had to come out into the kitchen and have a stir and make a wish. That's an old custom, sir, and I've always held to it."

"Most interesting," said Hercule Poirot. "Most interesting. And so everyone came out into the kitchen?"

"Yes, sir. The young gentlemen, Miss Bridget and the London gentleman who's staying here, and his sister and Mr David and Miss Diana - Mrs Middleton, I should say... All had a stir, they did."

"How many puddings did you make? Is this the only one?"

"No, sir, I made four. Two large ones and two smaller ones. The other large one I planned to serve on New Year's Day and the smaller ones were for Colonel and Mrs Lacey when they're alone like and not so many in the family."

"I see, I see," said Poirot.

"As a matter of fact, sir," said Mrs Lacey, "it was the wrong pudding you had for lunch today."

"The wrong pudding?" Poirot frowned. "How is that?"

"Well, sir, we have a big Christmas mould. A china mould with a pattern of holly and mistletoe on top and we always have the Christmas Day pudding boiled in that. But there was a most unfortunate accident. This morning, when Annie was getting it down from the shelf in the larder, she slipped and dropped it and it broke. Well, sir, naturally I couldn't serve that, could I? There might have been splinters in it. So we had to use the other one - the New Year's Day one, which was in a plain bowl. It makes a nice round but it's not so decorative as the Christmas mould. Really, where we'll get another mould like that I don't know. They don't make things in that size nowadays. All tiddly bits of things. Why, you can't even buy a breakfast dish that'll take a proper eight to ten eggs and bacon. Ah, things aren't what they were."

"No, indeed," said Poirot. "But today that is not so. This Christmas Day has been like the Christmas Days of old, is that not true?"

Mrs Ross sighed. "Well, I'm glad you say so, sir, but of course I haven't the help now that I used to have. Not skilled help, that is. The girls nowadays..." she lowered her voice slightly," they mean very well and they're very willing but they've not been trained, sir, if you understand what I mean."

"Times change, yes," said Hercule Poirot. "I too find it sad sometimes."

"This house, sir," said Mrs Ross, "it's too large, you know, for the mistress and the colonel. The mistress, she knows that. Living in a corner of it as they do, it's not the same thing at all. It only comes alive, as you might say, at Christmas time when all the family come."

"It is the first time, I think, that Mr Lee-Wortley and his sister have been here?"

"Yes, sir." A note of slight reserve crept into Mrs Ross's voice. "A very nice gentleman he is but, well - it seems a funny friend for Miss Sarah to have, according to our ideas. But there - London ways are different! It's sad that his sister's so poorly. Had an operation, she had. She seemed all right the first day she was here, but that very day, after we'd been stirring the puddings, she was took bad again and she's been in bed ever since. Got up too soon after her operation, I expect. Ah, doctors nowadays, they have you out of hospital before you can hardly stand on your feet. Why, my very own nephew's wife..." And Mrs Ross went into a long and spirited tale of hospital treatment as accorded to her relations, comparing it unfavourably with the consideration that had been lavished upon them in older times.

Poirot duly commiserated with her. "It remains," he said, "to thank you for this exquisite and sumptuous meal. You permit a little acknowledgment of my appreciation?"

A crisp five pound note passed from his hand into that of Mrs Ross who said perfunctorily:

"You really shouldn't do that, sir."

"I insist. I insist."

"Well, it's very kind of you indeed, sir." Mrs Ross accepted the tribute as no more than her due. "And I wish you, sir, a very happy Christmas and a prosperous New Year."

V

The end of Christmas Day was like the end of most Christmas Days. The tree was lighted, a splendid Christmas cake came in for tea, was greeted with approval but was partaken of only moderately. There was cold supper.

Both Poirot and his host and hostess went to bed early.

"Good night, M. Poirot," said Mrs Lacey. "I hope you've enjoyed yourself."

"It has been a wonderful day, Madame, wonderful."

"You're looking very thoughtful," said Mrs Lacey.

"It is the English pudding that I consider."

"You found it a little heavy, perhaps?" asked Mrs Lacey delicately.

"No, no, I do not speak gastronomically. I consider its significance."

"It's traditional, of course," said Mrs Lacey. "Well, good night, M. Poirot, and don't dream too much of Christmas puddings and mince-pies."

"Yes," murmured Poirot to himself as he undressed. "It is a problem certainly, that Christmas plum pudding. There is here something that I do not understand at all." He shook his head in a vexed manner. "Well - we shall see."

After making certain preparations, Poirot went to bed, but not to sleep.

It was some two hours later that his patience was rewarded. The door of his bedroom opened very gently. He smiled to himself. It was as he had thought it would be. His mind went back fleetingly to the cup of coffee so politely handed him by Desmond Lee-Wortley. A little later, when Desmond's back was turned, he had laid the cup down for a few moments on a table. He had then apparently picked it up again and Desmond had had the satisfaction, if satisfaction it was, of seeing him drink the coffee to the last drop. But a little smile lifted Poirot's moustache as he reflected that it was not he but someone else who was sleeping a good sound sleep tonight. "That pleasant young David," said Poirot to himself, "he is worried, unhappy. It will do him no harm to have a night's really sound sleep. And now, let us see what will happen?"

He lay quite still, breathing in an even manner with occasionally a suggestion, but the very faintest suggestion, of a snore.

Someone came up to the bed and bent over him. Then, satisfied, that someone turned away and went to the dressing-table. By the light of a tiny torch the visitor was examining Poirot's belongings neatly arranged on top of the dressing-table. Fingers explored the wallet, gently pulled open the drawers of the dressing-table, then extended the search to the pockets of Poirot's clothes. Finally the visitor approached the bed and with great caution slid his hand under the pillow. Withdrawing his hand, he stood for a moment or two as though uncertain what to do next. He walked round the room looking inside ornaments, went into the adjoining bathroom from whence he presently returned. Then, with a faint exclamation of disgust, he went out of the room.

"Ah," said Poirot, under his breath. "You have disappointment. Yes, yes, a serious disappointment. Bah! To imagine, even, that Hercule Poirot would hide something where you could find it!" Then, turning over on his other side, he went peacefully to sleep.

He was aroused next morning by an urgent soft tapping on his door.

"Qui est là? Come in, come in."

The door opened. Breathless, red-faced, Colin stood upon the threshold. Behind him stood Michael.

"Monsieur Poirot, Monsieur Poirot."

"But yes?" Poirot sat up in bed. "It is the early tea? But no. It is you, Colin. What has occurred?"

Colin was, for a moment, speechless. He seemed to be under the grip of some strong emotion. In actual fact it was the sight of the nightcap that Hercule Poirot wore that affected for the moment his organs of speech. Presently he controlled himself and spoke.

"I think - M. Poirot, could you help us? Something rather awful has happened."

"Something has happened? But what?"

"It's - it's Bridget. She's out there in the snow. I think - she doesn't move or speak and - oh, you'd better come and look for yourself. I'm terribly afraid - she may be dead."

"What?" Poirot cast aside his bed covers. "Mademoiselle Bridget is dead!"

"I think - I think somebody's killed her. There's - there's blood and - oh do come!"

"But certainly. But certainly. I come on the instant."

With great practicality Poirot inserted his feet into his outdoor shoes and pulled a fur-lined overcoat over his pyjamas.

"I come," he said. "I come on the moment. You have aroused the house?"

"No. No, so far I haven't told anyone but you. I thought it would be better. Grandfather and Gran aren't up yet. They're laying breakfast downstairs, but I didn't say anything to Peverell. She - Bridget - she's round the other side of the house, near the terrace and the library window."

"I see. Lead the way. I will follow."

Turning away to hide his delighted grin, Colin led the way downstairs. They went out through the side door. It was a clear morning with the sun not yet high over the horizon. It was not snowing now, but it had snowed heavily during the night and everywhere around was an unbroken carpet of thick snow. The world looked very pure and white and beautiful.

"There!" said Colin breathlessly. "I - it's - there!" He pointed dramatically.

The scene was indeed dramatic enough. A few yards away Bridget lay in the snow. She was wearing scarlet pyjamas and a white wool wrap thrown round her shoulders. The white wool wrap was stained with crimson. Her head was turned aside and hidden by the mass of her outspread black hair. One arm was under her body, the other lay flung out, the fingers clenched, and standing up in the centre of the crimson stain was the hilt of a large curved Kurdish knife which Colonel Lacey had shown to his guests only the evening before.

"Mon Dieu!" ejaculated M. Poirot. "It is something on the stage!"

There was a faint choking noise from Michael. Colin thrust himself quickly into the breach.

"I know," he said. "It - it doesn't seem real somehow, does it? Do you see those footprints - I suppose we mustn't disturb them?"

"Ah yes, the footprints. No, we must be careful not to disturb those footprints."

"That's what I thought," said Colin. "That's why I wouldn't let anyone go near her until we got you. I thought you'd know what to do."

"All the same," said Hercule Poirot briskly, "first, we must see if she is still alive? Is not that so?"

"Well - yes - of course," said Michael, a little doubtfully, "but you see, we thought, I mean, we didn't like..."

"Ah, you have the prudence! You have read the detective stories. It is most important that nothing should be touched and that the body should be left as it is. But we cannot be sure as yet if it is a body, can we? After all, though prudence is admirable, common humanity comes first. We must think of the doctor, must we not, before we think of the police?"

"Oh yes. Of course," said Colin, still a little taken aback.

"We only thought - I mean - we thought we'd better get you before we did anything," said Michael hastily.

"Then you will both remain here," said Poirot. "I will approach from the other side so as not to disturb these footprints. Such excellent footprints, are they not - so very clear? The footprints of a man and a girl going out together to the place where she lies. And then the man's footsteps come back but the girl's do not."

"They must be the footprints of the murderer," said Colin, with bated breath.

"Exactly," said Poirot. "The footprints of the murderer. A long narrow foot with rather a peculiar type of shoe. Very interesting. Easy, I think, to recognise. Yes, those footprints will be very important."

At that moment Desmond Lee-Wortley came out of the house with Sarah and joined them.

"What on earth are you all doing here?" he demanded in a somewhat theatrical manner. "I saw you from my bedroom window. What's up? Good lord, what's this? It - it - looks like..."

"Exactly," said Hercule Poirot. "It looks like murder, does it not?"

Sarah gave a gasp, then shot a quick suspicious glance at the two boys.

"You mean someone's killed the girl - what's-her-name - Bridget?" demanded Desmond. "Who on earth would want to kill her? It's unbelievable!"

"There are many things that are unbelievable," said Poirot. "Especially before breakfast, is it not? That is what one of your classics says. Six impossible things before breakfast." He added: "Please wait here, all of you."

Carefully making a circuit, he approached Bridget and bent for a moment down over the body. Colin and Michael were now both shaking with suppressed laughter. Sarah joined them, murmuring "What have you two been up to?"

"Good old Bridget," whispered Colin. "Isn't she wonderful? Not a twitch!"

"I've never seen anything look so dead as Bridget does," whispered Michael.

Hercule Poirot straightened up again.

"This is a terrible thing," he said. His voice held an emotion it had not held before.

Overcome by mirth, Michael and Colin both turned away. In a choked voice Michael said:

"What - what must we do?"

"There is only one thing to do," said Poirot. "We must send for the police. Will one of you telephone or would you prefer me to do it?"

"I think," said Colin, "I think - what about it, Michael?"

"Yes," said Michael, "I think the jig's up now." He stepped forward. For the first time he seemed a little unsure of himself. "I'm awfully sorry," he said, "I hope you won't mind too much. It - er - it was a sort of joke for Christmas and all that, you know. We thought we'd well, lay on a murder for you."

"You thought you would lay on a murder for me? Then this - then this..."

"It's just a show we put on," explained Colin, "to to make you feel at home, you know."

"Aha," said Hercule Poirot. "I understand. You make of me the April fool, is that it? But today is not April the first, it is December the twenty-sixth."

"I suppose we oughtn't to have done it really," said Colin, "but but you don't mind very much, do you, M. Poirot? Come on, Bridget," he called, "get up. You must be half-frozen to death already."

The figure in the snow, however, did not stir.

"It is odd," said Hercule Poirot, "she does not seem to hear you." He looked thoughtfully at them. "It is a joke, you say? You are sure this is a joke?"

"Why, yes." Colin spoke uncomfortably. "We - we didn't mean any harm."

"But why then does Mademoiselle Bridget not get up?"

"I can't imagine," said Colin.

"Come on, Bridget," said Sarah impatiently. "Don't go on lying there playing the fool."

"We really are very sorry, M. Poirot," said Colin apprehensively. "We do really apologise."

"You need not apologise," said Poirot, in a peculiar tone.

"What do you mean?" Colin stared at him. He turned again. "Bridget! Bridget! What's the matter? Why doesn't she get up? Why does she go on lying there?"

Poirot beckoned to Desmond. "You, Mr Lee-Wortley. Come here..."

Desmond joined him.

"Feel her pulse," said Poirot.

Desmond Lee-Wortley bend down. He touched the arm the wrist.

"There's no pulse..." he stared at Poirot. "Her arm's stiff. Good God, she really is dead!"

Poirot nodded. "Yes, she is dead," he said. "Someone has turned the comedy into a tragedy."

"Someone - who?"

"There is a set of footprints going and returning. A set of footprints that bears a strong resemblance to the footprints you have just made, Mr Lee-Wortley, coming from the path to this spot."

Desmond Lee-Wortley wheeled round.

"What on earth... Are you accusing me? Me? You're crazy! Why on earth should I want to kill the girl?"

"Ah - why? I wonder... Let us see... "

He bent down and very gently prised open the stiff fingers of the girl's clenched hand.

Desmond drew a sharp breath. He gazed down unbelievingly. In the palm of the dead girl's hand was what appeared to be a large ruby.

"It's that damn' thing out of the pudding!" he cried.

"Is it?" said Poirot. "Are you sure?"

"Of course it is."

With a swift movement Desmond bent down and plucked the red stone out of Bridget's hand.

"You should not do that," said Poirot reproachfully. "Nothing should have been disturbed."

"I haven't disturbed the body, have I? But this thing might might get lost and it's evidence. The great thing is to get the police here as soon as possible. I'll go at once and telephone."

He wheeled round and ran sharply towards the house. Sarah came swiftly to Poirot's side.

"I don't understand," she whispered. Her face was dead white. "I don't understand." She caught at Poirot's arm. "What did you mean about about the footprints?"

"Look for yourself, Mademoiselle."

The footprints that led to the body and back again were the same as the ones just made accompanying Poirot to the girl's body and back.

"You mean - that it was Desmond? Nonsense!"

Suddenly the noise of a car came through the clear air. They wheeled round. They saw the car clearly enough driving at a furious pace down the drive and Sarah recognised what car it was.

"It's Desmond," she said. "It's Desmond's car. He - he must have gone to fetch the police instead of telephoning."

Diana Middleton came running out of the house to join them.

"What's happened?" she cried in a breathless voice. "Desmond just came rushing into the house. He said something about Bridget being killed and then he rattled the telephone but it was dead. He couldn't get any answer. He said the wires must have been cut. He said the only thing was to take a car and go for the police. Why the police...?"

Poirot made a gesture.

"Bridget?" Diana stared at him. "But surely - isn't it a joke of some kind? I heard something - something last night. I thought that they were going to play a joke on you, M. Poirot?"

"Yes," said Poirot, "that was the idea - to play a joke on me. But now come into the house, all of you. We shall catch our deaths of cold here and there is nothing to be done until Mr Lee-Wortley returns with the police."

"But look here," said Colin, "we can't - we can't leave Bridget here alone."

"You can do her no good by remaining," said Poirot gently. "Come, it is a sad, a very sad tragedy, but there is nothing we can do any more to help Mademoiselle Bridget. So let us come in and get warm and have perhaps a cup of tea or of coffee."

They followed him obediently into the house. Peverell was just about to strike the gong. If he thought it extraordinary for most of the household to be outside and for Poirot to make an appearance in pyjamas and an overcoat, he displayed no sign of it. Peverell in his old age was still the perfect butler. He noticed nothing that he was not asked to notice. They went into the dining-room and sat down. When they all had a cup of coffee in front of them and were sipping it, Poirot spoke.

"I have to recount to you," he said, "a little history. I cannot tell you all the details, no. But I can give you the main outline. It concerns a young princeling who came to this country. He brought with him a famous jewel which he was to have reset for the lady he was going to marry, but unfortunately before that he made friends with a very pretty young lady. This pretty young lady did not care very much for the man, but she did care for his jewel - so much so that one day she disappeared with this historic possession which had belonged to his house for generations. So the poor young man, he is in a quandary, you see. Above all he cannot have a scandal. Impossible to go to the police. Therefore he comes to me, to Hercule Poirot. 'Recover for me,' he says, 'my historic ruby.' Eh bien, this young lady, she has a friend and the friend, he has put through several very questionable transactions. He has been concerned with blackmail and he has been concerned with the sale of jewellery abroad. Always he has been very clever. He is suspected, yes, but nothing can be proved. It comes to my knowledge that this very clever gentleman, he is spending Christmas here in this house. It is important that the pretty young lady, once she has acquired the jewel, should disappear for a while from circulation, so that no

pressure can be put upon her, no questions can be asked her. It is arranged, therefore, that she comes here to Kings Lacey, ostensibly as the sister of the clever gentleman..."

Sarah drew a sharp breath.

"Oh, no. Oh, no, not here! Not with me here!"

"But so it is," said Poirot. "And by a little manipulation I, too, become a guest here for Christmas. This young lady, she is supposed to have just come out of hospital. She is much better when she arrives here. But then comes the news that I, too, arrive, a detective a well-known detective. At once she has what you call the wind up. She hides the ruby in the first place she can think of, and then very quickly she has a relapse and takes to her bed again. She does not want that I should see her, for doubtless I have a photograph and I shall recognise her. It is very boring for her, yes, but she has to stay in her room and her brother, he brings her up the trays."

"And the ruby?" demanded Michael.

"I think," said Poirot, "that at the moment it is mentioned I arrive, the young lady was in the kitchen with the rest of you, all laughing and talking and stirring the Christmas puddings. The Christmas puddings are put into bowls and the young lady she hides the ruby, pressing it down into one of the pudding bowls. Not the one that we are going to have on Christmas Day. Oh no, that one she knows is in a special mould. She puts it in the other one, the one that is destined to be eaten on New Year's Day. Before then she will be

ready to leave, and when she leaves no doubt that Christmas pudding will go with her. But see how fate takes a hand. On the very morning of Christmas Day there is an accident. The Christmas pudding in its fancy mould is dropped on the stone floor and the mould is shattered to pieces. So what can be done? The good Mrs Ross, she takes the other pudding and sends it in."

"Good lord," said Colin, "do you mean that on Christmas Day when Grandfather was eating his pudding that that was a real ruby he'd got in his mouth?"

"Precisely," said Poirot, "and you can imagine the emotions of Mr Desmond Lee-Wortley when he saw that. Eh bien, what happens next? The ruby is passed round. I examine it and I manage unobtrusively to slip it in my pocket. In a careless way as though I were not interested. But one person at least observes what I have done. When I lie in bed that person searches my room. He searches me. He does not find the ruby. Why?"

"Because," said Michael breathlessly, "you had given it to Bridget. That's what you mean. And so that's why but I don't understand quite - I mean... Look here, what did happen?"

Poirot smiled at him.

"Come now into the library," he said, "and look out of the window and I will show you something that may explain the mystery."

He led the way and they followed him.

"Consider once again," said Poirot, "the scene of the crime."

He pointed out of the window. A simultaneous gasp broke from the lips of all of them. There was no body lying on the snow, no trace of the tragedy seemed to remain except a mass of scuffled snow.

"It wasn't all a dream, was it?" said Colin faintly. "I - has someone taken the body away?"

"Ah," said Poirot. "You see? The Mystery of the Disappearing Body." He nodded his head and his eyes twinkled gently.

"Good lord," cried Michael. "M. Poirot, you are - you haven't - oh, look, he's been having us on all this time!"

Poirot twinkled more than ever.

"It is true, my children, I also have had my little joke. I knew about your little plot, you see, and so I arranged a counterplot of my own. Ah, voilà Mademoiselle Bridget. None the worse, I hope, for your exposure in the snow? Never should I forgive myself if you attrapped une fluxion de poitrine."

Bridget had just come into the room. She was wearing a thick skirt and a woollen sweater. She was laughing.

"I sent a tisane to your room," said Poirot severely. "You have drunk it?"

"One sip was enough!" said Bridget. "I'm all right. Did I do it well, M. Poirot? Goodness, my arm hurts still after that tourniquet you made me put on it."

"You were splendid, my child," said Poirot. "Splendid. But see, all the others are still in the fog. Last night I went to Mademoiselle Bridget. I told her that I knew about your little complot and I asked her if she would act a part for me. She did it very cleverly. She made the footprints with a pair of Mr Lee-Wortley's shoes."

Sarah said in a harsh voice:

"But what's the point of it all, M. Poirot? What's the point of sending Desmond off to fetch the police? They'll be very angry when they find out it's nothing but a hoax."

Poirot shook his head gently.

"But I do not think for one moment, Mademoiselle, that Mr Lee-Wortley went to fetch the police," he said. "Murder is a thing in which Mr Lee-Wortley does not want to be mixed up. He lost his nerve badly. All he could see was his chance to get the ruby. He snatched that, he pretended the telephone was out of order and he rushed off in a car on the pretence of fetching the police. I think myself it is the last you will see of him for some time. He has, I understand, his own ways of getting out of England. He has his own plane, has he not, Mademoiselle?"

Sarah nodded. "Yes," she said. "We were thinking of..." she stopped.

"He wanted you to elope with him that way, did he not? Eh bien, that is a very good way of smuggling a jewel out of the country. When you are eloping with a girl, and that fact is publicised, then you will not be suspected of also smuggling a historic jewel out of the country. Oh yes, that would have made a very good camouflage."

"I don't believe it," said Sarah. "I don't believe a word of it!"

"Then ask his sister," said Poirot, gently nodding his head over her shoulder. Sarah turned her head sharply.

A platinum blonde stood in the doorway. She wore a fur coat and was scowling. She was clearly in a furious temper.

"Sister my foot!" she said, with a short unpleasant laugh. "That swine's no brother of mine! So he's beaten it, has he, and left me to carry the can? The whole thing was his idea! He put me up to it! Said it was money for jam. They'd never prosecute because of the scandal. I could always threaten to say that Ali had given me his historic jewel. Des and I were to have shared the swag in Paris and now the swine runs out on me! I'd like to murder him!" She switched abruptly. "The sooner I get out of here... Can someone telephone for a taxi?"

"A car is waiting at the front door to take you to the station, Mademoiselle," said Poirot.

"Think of everything, don't you?"

"Most things," said Poirot complacently.

But Poirot was not to get off so easily. When he returned to the dining-room after assisting the spurious Miss Lee-Wortley into the waiting car, Colin was waiting for him.

There was a frown on his boyish face.

"But look here, M. Poirot. What about the ruby? Do you mean to say you've let him get away with it?"

Poirot's face fell. He twirled his moustaches. He seemed ill at ease.

"I shall recover it yet," he said weakly. "There are other ways. I shall still..."

"Well, I do think!" said Michael. "To let that swine get away with the ruby!"

Bridget was sharper.

"He's having us on again," she cried. "You are, aren't you, M. Poirot?"

"Shall we do a final conjuring trick, Mademoiselle? Feel in my left-hand pocket."

Bridget thrust her hand in. She drew it out again with a scream of triumph and held aloft a large ruby blinking in crimson splendour.

"You comprehend," explained Poirot, "the one that was clasped in your hand was a paste replica. I brought it from London in case it was possible to make a substitution. You understand? We do not want the scandal. Monsieur Desmond will try and dispose of that ruby in Paris or in Belgium or wherever it is that he has his contacts, and then it will be discovered that the stone is not real! What could be more excellent? All finishes happily. The scandal is avoided, my princeling receives his ruby back again, he returns to his country and makes a sober and we hope a happy marriage. All ends well."

"Except for me," murmured Sarah under her breath.

She spoke so low that no one heard her but Poirot. He shook his head gently.

"You are in error, Mademoiselle Sarah, in what you say there. You have gained experience. All experience is valuable. Ahead of you I prophesy there lies happiness."

"That's what you say," said Sarah.

"But look here, M. Poirot," Colin was frowning. "How did you know about the show we were going to put on for you?"

"It is my business to know things," said Hercule Poirot. He twirled his moustache.

"Yes, but I don't see how you could have managed it. Did someone split - did someone come and tell you?"

"No, no, not that."

"Then how? Tell us how?"

They all chorused, "Yes, tell us how."

"But no," Poirot protested. "But no. If I tell you how I deduced that, you will think nothing of it. It is like the conjuror who shows how his tricks are done!"

"Tell us, M. Poirot! Go on. Tell us, tell us!"

"You really wish that I should solve for you this last mystery?"

"Yes, go on. Tell us."

"Ah, I do not think I can. You will be so disappointed."

"Now, come on, M. Poirot, tell us. How did you know?"

"Well, you see, I was sitting in the library by the window in a chair after tea the other day and I was reposing myself. I had been asleep and when I awoke you were discussing your plans just outside the window close to me, and the window was open at the top."

"Is that all?" cried Colin, disgusted. "How simple!"

"Is it not?" said Hercule Poirot, smiling. "You see? You are disappointed."

"Oh well," said Michael, "at any rate we know everything now."

"Do we?" murmured Hercule Poirot to himself. "I do not. I, whose business it is to know things."

He walked out into the hall, shaking his head a little. For perhaps the twentieth time he drew from his pocket a rather dirty piece of paper. "DON'T EAT NONE OF THE PLUM PUDDING. ONE AS WISHES YOU WELL."

Hercule Poirot shook his head reflectively. He who could explain everything could not explain this! Humiliating. Who had written it? Why had it been written? Until he found that out he would never know a moment's peace. Suddenly he came out of his reverie to be aware of a peculiar gasping noise. He looked sharply down. On the floor, busy with a dustpan and brush was a tow-headed creature in a flowered overall. She was staring at the paper in his hand with large round eyes.

"Oh sir," said this apparition. "Oh, sir. Please, sir."

"And who may you be, mon enfant?" inquired M. Poirot genially.

"Annie Bates, sir, please sir. I come here to help Mrs Ross. I didn't mean, sir, I didn't mean to to do anything what I shouldn't do. I did mean it well, sir. For your good, I mean."

Enlightenment came to Poirot. He held out the dirty piece of paper.

"Did you write that, Annie?"

"I didn't mean any harm, sir. Really I didn't."

"Of course you didn't, Annie." He smiled at her. "But tell me about it. Why did you write this?"

"Well, it was them two, sir. Mr Lee-Wortley and his sister. Not that she was his sister, I'm sure. None of us thought so! And she wasn't ill a bit. We could all tell that. We thought - we all thought - something queer was going on. I'll tell you straight, sir. I was in her bathroom taking in the clean towels, and I listened at the door. He was in her room and they were talking together. I heard what they said plain as plain. 'This detecive,' he was saying. 'This fellow Poirot who's coming here. We've got to do something about it. We've got to get him out of the way as soon as possible.' And then he says to her in a nasty, sinister sort of way, lowering his voice, 'Where did you put it?' And she answered him 'In the pudding.' Oh, sir, my heart gave such a leap I thought it would stop beating. I thought they meant to poison you in the Christmas pudding. I didn't know what to do!' Mrs Ross, she wouldn't listen to the likes of me. Then the idea came to me as I'd write you a warning. And I did and I put it on your pillow where you'd find it when you went to bed." Annie paused breathlessly.

Poirot surveyed her gravely for some minutes.

"You see too many sensational films, I think, Annie," he said at last, "or perhaps it is the television that affects you? But the important

thing is that you have the good heart and a certain amount of ingenuity. When I return to London I will send you a present."

"Oh thank you, sir. Thank you very much, sir."

"What would you like, Annie, as a present?"

"Anything I like, sir? Could I have anything I like?"

"Within reason," said Hercule Poirot prudently, "yes."

"Oh sir, could I have a vanity box? A real posh slap up vanity box like the one Mr Lee-Wortley's sister, wot wasn't his sister, had?"

"Yes," said Poirot, "yes, I think that could be managed."

"It is interesting," he mused. "I was in a museum the other day observing some antiquities from Babylon or one of those places, thousands of years old and among them were cosmetics boxes. The heart of women does not change."

"Beg your pardon, sir?" said Annie.

"It is nothing," said Poirot, "I reflect. You shall have your vanity box, child."

"Oh thank you, sir. Oh thank you very much indeed, sir."

Annie departed ecstatically. Poirot looked after her, nodding his head in satisfaction.

"Ah," he said to himself. "And now - I go. There is nothing more to be done here."

A pair of arms slipped round his shoulders unexpectedly.

"If you will stand just under the mistletoe..." said Bridget.

Hercule Poirot enjoyed it. He enjoyed it very much. He said to himself that he had had a very good Christmas.

THE MYSTERY OF THE SPANISH CHEST

Punctual to the moment, as always, Hercule Poirot entered the small room where Miss Lemon, his efficient secretary, awaited her instructions for the day.

At first sight Miss Lemon seemed to be composed entirely of angles - thus satisfying Poirot's demand for symmetry.

Not that where women were concerned Hercule Poirot carried his passion for geometrical precision so far. He was, on the contrary, old-fashioned. He had a continental prejudice for curves - it might he said for voluptuous curves. He liked women to be women. He liked them lush, highly colored, exotic. There had been a certain

Russian countess - but that was long ago now. A folly of earlier days.

But Miss Lemon he had never considered as a woman. She was a human machine - an instrument of precision. Her efficiency was terrific. She was forty-eight years of age, and was fortunate enough to have no imagination whatever.

"Good morning, Miss Lemon."

"Good morning, M. Poirot."

Poirot sat down and Miss Lemon placed before him the morning's mail, neatly arranged in categories.

She resumed her seat and sat with pad and pencil at the ready.

But there was to be this morning a slight change in routine. Poirot had brought in with him the morning newspaper, and his eyes were scanning it with interest. The headlines were big and bold.

"SPANISH CHEST MYSTERY. LATEST DEVELOPMENTS."

"You have read the morning papers, I presume, Miss Lemon?"

"Yes, M. Poirot. The news from Geneva is not very good."

Poirot waved away the news from Geneva in a comprehensive sweep of the arm.

"A Spanish chest," he mused. "Can you tell me, Miss Lemon, what exactly is a Spanish chest?"

"I suppose, M. Poirot, that it is a chest that came originally from Spain."

"One might reasonably suppose so. You have then, no expert knowledge?"

"They are usually of the Elizabethan period, I believe. Large, and with a good deal of brass decoration on them. They look very nice when well kept and polished. My sister bought one at a sale. She keeps household linen in it. It looks very nice."

"I am sure that in the house of any sister of yours, all the furniture would be well kept," said Poirot, bowing gracefully.

Miss Lemon replied sadly that servants did not seem to know what elbow grease was nowadays.

Poirot looked a little puzzled, but decided not to inquire into the inward meaning of the mysterious phrase "elbow grease."

He looked down again at the newspaper, conning over the names: Major Rich, Mr. and Mrs. Clayton, Commander McLaren, Mr. and Mrs. Spence. Names, nothing but names to him; yet all possessed of human personalities, hating, loving, fearing. A drama, this, in which he, Hercule Poirot, had no part. And he would have liked to have a part in it! Six people at an evening party, in a room with a big Spanish chest against the wall, six people, five of them talking,

eating a buffet supper, putting records on the gramophone, dancing, and the sixth dead, in the Spanish chest...

Ah, thought Poirot. How my dear friend Hastings would have enjoyed this! What romantic flights of imagination he would have had. What ineptitudes he would have uttered! Ah, ce cher Hastings, at this moment, today, I miss him. Instead -

He sighed and looked at Miss Lemon. Miss Lemon, intelligently perceiving that Poirot was in no mood to dictate letters, had uncovered her typewriter and was awaiting her moment to get on with certain arrears of work. Nothing could have interested her less than sinister Spanish chests containing dead bodies.

Poirot sighed and looked down at a photographed face. Reproductions in newsprint were never very good, and this was decidedly smudgy - but what a face! Mrs. Clayton, the wife of the murdered man...

On an impulse, he thrust the paper at Miss Lemon.

"Look," he demanded. "Look at that face."

Miss Lemon looked at it obediently, without emotion.

"What do you think of her, Miss Lemon? That is Mrs. Clayton."

Miss Lemon took the paper, glanced casually at the picture, and remarked:

"She's a little like the wife of our bank manager when we lived at Croydon Heath."

"Interesting," said Poirot. "Recount to me, if you will be so kind, the history of your bank manager's wife."

"Well, it's not really a very pleasant story, M. Poirot."

"It was in my mind that it might not be. Continue."

"There was a good deal of talk - about Mrs. Adams and a young artist. Then Mr. Adams shot himself. But Mrs. Adams wouldn't marry the other man and he took some kind of poison - but they pulled him through all right; and finally Mrs. Adams married a young solicitor. I believe there was more trouble after that, only of course we'd left Croydon Heath by then so I didn't hear very much more about it."

Hercule Poirot nodded gravely. "She was beautiful?"

"Well - not really what you'd call beautiful - But there seemed to be something about her -"

"Exactly. What is that something that they possess - the sirens of this world, the Helens of Troy, the Cleopatras -?"

Miss Lemon inserted a piece of paper vigorously into her typewriter.

"Really, M. Poirot, I've never thought about it. It seems all very silly to me. If people would just go on with their jobs and didn't think about such things it would be much better."

Having thus disposed of human frailty and passion, Miss Lemon let her fingers hover over the keys of the typewriter, waiting impatiently to be allowed to begin her work.

"That is your view," said Poirot. "And at this moment it is your desire that you should be allowed to get on with your job. But your job, Miss Lemon, is not only to take down my letters, to file my papers, to deal with my telephone calls, to typewrite my letters - all these things you do admirably. But me, I deal not only with documents but with human beings. And there, too, I need assistance."

"Certainly, M. Poirot," said Miss Lemon patiently. "What is it you want me to do?"

"This case interests me. I should be glad if you would make a study of this morning's report of it in all the papers and also of any additional reports in the evening papers - make me a précis of the facts."

"Very good, M. Poirot."

Poirot withdrew to his sitting room, a rueful smile on his face.

"It is indeed the irony," he said to himself, "that after my dear friend Hastings I should have Miss Lemon. What greater contrast can one

imagine? Ce cher Hastings - how he would have enjoyed himself. How he would have walked up and down talking about it, putting the most romantic construction on every incident, believing as gospel truth every word the papers have printed about it. And my poor Miss Lemon, what I have asked her to do, she will not enjoy at all!"

Miss Lemon came to him in due course with a typewritten sheet.

"I've got the information you wanted, M. Poirot. I'm afraid though, it can't be regarded as reliable. The papers vary a good deal in their accounts. I shouldn't like to guarantee that the facts as stated are more than sixty per cent accurate."

"That is probably a conservative estimate," murmured Poirot. "Thank you, Miss Lemon, for the trouble you have taken."

The facts were sensational but clear enough. Major Charles Rich, a well-to-do bachelor, had given an evening party to a few of his friends, at his apartment. These friends consisted of Mr. and Mrs. Clayton, Mr. and Mrs. Spence, and a Commander McLaren. Commander McLaren was a very old friend of both Rich and the Claytons. Mr. and Mrs. Spence, a younger couple, were fairly recent acquaintances. Arnold Clayton was in the Treasury. Jeremy Spence was a junior civil servant. Major Rich was forty-eight, Arnold Clayton was fifty-five, Commander McLaren was forty-six, Jeremy Spence was thirty-seven. Mrs. Clayton was said to be "some years younger than her husband." One person was unable to attend the party. At the last moment, Mr. Clayton was called away

to Scotland on urgent business, and was supposed to have left King's Cross by the 8:15 train.

The party proceeded as such parties do. Everyone appeared to be enjoying themselves. It was neither a wild party nor a drunken one. It broke up about 11:45. The four guests left together and shared a taxi. Commander McLaren was dropped first at his club and then the Spences dropped Margharita Clayton at Cardigan Gardens just off Sloane Street and went on themselves to their house in Chelsea.

The gruesome discovery was made on the following morning by Major Rich's manservant, William Burgess. The latter did not live in. He arrived early so as to clear up the sitting room before calling Major Rich with his early morning tea. It was whilst clearing up that Burgess was startled to find a big stain discoloring the light-colored rug on which stood the Spanish chest. It seemed to have seeped through from the chest, and the valet immediately lifted up the lid of the chest and looked inside. He was horrified to find there the body of Mr. Clayton, stabbed through the neck.

Obeying his first impulse, Burgess rushed out into the street and fetched the nearest policeman.

Such were the bald facts of the case. But there were further details. The police had immediately broken the news to Mrs. Clayton, who had been "completely prostrated." She had seen her husband for the last time at a little after six o'clock on the evening before. He had come home much annoyed, having been summoned to Scotland on urgent business in connection with some property that he owned. He had urged his wife to go to the party without him. Mr.

Clayton had then called in at his and Commander McLaren's club, had had a drink with his friend, and had explained the position. He had then said, looking at his watch, that he had just time on his way to King's Cross, to call in on Major Rich and explain. He had already tried to telephone him, but the line had seemed to be out of order.

According to William Burgess, Mr. Clayton arrived at the flat at about 7:55. Major Rich was out but was due to return any moment, so Burgess suggested that Mr. Clayton should come in and wait. Clayton said he had no time but would come in and write a note. He explained that he was on his way to catch a train at King's Cross. The valet showed him into the sitting room and himself returned to the kitchen, where he was engaged in the preparation of canapés for the party. The valet did not hear his master return, but about ten minutes later, Major Rich looked into the kitchen and told Burgess to hurry out and get some Turkish cigarettes, which were Mrs. Spence's favorite smoking. The valet did so and brought them to his master in the sitting room. Mr. Clayton was not there, but the valet naturally thought he had already left to catch his train.

Major Rich's story was short and simple. Mr. Clayton was not in the flat when he himself came in and he had no idea that he had been there. No note had been left for him and the first he heard of Mr. Clayton's journey to Scotland was when Mrs. Clayton and the others arrived.

There were two additional items in the evening papers. Mrs. Clayton who was "prostrated with shock" had left her flat in Cardigan Gardens and was believed to be staying with friends.

The second item was in the stop press. Major Charles Rich had been charged with the murder of Arnold Clayton and had been taken into custody.

"So that is that," said Poirot, looking up at Miss Lemon. "The arrest of Major Rich was to be expected. But what a remarkable case. What a very remarkable case! Do you not think so?"

"I suppose such things do happen, M. Poirot," said Miss Lemon without interest.

"Oh certainly! They happen every day. Or nearly every day. But usually they are quite understandable - though distressing."

"It is certainly a very unpleasant business."

"To be stabbed to death and stowed away in a Spanish chest is certainly unpleasant for the victim - supremely so. But when I say this is a remarkable case, I refer to the remarkable behavior of Major Rich."

Miss Lemon said with faint distaste: "There seems to be a suggestion that Major Rich and Mrs. Clayton were very close friends... It was a suggestion and not a proved fact, so I did not include it."

"That was very correct of you. But it is an inference that leaps to the eye. Is that all you have to say?"

Miss Lemon looked blank. Poirot sighed, and missed the rich colorful imagination of his friend Hastings. Discussing a case with Miss Lemon was uphill work.

"Consider for a moment this Major Rich. He is in love with Mrs. Clayton - granted... He wants to dispose of her husband - that, too, we grant, though if Mrs. Clayton is in love with him, and they are having the affair together, where is the urgency? It is, perhaps, that Mr. Clayton will not give his wife the divorce? But it is not of all this that I talk. Major Rich, he is a retired soldier, and it is said sometimes that soldiers are not brainy. But, tout de même, this Major Rich, is he, can he be, a complete imbecile?"

Miss Lemon did not reply. She took this to be a purely rhetorical question.

"Well," demanded Poirot. "What do you think about it all?"

"What do I think?" Miss Lemon was startled.

"Mais oui - you!"

Miss Lemon adjusted her mind to the strain put upon it. She was not given to mental speculation of any kind unless asked for it. In such leisure moments as she had, her mind was filled with the details of a superlatively perfect filing system. It was her only mental recreation.

"Well -" she began, and paused.

"Tell me just what happened - what you think happened, on that evening. Mr. Clayton is in the sitting room writing a note, Major Rich comes back - what then?"

"He finds Mr. Clayton there. They - I suppose they have a quarrel. Major Rich stabs him. Then, when he sees what he has done, he - he puts the body in the chest. After all, the guests, I suppose, might be arriving any minute."

"Yes, yes. The guests arrive! The body is in the chest. The evening passes. The guests depart. And then -"

"Well, then, I suppose Major Rich goes to bed and - Oh!"

"Ah," said Poirot. "You see it now. You have murdered a man. You have concealed his body in a chest. And then - you go peacefully to bed, quite unperturbed by the fact that your valet will discover the crime in the morning."

"I suppose it's possible that the valet might never have looked inside the chest?"

"With an enormous pool of blood on the carpet underneath it?"

"Perhaps Major Rich didn't realize that the blood was there."

"Was it not somewhat careless of him not to look and see?"

"I dare say he was upset," said Miss Lemon. Poirot threw up his hands in despair.

Miss Lemon seized the opportunity to hurry from the room.

The mystery of the Spanish chest was, strictly speaking, no business of Poirot's. He was engaged at the moment in a delicate mission for one of the large oil companies where one of the high ups was possibly involved in some questionable transaction. It was hush-hush, important, and exceedingly lucrative. It was sufficiently involved to command Poirot's attention, and had the great advantage that it required very little physical activity. It was sophisticated and bloodless. Crime at the highest levels.

The mystery of the Spanish chest was dramatic and emotional, two qualities which Poirot had often declared to Hastings could be much overrated - and indeed frequently were so by the latter. He had been severe with ce cher Hastings on this point, and now here he was, behaving much as his friend might have done, obsessed with beautiful women, crimes of passion, jealousy, hatred, and all the other romantic causes of murder! He wanted to know about it all. He wanted to know what Major Rich was like, and what his manservant, Burgess, was like, and what Margharita Clayton was like (though that, he thought, he knew) and what the late Arnold Clayton had been like (since he held that the character of the victim was of the first importance in a murder case), and even what Commander McLaren, the faithful friend, and Mr. and Mrs. Spence, the recently acquired acquaintances, were like.

And he did not see exactly how he was going to gratify his curiosity!

He reflected on the matter later in the day.

Why did the whole business intrigue him so much? He decided, after reflection, that it was because - as the facts were related - the whole thing was more or less impossible! Yes, there was a Euclidean flavor.

Starting from what one could accept, there had been a quarrel between two men. Cause, presumably, a woman. One man killed the other in the heat of rage. Yes, that happened - though it would be more acceptable if the husband had killed the lover. Still - the lover had killed the husband, stabbed him with a dagger (?), somehow a rather unlikely weapon. Perhaps Major Rich had had an Italian mother? Somewhere - surely - there should be something to explain the choice of a dagger as a weapon. Anyway, one must accept the dagger (some papers called it a stiletto!). It was to hand and was used. The body was concealed in the chest. That was common sense and inevitable. The crime had not been premeditated, and as the valet was returning at any moment, and four guests would be arriving before very long, it seemed the only course indicated.

The party is held, the guests depart, the manservant is already gone - and - Major Rich goes to bed!

To understand how that could happen, one must see Major Rich and find out what kind of a man acts in that way.

Could it be that, overcome with horror at what he had done and the long strain of an evening trying to appear his normal self, he had taken a sleeping pill of some kind or a tranquilizer which had put

him into a heavy slumber which lasted long beyond his usual hour of waking? Possible. Or was it a case, rewarding to a psychologist, where Major Rich's feeling of subconscious guilt made him want the crime to be discovered?

To make up one's mind on that point one would have to see Major Rich. It all came back to -

The telephone rang. Poirot let it ring for some moments, until he realized that Miss Lemon after bringing him his letters to sign, had gone home some time ago, and that George had probably gone out.

He picked up the receiver.

"M. Poirot?"

"Speaking!"

"Oh how splendid." Poirot blinked slightly at the fervor of the charming female voice. "It's Abbie Chatterton."

"Ah, Lady Chatterton. How can I serve you?"

"By coming over as quickly as you can right away to a simply frightful cocktail party I am giving. Not just for the cocktail party - it's for something quite different really. I need you. It's absolutely vital. Please, please, please don't let me down! Don't say you can't manage it."

Poirot had not been going to say anything of the kind. Lord Chatterton, apart from being a peer of the realm and occasionally making a very dull speech in the House of Lords, was nobody in particular. But Lady Chatterton was one of the brightest jewels in what Poirot called le hauté monde. Everything she did or said was news. She had brains, beauty, originality, and enough vitality to activate a rocket to the moon.

She said again: "I need you. Just give that wonderful moustache of yours a lovely twirl, and come!"

It was not quite so quick as that. Poirot had first to make a meticulous toilet. The twirl to the moustaches was added and he then set off.

The door of Lady Chatterton's delightful house in Cheriton Street was ajar and a noise as of animals mutinying at the zoo sounded from within. Lady Chatterton, who was holding two ambassadors, an international rugger player, and an American evangelist in play, neatly jettisoned them with the rapidity of sleight of hand and was at Poirot's side.

"M. Poirot, how wonderful to see you! No, don't have that nasty Martini. I've got something special for you - a kind of sirop that the sheikhs drink in Morocco. It's in my own little room upstairs."

She led the way upstairs and Poirot followed her. She paused to say over her shoulder: "I didn't put these people off, because it's absolutely essential that no one should know there's anything special going on here, and I've promised the servants enormous

bonuses if not a word leaks out. After all, one doesn't want one's house besieged by reporters. And, poor darling, she's been through so much already."

Lady Chatterton did not stop at the first-floor landing; instead she swept on up to the floor above.

Gasping for breath and somewhat bewildered, Hercule Poirot followed.

Lady Chatterton paused, gave a rapid glance downwards over the banisters, and then flung open a door, exclaiming as she did so: "I've got him, Margharita! I've got him! Here he is!"

She stood aside in triumph to let Poirot enter, then performed a rapid introduction.

"This is Margharita Clayton. She's a very, very dear friend of mine. You'll help her, won't you? Margharita, this is that wonderful Hercule Poirot. He'll do just everything you want - you will, won't you, dear M. Poirot?"

And without waiting for the answer which she obviously took for granted (Lady Chatterton had not been a spoiled beauty all her life for nothing), she dashed out of the door and down the stairs, calling back rather indiscreetly, "I've got to go back to all these awful people."

The woman who had been sitting in a chair by the window rose and came towards him. He would have recognized her even if Lady

Chatterton had not mentioned her name. Here was that wide, that very wide brow, the dark hair that sprang away from it like wings, the grey eyes set far apart. She wore a close-fitting high-necked gown of dull black that showed up the beauty of her body and the magnolia-whiteness of her skin. It was an unusual face rather than a beautiful one - one of those oddly proportioned faces that one sometimes sees in an Italian primitive. There was about her a kind of medieval simplicity - a strange innocence that could be, Poirot thought, more devastating than any voluptuous sophistication. When she spoke it was with a kind of childlike candor.

"Abbie says you will help me -" She looked at him gravely and inquiringly.

For a moment he stood quite still, scrutinizing her closely. There was nothing ill-bred in his manner of doing it. It was more the kind but searching look that a famous consultant gives a new patient.

"Are you sure, madame," he said at last, "that I can help you?"

A little flush rose to her cheeks.

"I don't know what you mean."

"What is it, madame, that you want me to do?"

"Oh," she seemed surprised. "I thought - you knew who I was?"

"I know who you are. Your husband was killed - stabbed, and a Major Rich has been arrested and charged with his murder."

The flush heightened.

"Major Rich did not kill my husband."

Quick as a flash Poirot said:

"Why not?"

She stared, puzzled. "I - I beg your pardon?"

"I have confused you - because I have not asked the question that everybody asks - the police - the lawyers 'Why should Major Rich kill Arnold Clayton?' But I ask the opposite. I ask you, madame, why you are sure that Major Rich did not kill him?"

"Because" - she paused a moment - "because I know Major Rich so well."

"You know Major Rich so well," repeated Poirot tonelessly. He paused and then said sharply:

"How well?"

Whether she understood his meaning, he could not guess. He thought to himself. 'Here is either a woman of great simplicity or of great subtlety...' Many people, he thought, must have wondered that about Margharita Clayton...

"How well?" She was looking at him doubtfully. "Five years - no, nearly six."

"That was not precisely what I meant. You must understand, madame, that I shall have to ask you the impertinent questions. Perhaps you will speak the truth, perhaps you will lie. It is very necessary for a woman to lie sometimes. Women must defend themselves, and the lie, it can be a good weapon. But there are three people, madame, to whom a woman should speak the truth. To her Father confessor, to her hairdresser, and to her private detective - if she trusts him. Do you trust me, madame?"

Margharita Clayton drew a deep breath.

"Yes," she said. "I do." And added: "I must."

"Very well, then. What is it you want me to do - find out who killed your husband?"

"I suppose so - yes."

"But it is not essential? You want me, then, to clear Major Rich from suspicion?"

She nodded quickly - gratefully.

"That - and that only?"

It was, he saw, an unnecessary question. Margharita Clayton was a woman who saw only one thing at a time.

"And now," he said, "for the impertinence. You and Major Rich, you are lovers, yes?"

"Do you mean, were we having an affair together? No."

"But he was in love with you?"

"Yes."

"And you - were in love with him?"

"I think so."

"You do not seem quite sure?"

"I am sure - now."

"Ah! You did not, then, love your husband?"

"No."

"You reply with an admirable simplicity. Most women would wish to explain at great length just exactly what their feelings were. How long had you been married?"

"Eleven years."

"Can you tell me a little about your husband - what kind of a man he was?"

She frowned. "It's difficult. I don't really know what kind of a man Arnold was. He was very quiet - very reserved. One didn't know what he was thinking. He was clever, of course - everyone said he was brilliant - in his work, I mean. He didn't - how can I put it - he never explained himself at all."

"Was he in love with you?"

"Oh, yes. He must have been. Or he wouldn't have minded so much..." she came to a sudden stop.

"About other men? That is what you were going to say? He was jealous?"

Again she said:

"He must have been." And then, as though she felt that the phrase needed explanation, she said,

"Sometimes, for days, he wouldn't speak -"

Poirot nodded thoughtfully.

"This violence - that has come into your life. Is it the first that you have known?"

"Violence?" She frowned, then flushed. "I - you mean - that poor boy who shot himself?"

"Yes," said Poirot. "I expect that is what I mean -"

"I'd no idea he felt like that... I was sorry for him - he seemed so shy - so lonely. He must have been very neurotic, I think. And there were two Italians and a duel... it was ridiculous! Anyway, nobody was killed, thank goodness. And honestly, I didn't care about either of them! I never even pretended to care."

"No. You were just - there! And where you are things happen! I have seen that before in my life. It is because you do not care that men are driven mad. But for Major Rich you do care. So we must do what we can -"

He was silent for a moment or two.

She sat there gravely, watching him.

"We turn from personalities, which are the really important things, to plain facts. I know only what has been in the papers. On the facts as given there, only two persons had the opportunity of killing your husband, only two persons could have killed him - Major Rich and Major Rich's manservant."

She said, stubbornly:

"I know Charles didn't kill him."

"So, then, it must have been the valet. You agree?"

She said doubtfully:

"I see what you mean -"

"But you are dubious about it?"

"It just seems – fantastic!"

"Yet the possibility is there. Your husband undoubtedly came to the flat, since his body was found there. If the valet's story is true, Major Rich killed him. But if the valet's story is false? Then the valet killed him and hid the body in the chest before his master returned. An excellent way of disposing of the body from his point of view. He has only got to 'notice the bloodstain' the next morning and 'discover' it. Suspicion will immediately fall on Rich."

"But why should he want to kill Arnold?"

"Ah why? The motive cannot be an obvious one - or the police would have investigated it. It is possible that your husband knew something to the valet's discredit, and was about to acquaint Major Rich with the facts. Did your husband ever say anything to you about this man Burgess?"

She shook her head.

"Do you think he would have done so - if that had indeed been the case?"

She frowned.

"It's difficult to say. Possibly not. Arnold never talked much about people. I told you he was reserved. He wasn't - he was never - a chatty man."

"He was a man who kept his own counsel. Yes, now what is your opinion of Burgess?"

"He's not the kind of man you notice very much. A fairly good servant. Adequate, but not polished."

"What age?"

"About thirty-seven or eight, I should think. He'd been an orderly in the army during the war, but he wasn't a regular soldier."

"How long had he been with Major Rich?"

"Not very long. About a year and a half, I think."

"You never noticed anything odd about his manner towards your husband?"

"We weren't there so very often. No, I noticed nothing at all."

"Tell me now about the events of that evening. What time were you invited?"

"Eight-fifteen for half past."

"And just what kind of a party was it to be?"

"Well, there would be drinks, and a kind of buffet supper - usually a very good one. Foie gras and hot toast. Smoked salmon. Sometimes there was a hot rice dish - Charles had a special recipe he'd got in the Near East - but that was more for winter. Then we used to have music - Charles had got a very good stereophonic gramophone. Both my husband and Jock McLaren were very fond of classical records. And we had dance music - the Spences were very keen dancers. It was that sort of thing - a quiet informal evening. Charles was a very good host."

"And this particular evening - it was like other evenings there? You noticed nothing unusual - nothing out of place?"

"Out of place?" she frowned for a moment. "When you said that I - no, it's gone. There was something -"

She shook her head again. "No. To answer your question, there was nothing unusual at all about that evening. We enjoyed ourselves. Everybody seemed relaxed and happy." She shivered. "And to think that all the time -"

Poirot held up a quick hand.

"Do not think. This business that took your husband to Scotland, how much do you know about that?"

"Not very much. There was some dispute over the restrictions on selling a piece of land which belonged to my husband. The sale had apparently gone through and then some sudden snag turned up."

"What did your husband tell you exactly?"

"He came in with a telegram in his hand. As far as I remember, he said, 'This is most annoying. I shall have to take the night mail to Edinburgh and see Johnston first thing tomorrow morning. Too bad, when one thought the thing was going through smoothly at last.' Then he said, 'Shall I ring up Jock and get him to call for you?' and I said, 'Nonsense, I'll just take a taxi,' and he said that Jock or the Spences would see me home. I said did he want anything packed and he said he'd just throw a few things into a bag, and have a quick snack at the club, before catching the train. Then he went off and - and that's the last time I saw him."

Her voice broke a little on the last words.

Poirot looked at her very hard.

"Did he show you the telegram?"

"No."

"A pity."

"Why do you say that?"

He did not answer that question. Instead he said briskly:

"Now to business. Who are the solicitors acting for Major Rich?"

She told him and he made a note of the address.

"Will you write a few words to them and give it to me? I shall want to make arrangements to see Major Rich."

"He - it's been remanded for a week."

"Naturally. That is the procedure. Will you also write a note to Commander McLaren and to your friends the Spences? I shall want to see all of them, and it is essential that they do not at once show me the door."

When she rose from the writing desk, he said:

"One thing more. I shall register my own impressions, but I also want yours - of Commander McLaren and of Mr. and Mrs. Spence."

"Jock is one of our oldest friends. I've known him ever since I was a child. He appears to be quite a dour person, but he's really a dear - always the same - always to be relied upon. He's not gay and amusing but he's a tower of strength - both Arnold and I relied on his judgement a lot."

"And he, also, is doubtless in love with you?" Poirot's eyes twinkled slightly.

"Oh yes," said Margharita happily. "He's always been in love with me - but by now it's become a kind of habit."

"And the Spences?"

"They're amusing - and very good company. Linda Spence is really rather a clever girl. Arnold enjoyed talking with her. She's attractive, too."

"You are friends?"

"She and I? In a way. I don't know that I really like her. She's too malicious."

"And her husband?"

"Oh, Jeremy is delightful. Very musical. Knows a good deal about pictures, too. He and I go to picture shows a good deal together."

"Ah, well, I shall see for myself." He took her hand in his, "I hope, madame, you will not regret asking for my help."

"Why should I regret it?" Her eyes opened wide.

"One never knows," said Poirot cryptically.

"And I - I do not know," he said to himself, as he went down the stairs. The cocktail party was still in full spate, but he avoided being captured and reached the street.

"No," he repeated. "I do not know."

It was of Margharita Clayton he was thinking. That apparently childlike candor, that frank innocence - was it just that? Or did it

mask something else? There had been women like that in medieval days - women on whom history had not been able to agree.

He thought of Mary Stuart, the Scottish Queen. Had she known, that night in Kirk o'Fields, of the deed that was to be done? Or was she completely innocent? Had the conspirators told her nothing? Was she one of those childlike simple women who can say to themselves "I do not know" and believe it? He felt the spell of Margharita Clayton. But he was not entirely sure about her...

Such women could be, though innocent themselves, the cause of crimes.

Such women could be, in intent and design, criminals themselves, though not in action.

Theirs was never the hand that held the knife - as to Margharita Clayton - no - he did not know!

Hercule Poirot did not find Major Rich's solicitors very helpful. He had not expected to do so.

They managed to indicate, though without saying so, that it would be in their client's best interest if Mrs. Clayton showed no sign of activity on his behalf.

His visit to them was in the interests of "correctness." He had enough pull with the Home Office and the CID to arrange his interview with the prisoner.

Inspector Miller, who was in charge of the Clayton case, was not one of Poirot's favorites. He was not, however, hostile on this occasion, merely contemptuous.

"Can't waste much time over the old dodderer," he had said to his assisting sergeant before Poirot was shown in. "Still, I'll have to be polite."

"You'll really have to pull some rabbits out of a hat if you're going to do anything with this one, M. Poirot," he remarked cheerfully. "Nobody else but Rich could have killed the bloke."

"Except the valet."

"Oh, I'll give you the valet! As a possibility, that is. But you won't find anything there. No motives whatever."

"You cannot be entirely sure of that. Motives are very curious things."

"Well, he wasn't acquainted with Clayton in any way. He's got a perfectly innocuous past. And he seems to be perfectly right in his head. I don't know what more you want?"

"I want to find out that Rich did not commit the crime."

"To please the lady, eh?" Inspector Miller grinned wickedly. "She's been getting at you, I suppose. Quite something, isn't she? Cherchez la femme with a vengeance. If she'd had the opportunity, you know, she might have done it herself."

"That, no!"

"You'd be surprised. I once knew a woman like that. Put a couple of husbands out of the way without a blink of her innocent blue eyes. Broken-hearted each time, too. The jury would have aquitted her if they'd had half a chance which they hadn't, the evidence being practically cast iron."

"Well, my friend, let us not argue. What I make so bold as to ask is a few reliable details on the facts. What a newspaper prints is news - but not always truth!"

"They have to enjoy themselves. What do you want?"

"Time of death as near as can be."

"Which can't be very near because the body wasn't examined until the following morning. Death is estimated to have taken place from thirteen to ten hours previously. That is, between seven and ten o'clock the night before... He was stabbed through the jugular vein - death must have been matter of moments."

"And the weapon?"

"A kind of Italian stiletto - quite small - razor sharp. Nobody has ever seen it before, or knows where it comes from. But we shall know - in the end it's a matter of time and patience."

"It could not have been picked up in the course of a quarrel."

"No. The valet says no such thing was in the flat."

"What interests me is the telegram," said Poirot. "The telegram that called Arnold Clayton away to Scot- land. Was that summons genuine?"

"No. There was no hitch or trouble up there. The land transfer, or whatever it was, was proceeding normally."

"Then who sent that telegram - I am presuming there was a telegram?"

"There must have been. Not that we'd necessarily believe Mrs. Clayton. But Clayton told the valet he was called by wire to Scotland. And he also told Commander McLaren."

"What time did he see Commander McLaren?"

"They had a snack together at their club - Combined Services - that was at about a quarter past seven. Then Clayton took a taxi to Rich's flat, arriving there just before eight o'clock. After that -" Miller spread his hands out.

"Anybody noticed anything at all odd about Rich's manner that evening?"

"Oh well, you know what people are. Once a thing has happened, people think they noticed a lot of things I bet they never saw at all. Mrs. Spence, now, she says he was distrait all the evening. Didn't

always answer to the point. As though he had 'something on his mind.' I bet he had, too, if he had a body in the chest! Wondering how the hell to get rid of it!"

"Why didn't he get rid of it?"

"Beats me. Lost his nerve, perhaps. But it was madness to leave it until the next day. He had the best chance he'd ever have that night. There's no night porter on. He could have got his car round, packed the body in the boot - it's a big boot - driven out in the country and parked it somewhere. He might have been seen getting the body into the car, but the flats are in a side street and there's a courtyard you drive a car through. At, say, three in the morning, he had a reasonable chance. And what does he do? Goes to bed, sleeps late the next morning and wakes up to find the police in the flat!"

"He went to bed and slept well as an innocent man might do."

"Have it that way if you like. But do you really believe that yourself?"

"I shall have to leave that question until I have seen the man myself."

"Think you know an innocent man when you see one? It's not so easy as that."

"I know it is not easy - and I should not attempt to say I could do it. What I want to make up my mind about is whether the man is as stupid as he seems to be."

Poirot had no intention of seeing Charles Rich until he had seen everyone else.

He started with Commander McLaren.

McLaren was a tall, swarthy, uncommunicative man. He had a rugged but pleasant face. He was a shy man and not easy to talk to. But Poirot persevered.

Fingering Margharita's note, McLaren said almost reluctantly:

"Well, if Margharita wants me to tell you all I can, of course I'll do so. Don't know what there is to tell, though. You've heard it all already. But whatever Margharita wants - I've always done what she wanted - ever since she was sixteen. She's got a way with her, you know."

"I know," said Poirot. He went on. "First I should like you to answer a question quite frankly. Do you think Major Rich is guilty?"

"Yes, I do. I wouldn't say so to Margharita if she wants to think he's innocent, but I simply can't see it any other way. Hang it all, the fellow's got to be guilty."

"Was there bad feeling between him and Mr. Clayton?"

"Not in the least. Arnold and Charles were the best of friends. That's what makes the whole thing so extraordinary."

"Perhaps Major Rich's friendship with Mrs. Clayton -"

He was interrupted.

"Faugh! All that stuff. All the papers slyly hinting at it. Damned innuendoes! Mrs. Clayton and Rich were good friends and that's all! Margharita's got lots of friends. I'm her friend. Been one for years. And nothing the whole world mightn't know about it. Same with Charles and Margharita."

"You do not then consider that they were having an affair together?"

"Certainly not!" McLaren was wrathful. "Don't go listening to that hellcat Spence woman. She'd say anything."

"But perhaps Mr. Clayton suspected there might be something between his wife and Major Rich."

"You can take it from me he did nothing of the sort! I'd have known if so. Arnold and I were very close."

"What sort of man was he? You, if anyone, should know."

"Well, Arnold was a quiet sort of chap. But he was clever - quite brilliant, I believe. What they call a first-class financial brain. He was quite high up in the Treasury, you know."

"So I have heard."

"He read a good deal. And he collected stamps. And he was extremely fond of music. He didn't dance, or care much for going out."

"Was it, do you think, a happy marriage?"

Commander McLaren's answer did not come quickly. He seemed to be puzzling it out.

"That sort of thing's very hard to say... Yes, I think they were happy. He was devoted to her in his quiet way. I'm sure she was fond of him. They weren't likely to split up, if that's what you're thinking. They hadn't, perhaps, a lot in common."

Poirot nodded. It was as much as he was likely to get. He said: "Now tell me about that last evening. Mr. Clayton dined with you at the club. What did he say?"

"Told me he'd got to go to Scotland. Seemed vexed about it. We didn't have dinner, by the way. No time. Just sandwiches and a drink. For him, that is. I had only the drink. I was going out to a buffet supper, remember."

"Mr. Clayton mentioned a telegram?"

"Yes."

"He did not actually show you the telegram?"

"No."

"Did he say he was going to call on Rich?"

"Not definitely. In fact he said he doubted if he'd have time. He said, 'Margharita can explain or you can,' And then he said, 'See she gets home all right, won't you?' Then he went off. It was all quite natural and easy."

"He had no suspicion at all that the telegram wasn't genuine?"

"Wasn't it?" Commander McLaren looked startled.

"Apparently not."

"How very odd -" Commander McLaren went into a kind of coma, emerging suddenly to say:

"But that really is odd. I mean, what's the point? Why should anybody want him to go to Scotland?"

"It is a question that needs answering, certainly."

Hercule Poirot left, leaving the commander apparently still puzzling on the matter.

The Spences lived in a minute house in Chelsea.

Linda Spence received Poirot with the utmost delight.

"Do tell me," she said. "Tell me all about Margharita! Where is she?"

"That I am not at liberty to state, madame."

"She has hidden herself well! Margharita is very clever at that sort of thing. But she'll be called to give evidence at the trial, I suppose? She can't wiggle herself out of that."

Poirot looked at her appraisingly. He decided grudgingly that she was attractive in the modern style (which at that moment resembled an underfed orphan child). It was not a type he admired. The artistically disordered hair fluffed out round her head, a pair of shrewd eyes watched him from a slightly dirty face devoid of makeup save for a vivid cerise mouth. She wore an enormous pale yellow sweater hanging almost to her knees, and tight black trousers.

"What's your part in all this?" demanded Mrs. Spence. "Get the boyfriend out of it somehow? Is that it? What a hope!"

"You think then, that he is guilty?"

"Of course. Who else?"

That, Poirot thought, was very much the question. He parried it by asking another question.

"What did Major Rich seem like to you on that fatal evening? As usual? Or not as usual?"

Linda Spence screwed up her eyes judicially.

"No, he wasn't himself. He was - different."

"How different?"

"Well, surely, if you've just stabbed a man in cold blood -"

"But you were not aware at the time that he had just stabbed a man in cold blood, were you?"

"No, of course not."

"So how did you account for his being 'different'? In what way?"

"Well - distrait. Oh, I don't know. But thinking it over afterwards I decided that there had definitely been something."

Poirot sighed.

"Who arrived first?"

"We did, Jim and I. And then Jock. And finally Margharita."

"When was Mr. Clayton's departure for Scotland first mentioned?"

"When Margharita came. She said to Charles: 'Arnold's terribly sorry. He's had to rush off to Edinburgh by the night train.' And Charles said: 'Oh, that's too bad.' And then Jock said: 'Sorry. Thought you already knew.' And then we had drinks."

"Major Rich at no time mentioned seeing Mr. Clayton that evening? He said nothing of his having called in on his way to the station?"

"Not that I heard."

"It was strange, was it not," said Poirot, "about that telegram?"

"What was strange?"

"It was a fake. Nobody in Edinburgh knows anything about it."

"So that's it. I wondered at the time."

"You have an idea about the telegram?"

"I should say it rather leaps to the eye."

"How do you mean exactly?"

"My dear man," said Linda. "Don't play the innocent. Unknown hoaxer gets the husband out of the way! For that night, at all events, the coast is clear."

"You mean that Major Rich and Mrs. Clayton planned to spend the night together."

"You have heard of such things, haven't you?"

Linda looked amused.

"And the telegram was sent by one or the other of them?"

"It wouldn't surprise me."

"Major Rich and Mrs. Clayton were having an affair together you think?"

"Let's say I shouldn't be surprised if they were. I don't know it for a fact."

"Did Mr. Clayton suspect?"

"Arnold was an extraordinary person. He was all bottled up, if you know what I mean. I think he did know. But he was the kind of man who would never have let on. Anyone would think he was a dry stick with no feelings at all. But I'm pretty sure he wasn't like that underneath. The queer thing is that I should have been much less surprised if Arnold had stabbed Charles than the other way about. I've an idea Arnold was really an insanely jealous person."

"That is interesting."

"Though it's more likely, really, that he'd have done in Margharita. Othello - that sort of thing. Margharita, you know, has an extraordinary effect on men."

"She is a good-looking woman," said Poirot with judicious understatement.

"It was more than that. She had something. She would get men all het up - mad about her - and turn round and look at them with a sort of wide-eyed surprise that drove them barmy."

"Une femme fatale."

"That's probably the foreign name for it."

"You know her well?"

"My dear, she's one of my best friends - and I wouldn't trust her an inch."

"Ah," said Poirot and shifted the subject to Commander McLaren.

"Jock? Old faithful? He's a pet. Born to be the friend of the family. He and Arnold were really close friends. I think Arnold unbent to him more than to anyone else. And of course he was Margharita's tame cat. He'd been devoted to her for years."

"And was Mr. Clayton jealous of him, too?"

"Jealous of Jock? What an idea! Margharita's genuinely fond of Jock, but she's never given him a thought of that kind. I don't think, really, that one ever would... I don't know why... It seems a shame. He's so nice."

Poirot switched to consideration of the valet. But beyond saying vaguely that he mixed a very good side car, Linda Spence seemed

to have no ideas about Burgess, and indeed seemed barely to have noticed him.

But she was quite quick in the uptake.

"You're thinking, I suppose, that he could have killed Arnold just as easily as Charles could? It seems to me madly unlikely."

"That remark depresses me, madame. But then, it seems to me (though you will probably not agree) that it is madly unlikely - not that Major Rich should kill Arnold Clayton - but that he should kill him in just the way he did."

"Stiletto stuff? Yes, definitely not in character. More likely the blunt instrument. Or he might have strangled him, perhaps?"

Poirot sighed.

"We are back at Othello. Yes, Othello... you have given me there a little idea "

"Have I? What -" There was the sound of a latchkey and an opening door. "Oh, here's Jeremy. Do you want to talk to him, too?"

Jeremy Spence was a pleasant looking man of thirty-odd, well groomed, and almost ostentatiously discreet. Mrs. Spence said that she had better go and have a look at a casserole in the kitchen and went off, leaving the two men together.

Jeremy Spence displayed none of the engaging candor of his wife. He was clearly disliking very much being mixed up in the case at all, and his remarks were carefully noninformative. They had known the Claytons some time, Rich not so well. Had seemed a pleasant fellow. As far as he could remember, Rich had seemed absolutely as usual on the evening in question. Clayton and Rich always seemed on good terms. The whole thing seemed quite unaccountable.

Throughout the conversation Jeremy Spence was making it clear that he expected Poirot to take his departure. He was civil, but only just so.

"I am afraid," said Poirot, "that you do not like these questions?"

"Well, we've had quite a session of this with the police. I rather feel that's enough. We've told all we know or saw. Now - I'd like to forget it."

"You have my sympathy. It is most unpleasant to be mixed up in this. To be asked not only what you know or what you saw but perhaps even what you think?"

"Best not to think."

"But can one avoid it? Do you think, for instance, that Mrs. Clayton was in it, too? Did she plan the death of her husband with Rich?"

"Good lord, no." Spence sounded shocked and dismayed. "I'd no idea that there was any question of such a thing?"

"Has your wife not suggested such a possibility?"

"Oh Linda! You know what women are - always got their knife into each other. Margharita never gets much of a show from her own sex - a darned sight too attractive. But surely this theory about Rich and Margharita planning murder - that's fantastic!"

"Such things have been known. The weapon, for instance. It is the kind of weapon a woman might possess, rather than a man."

"Do you mean the police have traced it to her... they can't have! I mean -"

"I know nothing," said Poirot truthfully, and escaped hastily.

From the consternation on Spence's face, he judged that he had left that gentleman something to think about!

"You will forgive my saying, M. Poirot, that I cannot see how you can be of assistance to me in any way."

Poirot did not answer. He was looking thoughtfully at the man who had been charged with the murder of his friend Arnold Clayton.

He was looking at the firm jaw, the narrow head. A lean brown man, athletic and sinewy. Something of the greyhound about him. A man whose face gave nothing away, and who was receiving his visitor with a marked lack of cordiality.

"I quite understand that Mrs. Clayton sent you to see me with the best intentions. But quite frankly, I think she was unwise. Unwise both for her own sake and mine."

"You mean?"

Rich gave a nervous glance over his shoulder. But the attendant warder was the regulation distance away. Rich lowered his voice.

"They've got to find a motive for this ridiculous accusation. They'll try to bring that there was an - association between Mrs. Clayton and myself. That, as I know Mrs. Clayton will have told you, is quite untrue. We are friends, nothing more. But surely it is advisable that she should make no move on my behalf."

Hercule Poirot ignored the point. Instead he picked out a word.

"You said this 'ridiculous' accusation. But it is not that, you know."

"I did not kill Arnold Clayton."

"Call it then a false accusation. Say the accusation is not true. But it is not ridiculous. On the contrary, it is highly plausible. You must know that very well."

"I can only tell you that to me it seems fantastic."

"Saying that will be of very little use to you. We must think of something more useful than that."

"I am represented by solicitors. They have briefed, I understand, eminent counsel to appear for my defence. I cannot accept your use of the word 'we.'"

Unexpectedly Poirot smiled.

"Ah," he said, in his most foreign manner, "that is the flea in the ear you give me. Very well. I go. I wanted to see you. I have seen you. Already I have looked up your career. You passed high up into Sandhurst. You passed into the Staff College. And so on and so on. I have made my own judgement of you today. You are not a stupid man."

"And what has all that got to do with it?"

"Everything! It is impossible that a man of your ability should commit a murder in the way this one was committed. Very well. You are innocent. Tell me now about your manservant Burgess."

"Burgess?"

"Yes. If you didn't kill Clayton, Burgess must have done so. The conclusion seems inescapable. But why? There must be a 'why?' You are the only person who knows Burgess well enough to make a guess at it. Why, Major Rich, why?"

"I can't imagine. I simply can't see it. Oh, I've followed the same line of reasoning as you have. Yes, Burgess had opportunity - the only person who had except myself. The trouble is, I just can't believe it.

Burgess is not the sort of man you can imagine murdering anybody."

"What do your legal advisers think?"

Rich's lips set in a grim line.

"My legal advisers spend their time asking me, in a persuasive way, if it isn't true that I have suffered all my life from blackouts when I don't really know what I am doing!"

"As bad as that," said Poirot. "Well, perhaps we shall find it is Burgess who is subject to blackouts. It is always an idea. The weapon now. They showed it to you and asked you if it was yours?"

"It was not mine. I had never seen it before."

"It was not yours, no. But are you quite sure you had never seen it before?"

"No." Was there a faint hesitation. "It's a kind of ornamental toy - really - one sees things like that lying about in people's houses."

"In a woman's drawing room, perhaps. Perhaps in Mrs. Clayton's drawing room?"

"Certainly not!"

The last word came out loudly and the warder looked up.

"Très bien. Certainly not - and there is no need to shout. But somewhere, at some time, you have seen something very like it. Eh? I am right?"

"I do not think so. In some curio shop... perhaps."

"Ah, very likely." Poirot rose. "I take my leave."

"And now," said Hercule Poirot, "for Burgess. Yes, at long last, for Burgess."

He had learned something about the people in the case, from themselves and from each other. But nobody had given him any knowledge of Burgess. No clue, no hint, of what kind of a man he was.

When he saw Burgess he realized why.

The valet was waiting for him at Major Rich's flat, apprised of his arrival by a telephone call from Commander McLaren.

"I am M. Hercule Poirot."

"Yes, sir, I was expecting you."

Burgess held back the door with a deferential hand and Poirot entered. A small square entrance hall, a door on the left, open, leading into the sitting room. Burgess relieved Poirot of his hat and coat, and followed him into the sitting room.

"Ah," said Poirot looking round. "It was here, then, that it happened?"

"Yes, sir."

A quiet fellow, Burgess, white-faced, a little weedy. Awkward shoulders and elbows. A flat voice with a provincial accent that Poirot did not know. From the east coast, perhaps. Rather a nervous man, perhaps - but otherwise no definite characteristics. It was hard to associate him with positive action of any kind. Could one postulate a negative killer?

He had those pale blue, rather shifty eyes that observant people often equate with dishonesty. Yet a liar can look you in the face with a bold and confident eye.

"What is happening to the flat?" Poirot inquired.

"I'm still looking after it, sir. Major Rich arranged for my pay and to keep it nice until - until -"

The eyes shifted uncomfortably.

"Until -" agreed Poirot.

He added in a matter-of-fact manner: "I should say that Major Rich will almost certainly be committed for trial. The case will come up probably within three months."

Burgess shook his head, not in denial, simply in perplexity.

"It really doesn't seem possible," he said.

"That Major Rich should be a murderer?"

"The whole thing. That chest -"

His eyes went across the room.

"Ah, so that is the famous chest?"

It was a mammoth piece of furniture of very dark polished wood, studded with brass, with a great brass hasp and antique lock.

"A handsome affair." Poirot went over to it.

It stood against the wall near the window, next to a modern cabinet for holding records. On the other side of it was a door, half ajar. The door was partly masked by a big painted leather screen.

"That leads into Major Rich's bedroom," said Burgess.

Poirot nodded. His eyes traveled to the other side of the room. There were two stereophonic record players, each on a low table, trailing snake-like electrical cord. There were easy chairs - a big table. On the walls were a set of Japanese prints. It was a handsome room, comfortable, but not luxurious.

He looked back at William Burgess.

"The discovery," he said kindly, "must have been a great shock to you."

"Oh it was, sir. I'll never forget it." The valet rushed into speech. Words poured from him. He felt, perhaps, that by telling the story often enough, he might at last expunge it from his mind.

"I'd gone round the room, sir. Clearing up. Glasses and so on. I'd just stooped to pick up a couple of olives off the floor - and I saw it - on the rug, a rusty dark stain. No, the rug's gone now. To the cleaners. The police had done with it. Whatever's that? I thought. Saying to myself, almost in joke like: 'Really it might be blood! But where does it come from? What got spilled?' And then I saw it was from the chest - down the side, here, where there's a crack. And I said, still not thinking anything, 'Well whatever -?' And I lifted up the lid like this -" (he suited the action to the word) "and there it was the body of a man lying on his side doubled up - like he might be asleep. And that nasty foreign knife or dagger thing sticking up out of his neck. I'll never forget it - never! Not as long as I live! The shock - not expecting it, you understand..."

He breathed deeply.

"I let the lid fall and I ran out of the flat and down to the street. Looking for a policeman - and lucky, I found one - just round the corner."

Poirot regarded him reflectively. The performance, if it was a performance, was very good. He began to be afraid that it was not a performance - that it was just how things had happened.

"You did not think of awakening first Major Rich?" he asked.

"It never occurred to me, sir. What with the shock, I - I just wanted to get out of here -" he swallowed - "and - and get help."

Poirot nodded.

"Did you realize that it was Mr. Clayton?" he asked.

"I ought to have, sir, but you know, I don't believe I did. Of course, as soon as I got back with the police officer, I said 'Why, it's Mr. Clayton!' And he says 'Who's Mr. Clayton?' And I says: 'He was here last night.'"

"Ah," said Poirot, "last night. Do you remember exactly when it was Mr. Clayton arrived here?"

"Not to the minute. But as near as not a quarter to eight, I'd say."

"You knew him well?"

"He and Mrs. Clayton had been here quite frequently during the year and a half I've been employed here."

"Did he seem quite as usual?"

"I think so. A little out of breath - but I took it he'd been hurrying. He was catching a train, or so he said."

"He had a bag with him, I suppose, as he was going to Scotland?"

"No, sir. I imagine he was keeping a taxi down below."

"Was he disappointed to find that Major Rich was out?"

"Not to notice. Just said he'd scribble a note. He came in here and went over to the desk and I went back to the kitchen. I was a little behindhand with the anchovy eggs. The kitchen's at the end of the passage and you don't hear very well from there. I didn't hear him go out or the master come in - but then I wouldn't expect to."

"And the next thing -"

"Major Rich called me. He was standing in the door here. He said he'd forgotten Mrs. Spence's Turkish cigarettes. I was to hurry out and get them. So I did. I brought them back and put them on the table in here. Of course I took it that Mr. Clayton had left by then to get his train."

"And nobody else came to the flat during the time Major Rich was out and you were in the kitchen?"

"No, sir - no one."

"Can you be sure of that?"

"How could anyone, sir? They'd have had to ring the bell."

Poirot shook his head. How could anyone? The Spences and McLaren and also Mrs. Clayton could, he already knew, account for every minute of their time. McLaren had been with acquaintances at the club, the Spences had had a couple of friends in for a drink before starting. Margharita Clayton had talked to a friend on the telephone at just that period. Not that he thought of any of them as possibilities. There would have been better ways of killing Arnold Clayton than following him to a flat with a manservant there and the host returning any moment. No, he had had a last minute hope of a "mysterious stranger"! Someone out of Clayton's apparently impeccable past, recognizing him in the street, following him here. Attacking him with the stiletto, thrusting the body into the chest, and fleeing. Pure melodrama, unrelated to reason or to probabilities! In tune with romantic historical fictions - matching the Spanish chest.

He went back across the room to the chest. He raised the lid. It came up easily, noiselessly. In a faint voice, Burgess said: "It's been scrubbed out, sir, I saw to that."

Poirot bent over it. With a faint exclamation he bent lower. He explored with his fingers.

"These holes - at the back and one side - they look - they feel, as though they had been made quite recently."

"Holes, sir?" The valet bent to see. "I really couldn't say. I've never noticed them particularly."

"They are not very obvious. But they are there. What is their purpose, would you say?"

"I really wouldn't know, sir. Some animal, perhaps - I mean a beetle, something of that kind. Something that gnaws wood?"

"Some animal?" said Poirot. "I wonder."

He stepped back across the room.

"When you came in here with the cigarettes, was there anything at all about this room that looked different? Anything at all? Chairs moved, table, something of that kind?"

"It's odd your saying that, sir... Now you come to mention it, there was. That screen there that cuts off the draft from the bedroom door, it was moved over a bit more to the left."

"Like this?" Poirot moved swiftly.

"A little more still... That's right."

The screen had already masked about half of the chest. The way it was now arranged, it almost hid the chest altogether.

"Why did you think it had been moved?"

"I didn't think, sir."

(Another Miss Lemon!)

Burgess added doubtfully:

"I suppose it leaves the way into the bedroom clearer - if the ladies wanted to leave their wraps."

"Perhaps. But there might be another reason." Burgess looked inquiring. "The screen hides the chest now, and it hides the rug below the chest. If Major Rich stabbed Mr. Clayton, blood would presently start dripping through the cracks at the base of the chest. Someone might notice - as you noticed the next morning. So - the screen was moved."

"I never thought of that, sir."

"What are the lights like here, strong or dim?"

"I'll show you, sir."

Quickly, the valet drew the curtains and switched on a couple of lamps. They gave a soft mellow light, hardly strong enough even to read by. Poirot glanced up at a ceiling light.

"That wasn't on, sir. It's very little used."

Poirot looked round in the soft glow. The valet said:

"I don't believe you'd see any bloodstains, sir, it's too dim."

"I think you are right. So, then, why was the screen moved?"

Burgess shivered.

"It's awful to think of - a nice gentleman like Major Rich doing a thing like that."

"You've no doubt that he did do it? Why did he do it, Burgess?"

"Well, he'd been through the war, of course. He might have had a head wound, mightn't he? They do say as sometimes it all flares up years afterwards. They suddenly go all queer and don't know what they're doing. And they say as often as not, it's their nearest and dearest as they goes for. Do you think it could have been like that?"

Poirot gazed at him. He sighed. He turned away. "No," he said, "it was not like that."

With the air of a conjuror, a piece of crisp paper was insinuated into Burgess's hand.

"Oh thank you, sir, but really I don't -"

"You have helped me," said Poirot. "By showing me this room. By showing me what is in the room. By showing me what took place that evening. The impossible is never impossible! Remember that. I said that there were only two possibilities - I was wrong. There is a third possibility." He looked round the room again and gave a little shiver. "Pull back the curtains. Let in the light and the air. This room needs it. It needs cleansing. It will be a long time, I think, before it is purified from what afflicts it - the lingering memory of hate."

Burgess, his mouth open, handed Poirot his hat and coat. He seemed bewildered. Poirot, who enjoyed making incomprehensible statements, went down to the street with a brisk step.

When Poirot got home, he made a telephone call to Inspector Miller.

"What happened to Clayton's bag? His wife said he had packed one."

"It was at the club. He left it with the porter. Then he must have forgotten it and gone off without it."

"What was in it?"

"What you'd expect. Pyjamas, extra shirt, washing things."

"Very thorough."

"What did you expect would be in it?"

Poirot ignored that question. He said:

"About the stiletto. I suggest that you get hold of whatever cleaning woman attends Mrs. Spence's house. Find out if she ever saw anything like it lying about there."

"Mrs. Spence?" Miller whistled. "Is that the way your mind is working? The Spences were shown the stiletto. They didn't recognize it."

"Ask them again."

"Do you mean -"

"And then let me know what they say."

"I can't imagine what you think you have got hold of."

"Read Othello, Miller. Consider the characters in Othello. We've missed out one of them."

He rang off. Next he dialed Lady Chatterton. The number was engaged.

He tried again a little later. Still no success. He called for George, his valet, and instructed him to continue ringing the number until he got a reply. Lady Chatterton, he knew, was an incorrigible telephoner.

He sat down in a chair, carefully eased off his patent leather shoes, stretched his toes, and leaned back.

"I am old," said Hercule Poirot. "I tire easily..." He brightened. "But the cells - they still function. Slowly - but they function. Othello, yes. Who was it said that to me? Ah yes, Mrs. Spence. The bag... the screen... the body, lying there like a man asleep. A clever murder. Premeditated, planned... I think, enjoyed!.."

George announced to him that Lady Chatterton was on the line.

"Hercule Poirot here, madame. May I speak to your guest?"

"Why, of course! Oh M. Poirot, have you done something wonderful?"

"Not yet," said Poirot. "But possibly, it marches."

Presently Margharita's voice - quiet, gentle.

"Madame, when I asked you if you noticed anything out of place that evening at the party, you frowned, as though you remembered something - and then it escaped you. Would it have been the position of the screen that night?"

"The screen? Why, of course, yes. It was not quite in its usual place."

"Did you dance that night?"

"Part of the time."

"Who did you dance with mostly?"

"Jeremy Spence. He's a wonderful dancer. Charles is good but not spectacular. He and Linda danced, and now and then we changed. Jock McLaren doesn't dance. He got out the records and sorted them and arranged what we'd have."

"You had serious music later?"

"Yes."

There was a pause. Then Margharita said:

"M. Poirot, what is - all this? Have you - is there - hope?"

"Do you ever know, madame, what the people around you are feeling?"

Her voice, faintly surprised, said:

"I - suppose so."

"I suppose not. I think you have no idea. I think that is the tragedy of your life. But the tragedy is for other people - not for you.

"Someone today mentioned to me Othello. I asked you if your husband was jealous, and you said you thought he must be. But you said it quite lightly. You said it as Desdemona might have said it, not realizing danger. She, too, recognized jealousy, but she did not understand it, because she herself never had, and never could, experience jealousy. She was, I think, quite unaware of the force of acute physical passion. She loved her husband with the romantic fervor of hero worship, she loved her friend Cassio, quite innocently, as a close companion. I think that because of her immunity to passion, she herself drove men mad. Am I making sense to you, madame?"

There was a pause - and then Margharita's voice answered. Cool, sweet, a little bewildered:

"I don't - I don't really understand what you are saying -"

Poirot sighed.

He spoke in matter-of-fact tones. "This evening," he said, "I pay you a visit."

Inspector Miller was not an easy man to persuade. But equally Hercule Poirot was not an easy man to shake off until he had got his way. Inspector Miller grumbled, but capitulated.

"- though what Lady Chatterton's got to do with this -"

"Nothing, really. She has provided asylum for a friend, that is all."

"About those Spences - how did you know?"

"That stiletto came from there? It was a mere guess. Something Jeremy Spence said gave me the idea. I suggested that the stiletto belonged to Margharita Clayton. He showed that he knew positively that it did not." He paused. "What did they say?" he asked with some curiosity.

"Admitted that it was very like a toy dagger they'd once had. But it had been mislaid some weeks ago, and they had really forgotten about it. I suppose Rich pinched it from there."

"A man who likes to play safe, Mr. Jeremy Spence," said Hercule Poirot. He muttered to himself: "Some weeks ago. Oh yes, the planning began a long time ago."

"Eh, what's that?"

"We arrive," said Poirot. The taxi drew up at Lady Chatterton's house in Cheriton Street. Poirot paid the fare.

Margharita Clayton was waiting for them in the room upstairs. Her face hardened when she saw Miller.

"I didn't know -"

"You did not know who the friend was I proposed to bring?"

"Inspector Miller is not a friend of mine."

"That rather depends on whether you want to see justice done or not, Mrs. Clayton. Your husband was murdered -"

"And now we have to talk of who killed him," said Poirot quickly. "May we sit down, madame?"

Slowly Margharita sat down in a high-backed chair facing the two men.

"I ask," said Poirot, addressing both his hearers, "to listen to me patiently. I think I now know what happened on that fatal evening at Major Rich's flat. We started, all of us, by an assumption that was

not true - the assumption that there were only two persons who had the opportunity of putting the body in the chest - that is to say, Major Rich or William Burgess. But we were wrong - there was a third person at the flat that evening who had an equally good opportunity to do so."

"And who was that?" demanded Miller sceptically. "The lift boy?"

"No. Arnold Clayton."

"What? Concealed his own dead body? You're crazy."

"Naturally not a dead body - a live one. In simple terms, he hid himself in the chest. A thing that has often been done throughout the course of history. The dead bride in the Mistletoe Bough, Iachimo with designs on the virtue of Imogen, and so on. I thought of it as soon as I saw that there had been holes bored in the chest quite recently. Why? They were made so that there might be a sufficiency of air in the chest. Why was the screen moved from its usual position that evening? So as to hide the chest from the people in the room. So that the hidden man could lift the lid from time to time and relieve his cramp, and hear better what went on."

"But why," demanded Margharita wide-eyed with astonishment. "Why should Arnold want to hide in the chest?"

"Is it you who ask that, madame? Your husband was a jealous man. He was also an inarticulate man. 'Bottled up,' as your friend Mrs. Spence put it. His jealousy mounted. It tortured him! Were you or were you not Rich's mistress? He did not know! He had to know! So

- a 'telegram from Scotland,' the telegram that was never sent and that no one ever saw! The overnight bag is packed and conveniently forgotten at the club. He goes to the flat at a time when he has probably ascertained Rich will be out. He tells the valet he will write a note. As soon as he is left alone, he bores the holes in the chest, moves the screen, and climbs inside the chest. Tonight he will know the truth. Perhaps his wife will stay behind the others, perhaps she will go but come back again. That night the desperate, jealousy racked man will know..."

"You're not saying he stabbed himself?" Miller's voice was incredulous. "Nonsense!"

"Oh no, someone else stabbed him. Somebody who knew he was there. It was murder all right. Carefully planned, long premeditated murder. Think of the other characters in Othello. It is Iago we should have remembered. Subtle poisoning of Arnold Clayton's mind; hints, suspicions. Honest Iago, the faithful friend, the man you always believe! Arnold Clayton believed him. Arnold Clayton let his jealousy be played upon, be roused to fever pitch. Was the plan of hiding in the chest Arnold's own idea? He may have thought it was - probably he did think so! And so the scene is set. The stiletto, quietly abstracted some weeks earlier, is ready. The evening comes. The lights are low, the gramophone is playing, two couples dance, the odd man out is busy at the record cabinet, close to the Spanish chest and its masking screen. To slip behind the screen, lift the lid and strike - Audacious, but quiet easy!"

"Clayton would have cried out!"

"Not if he were drugged," said Poirot. "According to the valet, the body was 'lying like a man asleep.' Clayton was asleep, drugged by the only man who could have drugged him, the man he had had a drink with at the club."

"Jock?" Margharita's voice rose high in childlike surprise. "Jock? Not dear old Jock. Why, I've known Jock all my life! Why on earth should Jock...?"

Poirot turned on her.

"Why did two Italians fight a duel? Why did a young man shoot himself? Jock McLaren is an inarticulate man. He has resigned himself, perhaps, to being the faithful friend to you and your husband, but then comes Major Rich as well. It is too much! In the darkness of hate and desire, he plans what is well nigh the perfect murder - a double murder, for he is almost certain to be found guilty of it. And with Rich and your husband both out of the way - he thinks that at last you may turn to him. And perhaps, madame, you would have done... Eh?"

She was staring at him, wide-eyed, horror-struck. Almost unconsciously she breathed:

"Perhaps... I don't know..."

Inspector Miller spoke with sudden authority.

"This is all very well, Poirot. It's a theory, nothing more. There's not a shred of evidence, probably not a word of it is true."

"It is all true."

"But there's no evidence. There's nothing we can act on."

"You are wrong. I think that McLaren, if this is put to him, will admit it. That is, if it is made clear to him that Margharita Clayton knows..."

Poirot paused and added:

"Because, once he knows that, he has lost. The perfect murder has been in vain."

THE UNDER DOG

Lily Margrave smoothed her gloves out on her knee with a nervous gesture, and darted a glance at the occupant of the big chair opposite her.

She had heard of M. Hercule Poirot, the well-known investigator, but this was the first time she had seen him in the flesh.

The comic, almost ridiculous, aspect that he presented disturbed her conception of him. Could this funny little man, with the egg-shaped head and the enormous mustaches, really do the wonderful things that were claimed for him? His occupation at the moment

struck her as particularly childish. He was piling small blocks of colored wood one upon the other, and seemed far more interested in the result than in the story she was telling.

At her sudden silence, however, he looked sharply across at her.

"Mademoiselle, continue, I pray of you. It is not that I do not attend; I attend very carefully, I assure you."

He began once more to pile the little blocks of wood one upon the other, while the girl's voice took up the tale again. It was a gruesome tale, a tale of violence and tragedy, but the voice was so calm and unemotional, the recital was so concise that something of the savor of humanity seemed to have been left out of it.

She stopped at last.

"I hope," she said anxiously, "that I have made everything clear."

Poirot nodded his head several times in emphatic assent. Then he swept his hand across the wooden blocks, scattering them over the table, and, leaning back in his chair, his fingertips pressed together and his eyes on the ceiling, he began to recapitulate.

"Sir Reuben Astwell was murdered ten days ago. On Wednesday, the day before yesterday, his nephew, Charles Leverson, was arrested by the police. The facts against him as far as you know are - you will correct me if I am wrong, Mademoiselle.

"Sir Reuben was sitting up late writing in his own special sanctum, the Tower room. Mr Leverson came in late, letting himself in with a latch key. He was overheard quarreling with his uncle by the butler, whose room was directly below the Tower room. The quarrel ended with a sudden thud as of a chair being thrown over and a half-smothered cry.

"The butler was alarmed, and thought of getting up to see what was the matter, but as a few seconds later he heard Mr Leverson leave the room gaily whistling a tune, he thought nothing more of it. On the following morning, however, a housemaid discovered Sir Reuben dead by his desk. He had been struck down by some heavy instrument. The butler, I gather, did not at once tell the story to the police. That was natural, I think, eh, Mademoiselle?"

The sudden question made Lily Margrave start.

"I beg your pardon?" she said.

"One looks for humanity in these matters, does one not?" said the little man. "As you recited the story to me - so admirably, so concisely - you made of the actors in the drama machines - puppets. But me, I look always for human nature. I say to myself, this butler, this - what did you say his name was?"

"His name is Parsons."

"This Parsons, then, he will have the characteristics of his class, he will object very strongly to the police, he will tell them as little as possible. Above all, he will say nothing that might seem to

incriminate a member of the household. A housebreaker, a burglar, he will cling to that idea with all the strength of extreme obstinacy. Yes, the loyalties of the servant class are an interesting study."

He leaned back beaming.

"In the meantime," he went on, "everyone in the household has told his or her tale, Mr Leverson among the rest, and his tale was that he had come in late and gone up to bed without seeing his uncle."

"That is what he said."

"And no one saw reason to doubt that tale," mused Poirot, "except, of course, Parsons. Then there comes down an inspector from Scotland Yard, Inspector Miller you said, did you not? I know him, I have come across him once or twice in the past. He is what they call the sharp man, the ferret, the weasel.

"Yes I know him! And the sharp Inspector Miller, he sees what the local inspector has not seen, that Parsons is ill at ease and uncomfortable, and knows something that he has not told. Eh bien, he makes short work of Parsons. By now it has been clearly proved that no one broke into the house that night, that the murderer must be looked for inside the house and not outside. And Parsons is unhappy and frightened, and feels very relieved to have his secret knowledge drawn out of him.

"He has done his best to avoid scandal, but there are limits; and so Inspector Miller listens to Parsons' story, and asks a question or

two, and then makes some private investigations of his own. The case he builds up is very strong - very strong.

"Blood-stained fingers rested on the corner of the chest in the Tower room and the fingerprints were those of Charles Leverson. The housemaid told him she emptied a basin of blood-stained water in Mr Leverson's room the morning after the crime. He explained to her that he had cut his finger, and he had a little cut there, oh yes, but such a very little cut! The cuff of his evening shirt had been washed, but they found blood stains in the sleeve of his coat. He was hard pressed for money, and he inherited money at Sir Reuben's death. Oh, yes, a very strong case, Mademoiselle," He paused.

"And yet you come to me today."

Lily Margrave shrugged her slender shoulders.

"As I told you, M. Poirot, Lady Astwell sent me."

"You would not have come of your own accord, eh?"

The little man glanced at her shrewdly. The girl did not answer.

"You do not reply to my question."

Lily Margrave began smoothing her gloves again.

"It is rather difficult for me, M. Poirot. I have my loyalty to Lady Astwell to consider. Strictly speaking, I am only her paid

companion, but she has treated me more as though I were a daughter or a niece. She has been extraordinarily kind, and whatever her faults, I should not like to appear to criticise her actions, or - well, to prejudice you against taking up the case."

"Impossible to prejudice Hercule Poirot, cela ne se fait pas," declared the little man cheerily. I perceive that you think Lady Astwell has in her bonnet the buzzing bee. Come now, is it not so?"

"If I must say -"

"Speak, Mademoiselle."

"I think the whole thing is simply silly."

"It strikes you like that, eh?"

"I don't want to say anything against Lady Astwell -"

"I comprehend," murmured Poirot gently. "I comprehend perfectly." His eyes invited her to go on.

"She really is an awfully good sort, and frightfully kind, but she isn't - how can I put it? She isn't an educated woman. You know she was an actress when Sir Reuben married her, and she has all sorts of prejudices and superstitions. If she says a thing, it must be so, and she simply won't listen to reason. The Inspector was not very tactful with her, and it put her back up. She says it is nonsense to suspect Mr Leverson and just the sort of stupid, pigheaded mistake the police would make, and that, of course, dear Charles did not do it."

"But she has no reasons, eh?"

"None whatever."

"Ha! Is that so? Really, now."

"I told her," said Lily, "that it would be no good coming to you with a mere statement like that and nothing to go on."

"You told her that," said Poirot, "did you really? That is interesting."

His eyes swept over Lily Margrave in a quick comprehensive survey, taking in the details of her neat black tailor-made, the touch of white at her throat, an expensive crêpe de Chine blouse showing dainty tucks, and the smart little black felt hat. He saw the elegance of her, the pretty face with its slightly pointed chin, and the dark blue long-lashed eyes. Insensibly his attitude changed; he was interested now, not so much in the case as in the girl sitting opposite him.

"Lady Astwell is, I should imagine, Mademoiselle, just a trifle inclined to be unbalanced and hysterical?"

Lily Margrave nodded eagerly.

"That describes her exactly. She is, as I told you, very kind, but it is impossible to argue with her or to make her see things logically."

"Possibly she suspects someone on her own account," suggested Poirot, "someone quite absurd."

"That is exactly what she does do," cried Lily. "She has taken great dislike to Sir Reuben's secretary, poor man. She says she knows he did it, and yet it has been proved quite conclusively that poor Mr Owen Trefusis cannot possibly have done it.

"And she has no reasons?"

"Of course not; it is all intuition with her."

Lily Margrave's voice was very scornful.

"I perceive, Mademoiselle, said Poirot, smiling, "that you do not believe in intuition?"

"I think it is nonsense," replied Lily.

Poirot leaned back in his chair.

"Les femmes," he murmured, "they like to think that it is a special weapon that the good God has given them, and for every once that it shows them the truth, at least nine times it leads them astray."

"I know," said Lily, "but I have told you what Lady Astwell is like. You simply cannot argue with her."

"So you, Mademoiselle, being wise and discreet, came along to me as you were bidden, and have managed to put me au courant of the situation."

Something in the tone of his voice made the girl look up sharply.

"Of course, I know," said Lily apologetically, "how very valuable your time is."

"You are too flattering, Mademoiselle," said Poirot, "but indeed - yes, it is true, at this present time I have many cases of moment on hand."

"I was afraid that might be so," said Lily, rising. "I will tell Lady Astwell -"

But Poirot did not rise also. Instead he lay back in his chair and looked steadily up at the girl.

"You are in haste to be gone, Mademoiselle? Sit down one more little moment, I pray of you."

He saw the color flood into her face and ebb out again. She sat down once more slowly and unwillingly.

"Mademoiselle is quick and decisive," said Poirot. "She must make allowances for an old man like myself, who comes to his decisions slowly. You mistook me, Mademoiselle. I did not say that I would not go down to Lady Astwell."

"You will come, then?"

The girl's tone was flat. She did not look at Poirot, but down at the ground, and so was unaware of the keen scrutiny with which he regarded her.

"Tell Lady Astwell, Mademoiselle, that I am entirely at her service. I will be at - Mon Repos, is it not? - this afternoon."

He rose. The girl followed suit.

"I - I will tell her. It is very good of you to come, M. Poirot. I am afraid, though, you will find you have been brought on a wild goose chase."

"Very likely, but - who knows?"

He saw her out with punctilious courtesy to the door. Then he returned to the sitting-room, frowning, deep in thought. Once or twice he nodded his head, then he opened the door and called to his valet.

"My good George, prepare me, I pray of you, a little valise. I go down to the country this afternoon."

"Very good, sir," said George.

He was an extremely English-looking person. Tall, cadaverous and unemotional.

"A young girl is a very interesting phenomenon, George," said Poirot, as he dropped once more into his armchair and lighted a tiny cigarette. "Especially, you understand, when she has brains. To ask someone to do a thing and at the same time to put them against doing it, that is a delicate operation. It requires finesse. She was very adroit - oh, very adroit - but Hercule Poirot, my good George, is of a cleverness quite exceptional."

"I have heard you say so, sir."

"It is not the secretary she has in mind," mused Poirot. "Lady Astwell's accusation of him she treats with contempt. Just the same she is anxious that no one should disturb the sleeping dogs. I, my good George, I go to disturb them, I go to make the dogs fight! There is a drama there, at Mon Repos. A human drama, and it excites me. She was adroit, the little one, but not adroit enough. I wonder - I wonder what I shall find there?"

Into the dramatic pause which succeeded these words George's voice broke apologetically:

"Shall I pack dress clothes, sir?"

Poirot looked at him sadly.

"Always the concentration, the attention to your own job. You are very good for me, George."

When the 4:55 drew up at Abbots Cross station, there descended from it M. Hercule Poirot, very neatly and foppishly attired, his mustaches waxed to a stiff point. He gave up his ticket, passed through the barrier, and was accosted by a tall chauffeur.

"Mr Poirot?"

The little man beamed upon him.

"That is my name."

"This way, sir, if you please."

He held open the door of the big Rolls Royce limousine.

The house was a bare three minutes from the station.

The chauffeur descended once more and opened the door of the car, and Poirot stepped out. The butler was already holding the front door open.

Poirot gave the outside of the house a swift appraising glance before passing through the open door. It was a big, solidly built red brick mansion, with no pretensions to beauty, but with an air of solid comfort.

Poirot stepped into the hall. The butler relieved him deftly of his hat and overcoat, then murmured with that deferential undertone only to be achieved by the best servants:

"Her Ladyship is expecting you, sir."

Poirot followed the butler up the soft carpeted stairs. This, without doubt, was Parsons, a very well-trained servant, with a manner suitably devoid of emotion. At the top of the staircase he turned to the right along a corridor. He passed through a door into a little anteroom, from which two more doors led. He threw open the lefthand one of these, and announced:

"M. Poirot, m'lady."

The room was not a very large one, and it was crowded with furniture and knickknacks. A woman, dressed in black, got up from a sofa and came quickly toward Poirot.

"M. Poirot," she said with outstretched hand. Her eye ran rapidly over the dandified figure. She paused a minute, ignoring the little man's bow over her hand, and his murmured "My Lady," and then, releasing his hand after a sudden vigorous pressure, she exclaimed:

"I believe in small men! They are the clever ones."

"Inspector Miller," murmured Poirot, "is, I think, a tall man?"

"He is a bumptious idiot," said Lady Astwell. "Sit down here by me, will you, M. Poirot?"

She indicated the sofa and went on:

"Lily did her best to put me off sending for you, but I have not come to my time of life without knowing my own mind."

"A rare accomplishment," said Poirot, as he followed her to the settee.

Lady Astwell settled herself comfortably among the cushions and turned so as to face him.

"Lily is a dear girl," said Lady Astwell, "but she thinks she knows everything, and as often as not in my experience those sort of people are wrong. I am not clever, M. Poirot, I never have been, but I am right where many a more stupid person is wrong. I believe in guidance. Now do you want me to tell you who is the murderer, or do you not? A woman knows, M. Poirot."

"Does Miss Margrave know?"

"What did she tell you?" asked Lady Astwell sharply.

"She gave me the facts of the case."

"The facts? Oh, of course they are dead against Charles, but I tell you, M. Poirot, he didn't do it. I know he didn't!"

She bent upon him an earnestness that was almost disconcerting.

"You are very positive, Lady Astwell?"

"Trefusis killed my husband, M. Poirot. I am sure of it."

"Why?"

"Why should he kill him, do you mean, or why am I sure? I tell you I know it! I am funny about those things. I made up my mind at once, and I stick to it."

"Did Mr Trefusis benefit in any way by Sir Reuben's death?"

"Never left him a penny," returned Lady Astwell promptly. "Now that shows you dear Reuben couldn't have liked or trusted him."

"Had he been with Sir Reuben long, then?"

"Close on nine years."

"That is a long time," said Poirot softly, "a very long time to remain in the employment of one man. Yes, Mr Trefusis, he must have known his employer well."

Lady Astwell stared at him.

"What are you driving at? I don't see what that has to do with it."

"I was following out a little idea of my own," said Poirot. "A little idea, not interesting, perhaps, but original, on the effects of service."

Lady Astwell still stared.

"You are very clever, aren't you?" she said in rather a doubtful tone. "Everybody says so."

Hercule Poirot laughed.

"Perhaps you shall pay me that compliment, too, Madame, one of these days. But let us return to the motive. Tell me now of your household, of the people who were here in the house on the day of the tragedy."

"There was Charles, of course."

"He was your husband's nephew, I understand, not yours."

"Yes, Charles was the only son of Reuben's sister. She married a comparatively rich man, but one of those crashes came - they do in the city - and he died, and his wife, too, and Charles came to live with us. He was twenty-three at the time, and going to be a barrister. But when the trouble came, Reuben took him into his office."

"He was industrious, M. Charles?"

"I like a man who is quick on the uptake," said Lady Astwell with a nod of approval. "No, that's just the trouble, Charles was not industrious. He was always having rows with his uncle over some muddle or other that he had made. Not that poor Reuben was an easy man to get on with. Many's the time I've told him that he had forgotten what it was to be young himself. He was very different in those days, M. Poirot."

Lady Astwell heaved a sigh of reminiscence.

"Changes must come, Milady," said Poirot. "It is the law."

"Still," said Lady Astwell, "he was never really rude to me. At least if he was, he was always sorry afterward - poor dear Reuben."

"He was difficult, eh?" said Poirot.

"I could always manage him," said Lady Astwell with the air of a successful lion tamer. "But it was rather awkward sometimes when he would lose his temper with the servants. There are ways of doing it, and Reuben's was not the right way."

"How exactly did Sir Reuben leave his money, Lady Astwell?"

"Half to me - and half to Charles," replied Lady Astwell promptly. "The lawyers don't put it simply like that, but that's what it amounts to."

Poirot nodded his head.

"I see - I see," he murmured. "Now, Lady Astwell, I will demand of you that you will describe to me the household. There was yourself, and Sir Reuben's nephew, Mr Charles Leverson, and the secretary, Mr Owen Trefusis, and there was Miss Lily Margrave. Perhaps you will tell me something of that young lady."

"You want to know about Lily?"

"Yes, she has been with you long?"

"About a year. I have had a lot of secretary-companions, you know, but somehow or other they all got on my nerves. Lily was different. She was tactful and full of common sense, and besides she looks so nice. I do like to have a pretty face about me, M. Poirot. I am a funny kind of person; I take likes and dislikes straight away. As soon as I saw that girl, I said to myself: 'She'll do.'"

"Did she come to you through friends, Lady Astwell?"

"I think she answered an advertisement. Yes - that was it."

"You know something of her people, of where she comes from?"

"Her father and mother are out in India, I believe. I don't really know much about them, but you can see at a glance that Lily is a lady, can't you, M. Poirot?"

"Oh perfectly, perfectly."

"Of course," went on Lady Astwell, "I am not a lady myself. I know it, and the servants know it, but there is nothing mean-spirited about me. I can appreciate the real thing when I see it, and no one could be nicer than Lily has been to me. I look upon that girl almost as a daughter, M. Poirot, indeed I do."

Poirot's right hand strayed out and straightened one or two of the objects lying on a table near him.

"Did Sir Reuben share this feeling?" he asked.

His eyes were on the knickknacks, but doubtless he noted the pause before Lady Astwell's answer came.

"With a man it's different. Of course they - they got on very well,"

"Thank you, Madame," said Poirot. He was smiling to himself.

"And these were the only people in the house that night?" he asked, "Excepting, of course, the servants."

"Oh, there was Victor."

"Victor?"

"Yes my husband's brother, you know, and his partner."

"He lived with you?"

"No, he had just arrived on a visit. He has been out in West Africa for the past few years."

"West Africa," murmured Poirot.

He had learned that Lady Astwell could be trusted to develop a subject herself if sufficient time was given her.

"They say it's a wonderful country, but I think it's the kind of place that has a very bad effect upon a man. They drink too much and they get uncontrolled. None of the Astwells has a good temper and Victor's, since he came back from Africa, has been simply too shocking. He has frightened me once or twice."

"Did he frighten Miss Margrave, I wonder?" murmured Poirot gently.

"Lily? Oh I don't think he has seen much of Lily."

Poirot made a note or two in a diminutive notebook; then he put the pencil back in its loop and returned the notebook to his pocket.

"I thank you, Lady Astwell. I will now, if I may, interview Parsons."

"Will you have him up here?"

Lady Astwell's hand moved toward the bell. Poirot arrested the gesture quickly.

"No, no, a thousand times no. I will descend to him."

"If you think it is better -"

Lady Astwell was clearly disappointed at not being able to participate in the forthcoming scene. Poirot adopted an air of secrecy.

"It is essential," he said mysteriously, and left Lady Astwell duly impressed.

He found Parsons in the butler's pantry, polishing silver. Poirot opened the proceedings with one of his funny little bows.

"I must explain myself," he said. "I am a detective agent."

"Yes, sir," said Parsons, "we gathered as much."

His tone was respectful but aloof.

"Lady Astwell sent for me," continued Poirot. "She is not satisfied; no, she is not satisfied at all."

"I have heard her Ladyship say so on several occasions," said Parsons.

"In fact," said Poirot, "I recount to you the things you already know? Eh? Let us then not waste time on these bagatelles. Take me, if you will be so good, to your bedroom and tell me exactly what it was you heard there on the night of the murder."

The butler's room was on the ground floor, adjoining the servants hall. It had barred windows, and the strong room was in one corner of it. Parsons indicated the narrow bed.

"I had retired, sir, at 11 o'clock. Miss Margrave had gone to bed, and Lady Astwell was with Sir Reuben in the Tower room."

"Lady Astwell was with Sir Reuben? Ah, proceed."

"The Tower room, sir, is directly over this. If people are talking in it one can hear the murmur of voices but naturally not anything that is said. I must have fallen asleep about half-past eleven. It was just 12 o'clock when I was awakened by the sound of the front door being slammed to and knew Mr Leverson had returned. Presently I heard footsteps overhead, and a minute or two later Mr Leverson's voice talking to Sir Reuben.

"It was my fancy at the time, sir, that Mr Leverson was - I should not exactly like to say drunk, but inclined to be a little indiscreet and noisy. He was shouting at his uncle at the top of his voice. I caught a word or two here or there but not enough to understand what it was all about, and then there was a sharp cry and a heavy thud."

There was a pause, and Parsons repeated the last words. "A heavy thud," he said impressively.

"If I mistake not, it is a dull thud in most words of romance," murmured Poirot.

"Maybe, sir," said Parsons severely. "It was a heavy thud I heard."

"A thousand pardons," said Poirot.

"Do not mention it, sir. After the thud in the silence, I heard Mr Leverson's voice as plain as plain can be, raised high. 'My God,' he said, 'My God,' just like that, sir."

Parsons, from his first reluctance to tell the tale, had now progressed to a thorough enjoyment of it. He fancied himself mightily as a narrator. Poirot played up to him.

"Mon Dieu," he murmured. "What emotion you must have experienced!"

"Yes, indeed, sir," said Parsons, "as you say, sir. Not that I thought very much of it at the time. But it did occur to me to wonder if anything was amiss, and whether I had better go up and see. I went to turn the electric light on, and was unfortunate enough to knock over a chair.

"I opened the door, and went through the servants' hall, and opened the other door which gives on a passage. The back stairs lead up from there, and as I stood at the bottom of them, hesitating, I heard Mr Leverson's voice from up above, speaking hearty and cheery-like. 'No harm done, luckily,' he says. 'Good night,' and I heard him move off along the passage to his own room, whistling.

"Of course I went back to bed at once. Just something knocked over, that's all I thought it was. I ask you, sir, was I to think Sir Reuben was murdered, with Mr Leverson saying good night and all?"

"You are sure it was Mr Leverson's voice you heard?"

Parsons looked at the little Belgian pityingly, and Poirot saw clearly enough that, right or wrong, Parsons' mind was made up on this point.

"Is there anything further you would like to ask me, sir?"

"There is one thing." said Poirot, "do you like Mr Leverson?"

"I - I beg your pardon, sir?"

"It is a simple question. Do you like Mr Leverson?"

Parsons, from being startled at first, now seemed embarrassed.

"The general opinion in the servants' hall, sir," he said, and paused.

"By all means," said Poirot, "put it that way if it pleases you."

"The opinion is, sir, that Mr Leverson is an open-handed young gentleman, but not, if I may say so, particularly intelligent, sir."

"Ah!" said Poirot. "Do you know, Parsons, that without having seen him, that is also precisely my opinion of Mr Leverson."

"Indeed, sir."

"What is your opinion - I beg your pardon - the opinion of the servants' hall of the secretary?"

"He is a very quiet, patient gentleman, sir. Anxious to give no trouble."

"Vraiment," said Poirot.

The butler coughed.

"Her ladyship, sir," he murmured, "is apt to be a little hasty in her judgments."

"Then, in the opinion of the servants' hall, Mr Leverson committed the crime?"

"We none of us wish to think it was Mr Leverson," said Parsons. "We - well, plainly we didn't think he had it in him, sir."

"But he has a somewhat violent temper, has he not?" asked Poirot.

Parsons came nearer to him.

"If you are asking me who had the most violent temper in the house -"

Poirot held up a hand.

"Ah! But that is not the question I should ask," he said softly. "My question would be, who has the best temper?"

Parsons stared at him open-mouthed.

Poirot wasted no further time on him. With an amiable little bow - he was always amiable - he left the room and wandered out into the big square hall of Mon Repos. There he stood a minute or two in thought, then, at a slight sound that came to him, cocked his head

on one side in the manner of a perky robin, and finally, with noiseless steps, crossed to one of the doors that led out of the hall.

He stood in the doorway, looking into the room; a small room furnished as a library. At a big desk at the further end of it sat a thin, pale young man busily writing. He had a receding chin, and wore a pince-nez.

Poirot watched him for some minutes, and then he broke the silence by giving a completely artificial and theatrical cough.

"Ahem!" coughed M. Hercule Poirot.

The young man at the desk stopped writing and turned his head. He did not appear unduly startled, but an expression of perplexity gathered on his face as he eyed Poirot.

The latter came forward with a little bow.

"I have the honor of speaking to M. Trefusis, yes? Ah! my name is Poirot, Hercule Poirot. You may perhaps have heard of me."

"Oh - er - yes, certainly," said the young man.

Poirot eyed him attentively.

Owen Trefusis was about thirty-three years of age, and the detective saw at once why nobody was inclined to treat Lady Astwell's accusation seriously. Mr Owen Trefusis was a prim, proper young man, disarmingly meek, the type of man who can be,

and is, systematically bullied. One could feel quite sure that he would never display resentment.

"Lady Astwell sent for you, of course," said the secretary. "She mentioned that she was going to do so. Is there any way in which I can help you?"

His manner was polite without being effusive. Poirot accepted a chair, and murmured gently:

"Has Lady Astwell said anything to you of her beliefs and suspicions?"

Owen Trefusis smiled a little.

"As far as that goes," he said, "I believe she suspects me. It is absurd, but there it is. She has hardly spoken a civil word to me since, and she shrinks against the wall as I pass by."

His manner was perfectly natural, and there was more amusement than resentment in his voice. Poirot nodded with an air of engaging frankness.

"Between ourselves," he explained, "she said the same thing to me. I did not argue with her - me, I have made it a rule never to argue with very positive ladies. You comprehend, it is a waste of time."

"Oh, quite."

"I say, yes, Milady - oh, perfectly, Milady - precisement, Milady. They mean nothing, those words, but they soothe all the same. I make my investigations, for though it seems almost impossible that anyone except M. Leverson could have committed the crime, yet - well, the impossible has happened before now."

"I understand your position perfectly," said the secretary. "Please regard me as entirely at your service."

"Bon," said Poirot. "We understand one another. Now recount to me the events of that evening. Better start with dinner."

"Leverson was not at dinner, as you doubtless know," said the secretary. "He had a serious disagreement with his uncle, and went off to dine at the Golf Club. Sir Reuben was in a very bad temper in consequence."

"Not too amiable, ce Monsieur, eh?" hinted Poirot delicately.

Trefusis laughed.

"Oh! He was a Tartar! I haven't worked with him for nine years without knowing most of his little ways. He was an extraordinarily difficult man, M. Poirot. He would get into childish fits of rage and abuse anybody who came near him. I was used to it by that time. I got into the habit of paying absolutely no attention to anything he said. He was not bad-hearted really, but he could be most foolish and exasperating in his manner. The great thing was never to answer him back."

"Were other people as wise as you were in that respect?"

Trefusis shrugged his shoulders.

"Lady Astwell enjoyed a good row," he said. "She was not in the least afraid of Sir Reuben, and she always stood up to him and gave him as good as she got. They always made up afterward, and Sir Reuben was really devoted to her."

"Did they quarrel that last night?"

The secretary looked at him sideways, hesitated a minute, then he said:

"I believe so; what made you ask?"

"An idea, that is all."

"I don't know, of course," explained the secretary, "but things looked as though they were working up that way."

Poirot did not pursue the topic.

"Who else was at dinner?"

"Miss Margrave, Mr Victor Astwell, and myself."

"And afterward?"

"We went into the drawing-room. Sir Reuben did not accompany us. About ten minutes later he came in and hauled me over the coals for some trifling matter about a letter. I went up with him to the Tower room and set the thing straight; then Mr Victor Astwell came in and said he had something he wished to talk to his brother about, so I went downstairs and joined the two ladies.

"About a quarter of an hour later I heard Sir Reuben's bell ringing violently, and Parsons came to say I was to go up to Sir Reuben at once. As I entered the room, Mr Victor Astwell was coming out. He nearly knocked me over. Something had evidently happened to upset him. He has a very violent temper. I really believe he didn't see me."

"Did Sir Reuben make any comment on the matter?"

"He said: 'Victor is a lunatic; he will do for somebody some day when he is in one of these rages.'"

"Ah!" said Poirot. "Have you any idea what the trouble was about?"

"I couldn't say at all."

Poirot turned his head very slowly and looked at the secretary. Those last words had been uttered too hastily. He formed the conviction that Trefusis could have said more had he wished to do so. But once again Poirot did not press the question.

"And then? Proceed, I pray of you."

"I worked with Sir Reuben for about an hour and a half. At 11 o'clock Lady Astwell came in, and Sir Reuben told me I could go to bed."

"And you went?"

"Yes."

"Have you any idea how long she stayed with him?"

"None at all. Her room is on the first floor, and mine is on the second, so I would not hear her go to bed."

"I see."

Poirot nodded his head once or twice and sprang to his feet.

"And now, Monsieur, take me to the Tower room."

He followed the secretary up the broad stairs to the first landing. Here Trefusis led him along the corridor, and through a baize door at the end of it, which gave on the servants staircase and on a short passage that ended in a door. They passed through this door and found themselves on the scene of the crime.

It was a lofty room twice as high as any of the others, and was roughly about thirty feet square. Swords and assegais adorned the walls, and many native curios were arranged about on tables. At the far end, in the embrasure of the window, was a large writing table. Poirot crossed straight to it.

"It was here Sir Reuben was found?"

Trefusis nodded.

"He was struck from behind, I understand?"

Again the secretary nodded.

"The crime was committed with one of these native clubs," he explained. "A tremendously heavy thing. Death must have been practically instantaneous."

"That strengthens the conviction that the crime was not premeditated. A sharp quarrel, and a weapon snatched up almost unconsciously."

"Yes, it does not look well for poor Leverson."

"And the body was found fallen forward on the desk?"

"No, it had slipped sideways to the ground."

"Ah," said Poirot, "that is curious."

"Why curious?" asked the secretary.

"Because of this."

Poirot pointed to a round irregular stain on the polished surface of the writing table.

"That is a blood stain mon ami,"

"It may have splattered there," suggested Trefusis, "or it may have been made later, when they moved the body."

"Very possibly, very possibly," said the little man. "There is only the one door to this room?"

"There is a staircase here."

Trefusis pulled aside a velvet curtain in the corner of the room nearest the door, where a small spiral staircase led upward.

"This place was originally built by an astronomer. The stairs lead up to the tower where the telescope was fixed. Sir Reuben had the place fitted up as a bedroom, and sometimes slept there if he was working very late."

Poirot went nimbly up the steps. The circular room upstairs was plainly furnished, with a camp bed, a chair and dressing-table. Poirot satisfied himself that there was no other exit, and then came down again to where Trefusis stood waiting for him.

"Did you hear Mr Leverson come in?" he asked.

Trefusis shook his head.

"I was fast asleep by that time."

Poirot nodded. He looked slowly round the room.

"Eh bien!" he said at last. "I do not think there is any thing further here, unless - perhaps you would be so kind as to draw the curtains."

Obediently Trefusis pulled the heavy black curtains across the window at the far end of the room. Poirot switched on the light - which was masked by a big alabaster bowl hanging from the ceiling.

"There was a desk light?" he asked.

For reply the secretary clicked on a powerful green-shaded hand lamp, which stood on the writing table. Poirot switched the other light off, then on, then off again.

"C'est bien! I have finished here."

"Dinner is at half-past seven," murmured the secretary.

"I thank you, M. Trefusis, for your many amiabilities."

"Not at all."

Poirot went thoughtfully along the corridor to the room appointed for him. The immovable George was there laying out his master's things.

"My good George," he said presently, "I shall, I hope, meet at dinner a certain gentleman who begins to intrigue me greatly. A man who has come home from the tropics, George. With a tropical temper - so it is said. A man whom Parsons tries to tell me about, and whom Lily Margrave does not mention. The late Sir Reuben had a temper of his own, George. Supposing such a man to come into contact with a man whose temper was worse than his own - how do you say it? The fur would jump about, eh?"

"'Would fly' is the correct expression, sir, and it is not always the case, sir, not by a long way."

"No?"

"No, sir. There was my Aunt Jemima, sir, a most shrewish tongue she had, bullied a poor sister of hers who lived with her, something shocking she did. Nearly worried the life out of her. But if anyone came along who stood up to her, well, it was a very different thing. It was meekness she couldn't bear."

"Ha!" said Poirot, "it is suggestive - that."

George coughed apologetically.

"Is there anything I can do in any way," he inquired delicately, "to - er - assist you, sir?"

"Certainly," said Poirot promptly. "You can find out for me what color evening dress Miss Lily Margrave wore that night, and which housemaid attends her."

George received these commands with his usual stolidity.

"Very good. sir, I will have the information for you in the morning."

Poirot rose from his seat and stood gazing into the fire.

"You are very useful to me, George," he murmured. "Do you know, I shall not forget your Aunt Jemima?"

Poirot did not, after all, see Victor Astwell that night. A telephone message came from him that he was detained in London.

"He attends to the affairs of your late husband's business, eh?" asked Poirot of Lady Astwell.

"Victor is a partner," she explained. "He went out to Africa to look into some mining concessions for the firm. It was mining, wasn't it, Lily?"

"Yes, Lady Astwell."

"Gold mines, I think, or was it copper or tin? You ought to know, Lily, you were always asking Reuben questions about it all. Oh, do be careful, dear, you will have that vase over!"

"It is dreadfully hot in here with the fire," said the girl. "Shall I - shall I open the window a little?"

"If you like, dear," said Lady Astwell placidly.

Poirot watched while the girl went across to the window and opened it. She stood there a minute or two breathing in the cool night air. When she returned and sat down in her seat, Poirot said to her politely:

"So Mademoiselle is interested in mines?"

"Oh, not really," said the girl indifferently, "I listened to Sir Reuben, but I don't know anything about the subject."

"You pretended very well, then," said Lady Astwell. "Poor Reuben actually thought you had some ulterior motive in asking all those questions."

The little detective's eyes had not moved from the fire, into which he was steadily staring, but nevertheless, he did not miss the quick flush of vexation on Lily Margrave's face. Tactfully he changed the conversation. When the hour for good nights came, Poirot said to his hostess:

"May I have just two little words with you, Madame?"

Lily Margrave vanished discreetly. Lady Astwell looked inquiringly at the detective.

"You were the last person to see Sir Reuben alive that night?"

She nodded. Tears sprang into her eyes, and she hastily held a black-edged handkerchief to them.

"Ah, do not distress yourself, I beg of you do not distress yourself."

"It's all very well, M. Poirot, but I can't help it."

"I am a triple imbecile thus to vex you."

"No, no, go on. What were you going to say?"

"It was about 11 o'clock, I fancy, when you went into the Tower room, and Sir Reuben dismissed Mr Trefusis. Is that right?"

"It must have been about then."

"How long were you with him?"

"It was just a quarter to twelve when I got up to my room; I remember glancing at the clock."

"Lady Astwell, will you tell me what your conversation with your husband was about?"

Lady Astwell sank down on the sofa and broke down completely. Her sobs were vigorous.

"We - qua - qua - quarreled," she moaned.

"What about?" Poirot's voice was coaxing, almost tender.

"L - l - lots of things. It b - b - began with L - Lily. Reuben took a dislike to her - for no reason, and said he had caught her interfering with his papers. He wanted to send her away, and I said she was a dear girl, and I would not have it. And then he s - s - started shouting me down, and I wouldn't have that, so I just told him what I thought of him.

"Not that I really meant it, M. Poirot, and he said he had taken me out of the gutter to marry me, and I said - ah, but what does it all matter now? I shall never forgive myself. You know how it is, M Poirot, I always did say a good row clears the air, and how was I to know someone was going to murder him that very night? Poor old Reuben."

Poirot had listened sympathetically to all this outburst.

"I have caused you suffering," he said. "I apologize. Let us now be very business-like - very practical, very exact. You still cling to your idea that Mr Trefusis murdered your husband?"

Lady Astwell drew herself up.

"A woman's instinct, M. Poirot," she said solemnly, "never lies."

"Exactly, exactly," said Poirot. "But when did he do it?"

"When? After I left him, of course."

"You left Sir Reuben at a quarter to twelve. At five minutes to twelve Mr Leverson came in. In that ten minutes you say the secretary came down from his bedroom and murdered him?"

"It is perfectly possible."

"So many things are possible," said Poirot. "It could be done in ten minutes. Oh, yes! But was it?"

"Of course he says he was in bed and fast asleep," said Lady Astwell, "but who is to know if he was or not?"

"Nobody saw him about," Poirot reminded her.

"Everybody was in bed and fast asleep," said Lady Astwell triumphantly. "Of course nobody saw him."

"I wonder," said Poirot to himself.

A short pause.

"Eh bien, Lady Astwell, I will wish you good night."

George deposited a tray of early morning coffee by his master's bedside.

"Miss Margrave, sir, wore a dress of light green chiffon on the night in question."

"Thank you, George, you are most reliable."

"The third housemaid looks after Miss Margrave, sir. Her name is Gladys."

"Thank you, George. You are invaluable."

"Not at at all, sir."

"It is a fine morning," said Poirot, looking out of the window, "and no one is likely to be astir very early. I think, my good George, that we shall have the Tower room to ourselves if we proceed there to make a little experiment."

"You need me, sir?"

"The experiment'," said Poirot, "will not be painful."

The curtains were still drawn in the Tower room when they arrived there. George was about to pull them, when Poirot restrained him.

"We will leave the room as it is. Just turn on the desk lamp."

The valet obeyed.

"Now, my good George, sit down in that chair. Dispose yourself as though you were writing. Très bien. Me, I seize a club, I steal up behind you, so, and I hit you on the back of the head."

"Yes, sir," said George.

"Ah!" said Poirot, "but when I hit you, do not continue to write. You comprehend I cannot be exact. I cannot hit you with the same force with which the assassin hit Sir Reuben. When it comes to that point, we must do the make-believe. I hit you on the head, and you collapse, so. The arms well relaxed, the body limp. Permit me to arrange you. But no, do not flex your muscles."

He heaved a sigh of exasperation.

"You press admirably the trousers, George," he said, "but the imagination, you possess it not. Get up and let me take your place."

Poirot in his turn sat down at the writing table.

"I write," he declared, "I write busily. You steal up behind me you hit me on the head with the club. Crash! The pen slips from my fingers, I drop forward, but not very far forward, for the chair is low, and the desk is high, and, moreover, my arms support me. Have the goodness, George, to go back to the door, stand there, and tell me what you see."

"Ahem!"

"Yes, George?" encouragingly. "I see you, sir, sitting at the desk."

"Sitting at the desk?"

"It is a little difficult to see plainly, sir," explained George, "being such a long way away, sir, and the lamp being so heavily shaded. If I might turn on this light, sir?"

His hand reached out to the switch.

"Not at all," said Poirot sharply. "We shall do very well as we are. Here am I bending over the desk, there are you standing by the door. Advance now, George, advance, and put your hand on my shoulder."

George obeyed.

"Lean on me a little, George, to steady yourself on your feet, as it were. Ah! Voilà."

Hercule Poirot's limp body slid artistically sideways.

"I collapse - so!" he observed. "Yes, it is very well imagined. There is now something most important that must be done."

"Indeed, sir?" said the valet.

"Yes it is necessary that I should breakfast well."

The little man laughed heartily at his own joke.

"The stomach, George; it must not be ignored."

George maintained a disapproving silence. Poirot went downstairs chuckling happily to himself. He was pleased at the way things were shaping. After breakfast he made the acquaintance of Gladys, the third housemaid. He was very interested in what she could tell him of the crime. She was sympathetic toward Charles, although she had no doubt of his guilt.

"Poor young gentleman, sir, it seems hard, it does, him not being quite himself at the time."

"He and Miss Margrave should have got on well together," suggested Poirot, "as the only two young people in the house."

Gladys shook her head.

"Very stand-offish Miss Lily was with him. She wouldn't have no carryings-on, and she made it plain."

"He was fond of her, was he?"

"Oh, only in passing, so to speak; no harm in it, sir. Mr Victor Astwell, now he is properly gone on Miss Lily."

She giggled.

"Ah vraiment!"

Gladys giggled again.

"Sweet on her straight away he was. Miss Lily is just like a lily, isn't she, sir? So tall and such a lovely shade of gold hair."

"She should wear a green evening frock," mused Poirot. "There is a certain shade of green -"

"She has one, sir," said Gladys. "Of course, she can't wear it now, being in mourning, but she had it on the very night Sir Reuben died."

"It should be a light green, not a dark green," said Poirot.

"It is a light green, sir. If you wait a minute I'll show it to you. Miss Lily has just gone out with the dogs."

Poirot nodded. He knew that as well as Gladys did. In fact, it was only after seeing Lily safely off the premises that he had gone in search of the housemaid. Gladys hurried away, and returned a few minutes later with a green evening dress on a hanger.

"Exquis!" murmured Poirot, holding up hands of admiration. "Permit me to take it to the light a minute."

He took the dress from Gladys, turned his back on her and hurried to the window. He bent over it, then held it out at arm's length.

"It is perfect," he declared. "Perfectly ravishing. A thousand thanks for showing it to me."

"Not at ail, sir," said Gladys. "We all know that Frenchmen are interested in ladies' dresses."

"You are too kind," murmured Poirot.

He watched her hurry away again with the dress. Then he looked down at his two hands and smiled. In the right hand was a tiny pair of small nail scissors, in the left was a neatly clipped fragment of green chiffon.

"And now," he murmured, "to be heroic."

He returned to his own apartment and summoned George.

"On the dressing-table, my good George, you will perceive a gold scarf pin."

"Yes, sir."

"On the washstand is a solution of carbolic. Immerse, I pray you, the point of the pin in the carbolic."

George did as he was bid. He had long ago ceased to wonder at the vagaries of his master.

"I have done that, sir."

"Très bien! Now approach. I tender to you my first finger; insert the point of the pin in it."

"Excuse me, sir, you want me to prick you, sir?"

"But, yes, you have guessed correctly. You must draw blood, you understand, but not too much."

George took hold of his master's finger. Poirot shut his eyes and leaned back. The valet stabbed at the finger with the scarf pin, and Poirot uttered a shrill yell.

"Je vous remercie, George," he said. "What you have done is ample."

Taking a small piece of green chiffon from his pocket, he dabbed his finger with it gingerly.

"The operation has succeeded to a miracle," he remarked, gazing at the result. "You have no curiosity, George? Now, that is admirable!"

The valet had just taken a discreet look out of the window.

"Excuse me, sir," he murmured, "a gentleman has driven up in a large car."

"Ah! Ah!" said Poirot. He rose briskly to his feet. "The elusive Mr Victor Astwell. I go down to make his acquaintance."

Poirot was destined to hear Mr Victor Astwell some time before he saw him. A loud voice rang out from the hall.

"Mind what you are doing, you damned idiot! That case has got glass in it. Curse you, Parsons, get out of the way! Put it down, you fool!"

Poirot skipped nimbly down the stairs. Victor Astwell was a big man. Poirot bowed to him politely.

"Who the devil are you?" roared the big man.

Poirot bowed again.

"My name is Hercule Poirot."

"Lord!" said Victor Astwell. "So Nancy sent for you, after all, did she?"

He put a hand on Poirot's shoulder and steered him into the library.

"So you are the fellow they make such a fuss about," he remarked, looking him up and down. "Sorry for my language just now. That chauffeur of mine is a damned ass, and Parsons always does get on my nerves, blithering old idiot.

"I don't suffer fools gladly, you know," he said, half apologetically, "but by all accounts you are not a fool, eh, M. Poirot?"

He laughed breezily.

"Those who have thought so have been sadly mistaken," said Poirot placidly.

"Is that so? Well, so Nancy has carted you down here - got a bee in her bonnet about the secretary. There is nothing in that; Trefusis is as mild as milk - drinks milk, too, I believe. The fellow is a teetotaler. Rather waste of your time, isn't it?"

"If one has an opportunity to observe human nature, time is never wasted," said Poirot quietly.

"Human nature, eh?"

Victor Astwell stared at him, then he flung himself down in a chair.

"Anything I can do for you?"

"Yes, you can tell me what your quarrel with your brother was about that evening."

Victor Astwell shook his head.

"Nothing to do with the case," he said decisively.

"One can never be sure," said Poirot.

"It had nothing to do with Charles Leverson."

"Lady Astwell thinks that Charles had nothing to do with the murder."

"Oh, Nancy!"

"Parsons assumes that it was M. Charles Leverson who came in that night, but he didn't see him. Remember nobody saw him."

"You are wrong there," said Astwell. "I saw him."

"You saw him?"

"It's very simple. Reuben had been pitching into young Charles - not without good reason, I must say. Later on he tried to bully me. I told him a few home truths and, just to annoy him, I made up my mind to back the boy. I meant to see him that night, so as to tell him how the land lay. When I went up to my room I didn't go to bed. Instead, I left the door ajar and sat on a chair smoking. My room is on the second floor, M. Poirot, and Charles's room is next to it."

"Pardon my interrupting you - Mr Trefusis, he, too, sleeps on that floor?"

Astwell nodded.

"Yes, his room is just beyond mine."

"Nearer the stairs?"

"No, the other way."

A curious light came into Poirot's face, but the other didn't notice it and went on:

"As I say, I waited up for Charles. I heard the front door slam, as I thought, about five minutes to twelve, but there was no sign of Charles for about ten minutes. When he did come up the stairs I saw that it was no good tackling him that night.

He lifted his elbows significantly.

"I see," murmured Poirot.

"Poor devil couldn't walk straight," said Astwell. "He was looking pretty ghastly, too. I put it down to his condition at the time. Of course, now I realize that he had come straight from committing the crime."

Poirot interposed a quick question.

"You heard nothing from the Tower room?"

"No but you must remember that I was right at the other end of the building. The walls are thick, and I don't believe you would even hear a pistol shot fired from there."

Poirot nodded.

"I asked if he would like some help getting to bed," continued Astwell. "But he said he was all right and went into his room and banged the door. I undressed and went to bed."

Poirot was staring thoughtfully at the carpet.

"You realize, M. Astwell," he said at last, "that your evidence is very important?"

"I suppose so, at least - what do you mean?"

"Your evidence that ten minutes elapsed between the slamming of the front door and Leverson's appearance upstairs. He himself says, so I understand, that he came into the house and went straight up to bed. But there is more than that. Lady Astwell's accusation of the secretary is fantastic, I admit, yet up to now it has not been proved impossible. But your evidence creates an alibi."

"How is that?"

"Lady Astwell says that she left her husband at a quarter to twelve, while the secretary had gone to bed at eleven o'clock. The only time he could have committed the crime was between a quarter to twelve and Charles Leverson's return. Now, if, as you say, you sat with your door open, he could not have come down from his room without your seeing him."

"That is so," agreed the other.

"There is no other staircase?"

"No, to get down to the Tower room he would have had to pass my door, and he didn't, I am quite sure of that. And, anyway, M. Poirot, as I said just now, the man is as meek as a parson, I assure you."

"But yes, but yes," said Poirot soothingly, "I understand all that." He paused. "And you will not tell me the subject of your quarrel with Sir Reuben?"

The other's face turned a dark red.

"You'll get nothing out of me."

Poirot looked at the ceiling.

"I can always be discreet," he murmured, "where a lady is concerned."

Victor Astwell sprang to his feet.

"Damn you, how did you - what do you mean?"

"I was thinking," said Poirot, "of Miss Lily Margrave."

Victor Astwell stood undecided for a minute or two then his color subsided, and he sat down again.

"You are too clever for me, M. Poirot. Yes, it was Lily we quarreled about. Reuben had his knife into her; he had ferreted out something or other about the girl - false references, something of that kind. I don't believe a word of it myself.

"And then he went further than he had any right to go, talked about her stealing down at night and getting out of the house to meet some fellow or other. My God! I gave it to him; I told him that better

men than he had been killed for saying less. That shut him up. Reuben was inclined to be a bit afraid of me when I got going."

"I hardly wonder at it," murmured Poirot politely.

"I think a lot of Lily Margrave," said Victor in another tone. "A nice girl through and through."

Poirot did not answer. He was staring in front of him, seemingly lost in abstraction. He came out of his brown study with a jerk.

"I must, I think, promenade myself a little. There is a hotel here, yes?"

"Two," said Victor Astwell, "the Golf Hotel up by the links and the Mitre down by the station."

"I thank you," said Poirot. "Yes, certainly I must promenade myself a little."

The Golf Hotel as befits its name, stands on the golf links almost adjoining the club house. It was to this hostelry that Poirot repaired first in the course of that "promenade" which he had advertised himself as being about to take. The little man had his own way of doing things. Three minutes after he had entered the Golf Hotel he was in private consultation with Miss Langdon, the manageress.

"I regret to incommode you in any way, Mademoiselle," said Poirot, "but you see I am a detective."

Simplicity always appealed to him. In this case the method proved efficacious at once.

"A detective!" exclaimed Miss Langdon, looking at him doubtfully.

"Not from Scotland Yard," Poirot assured her. "In fact - you may have noticed it? I am not an Englishman. No, I make the private inquiries into the death of Sir Reuben Astwell."

"You don't say, now!" Miss Langdon goggled at him expectantly.

"Precisely," said Poirot, beaming. "Only to someone of discretion like yourself would I reveal the fact. I think, Mademoiselle, you may be able to aid me. Can you tell me of any gentleman staying here on the night of the murder who was absent from the hotel that evening and returned to it about twelve or half-past?"

Miss Langdon's eyes opened wider than ever.

"You don't think -?" she breathed.

"That yon had the murderer here? No, but I have reason to believe that a guest staying here promenaded himself in the direction of Mon Repos that night, and if so he may have seen something which, though conveying no meaning to him, might be very useful to me."

The manageress nodded her head sapiently, with an air of one thoroughly well up in the annals of detective law.

"I understand perfectly. Now, let me see; who did we have staying here?"

She frowned, evidently running over the names in her mind, and helping her memory by occasionally checking them off on her fingertips.

"Captain Swann, Mr Elkins, Major Blunt, old Mr Benson. No, really, sir, I don't believe anyone went out that evening."

"You would have noticed if they had done so, eh?"

"Oh, yes, sir, it is not very usual, you see. I mean gentlemen go out to dinner and all that, but they don't go out after dinner, because - well, there is nowhere to go to, is there?"

The attractions of Abbots Cross were golf and nothing but golf.

"That is so," agreed Poirot. "Then, as far as you remember, Mademoiselle, nobody from here was out that night?"

"Captain England and his wife were out to dinner."

Poirot shook his head.

"That is not the kind of thing I mean. I will try the other hotel; the Mitre, is it not?"

"Oh, the Mitre," said Miss Langdon. "Of course, anyone might have gone out walking from there."

The disparagement of her tone, though vague, was evident, and Poirot beat a tactful retreat.

Ten minutes later he was repeating the scene this time with Miss Cole, the brusque manageress of the Mitre, a less pretentious hotel with lower prices, situated close to the station.

"There was one gentleman out late that night, came in about half-past twelve, as far as I can remember. Quite a habit of his it was, to go out for a walk at that time of the evening. He had done it once or twice before. Let me see now, what was his name? Just for the moment I can't remember it."

She pulled a large ledger toward her and began turning over the pages.

"Nineteenth, twentieth, twenty-first, twenty-second. Ah, here we are. Naylor, Captain Humphrey Naylor."

"He had stayed here before? You know him well?"

"Once before," said Miss Cole, "about a fortnight earlier. He went out then in the evening, I remember."

"He came to play golf, eh?"

"I suppose so," said Miss Cole; "that's what most of the gentlemen come for."

"Very true," said Poirot. "Well, Mademoiselle, I thank you infinitely, and I wish you good day."

He went back to Mon Repos with a very thoughtful face. Once or twice he drew something from his pocket and looked at it.

"It must be done," he murmured to himself, "and soon, as soon as I can make the opportunity."

His first proceeding on re-entering the house was to ask Parsons where Miss Margrave might be found. He was told that she was in the small study dealing with Lady Astwell's correspondence and the information seemed to afford Poirot satisfaction.

He found the little study without difficulty. Lily Margrave was seated at a desk by the window, writing. But for her the room was empty. Poirot carefully shut the door behind him and came toward the girl.

"I may have a little minute of your time, Mademoiselle, you will be so kind?"

"Certainly."

Lily Margrave put the papers aside and turned toward him.

"What can I do for you?"

"On the evening of the tragedy, Mademoiselle, I understand that when Lady Astwell went to her husband you went straight up to bed. Is that so?"

Lily Margrave nodded.

"You did not come down again, by any chance?"

The girl shook her head.

"I think you said, Mademoiselle, that you had not at any time that evening been in the Tower room?"

"I don't remember saying so, but as a matter of fact that is quite true. I was not in the Tower room that evening."

Poirot raised his eyebrows.

"Curious," he murmured.

"What do you mean?"

"Very curious," murmured Hercule Poirot again. "How do you account, then, for this?"

He drew from his pocket a little scrap of stained green chiffon and held it up for the girl's inspection.

Her expression did not change, but he felt rather than heard the sharp intake of breath.

"I don't understand, M. Poirot."

"You wore, I understand, a green chiffon dress that evening, Mademoiselle. This -" he tapped the scrap in his fingers - "was torn from it."

"And you found it in the Tower room?" asked the girl sharply. "Whereabouts?"

Hercule Poirot looked at the ceiling.

"For the moment shall we just say - in the Tower room?"

For the first time, a look of fear sprang into the girl's eyes. She began to speak, then checked herself. Poirot watched her small white hands clenching themselves on the edge of the desk.

"I wonder if I did go into the Tower room that evening?" she mused. "Before dinner, I mean. I don't think so. I am almost sure I didn t. If that scrap has been in the Tower room all this time, it seems to me a very extraordinary thing the police did not find it right away."

"The police," said the little man, "do not think of things that Hercule Poirot thinks of."

"I may have run in there for a minute just before dinner," mused Lily Margrave, "or it may have been the night before. I wore the same dress then. Yes, I am almost sure it was the night before."

"I think not," said Poirot evenly.

"Why?"

He only shook his head slowly from side to side.

"What do you mean?" whispered the girl.

She was leaning forward, staring at him, all the color ebbing out of her face.

"You do not notice, Mademoiselle, that this fragment is stained? There is no doubt about it, that stain is human blood."

"You mean -?"

"I mean, Mademoiselle, that you were in the Tower room after the crime was committed, not before. I think you will do well to tell me the whole truth, lest worse should befall you."

He stood up now, a stern little figure of a man, his forefinger pointed accusingly at the girl.

"How did you find out?" gasped Lily.

"No matter, Mademoiselle. I tell you Hercule Poirot knows. I know all about Captain Humphrey Naylor, and that you went down to meet him that night."

Lily suddenly put her head down on her arms and burst into tears. Immediately Poirot relinquished his accusing attitude.

"There, there, my little one," he said, patting the girl on the shoulder. "Do not distress yourself. Impossible to deceive Hercule Poirot; once realize that and all your troubles will be at an end. And now you will tell me the whole story, will you not? You will tell old Papa Poirot?"

"It is not what you think, it isn't, indeed. Humphrey - my brother - never touched a hair of his head."

"Your brother, eh?" said Poirot. "So that is how the land lies. Well, if you wish to save him from suspicion, you must tell me the whole story now, without reservations."

Lily sat up again, pushing back the hair from her forehead. After a minute or two, she began to speak in a low, clear voice.

"I will tell you the truth, M. Poirot. I can see now that it would be absurd to do anything else. My real name is Lily Naylor, and Humphrey is my only brother. Some years ago, when he was out in Africa, he discovered a gold mine, or rather, I should say, discovered the presence of gold. I can't tell you this part of it properly, because I don't understand the technical details, but what it amounted to was this:

"The thing seemed likely to be a very big undertaking, and Humphrey came home with letters to Sir Reuben Astwell in the hopes of getting him interested in the matter. I don't understand the

rights of it even now, but I gather that Sir Reuben sent out an expert to report, and that he subsequently told my brother that the expert's report was unfavorable and that he, Humphrey, had made a great mistake. My brother went back to Africa on an expedition into the interior and was lost sight of. It was assumed that he and the expedition had perished.

"It was soon after that that a company was formed to exploit the Mpala Cold Fields. When my brother got back to England he at once jumped to the conclusion that these gold fields were identical with those he had discovered. Sir Reuben Astwell had apparently nothing to do with this company, and they had seemingly discovered the place on their own. But my brother was not satisfied; he was convinced that Sir Reuben had deliberately swindled him.

"He became more and more violent and unhappy about the matter. We two are alone in the world, M. Poirot, and as it was necessary then for me to go out and earn my own living, I conceived the idea of taking a post in this household and trying to find out if any connection existed between Sir Reuben and the Mpala Gold Fields. For obvious reasons I concealed my real name, and I'll admit frankly that I used a forged reference.

"There were many applicants for the post, most of them with better qualifications than mine, so - well, M. Poirot, I wrote a beautiful letter from the Duchess of Perthshire who I knew had just gone to America. I thought a Duchess would have a great effect upon Lady Astwell, and I was quite right. She engaged me on the spot.

"Since then I have been that hateful thing, a spy, and until lately with no success. Sir Reuben is not a man to give away his business secrets, but when Victor Astwell came back from Africa he was less guarded in his talk, and I began to believe that, after all, Humphrey had not been mistaken. My brother came down here about a fortnight before the murder, and I crept out of the house to meet him secretly at night. I told him the things Victor Astwell had said, and he became very excited and assured me I was definitely on the right track.

"But after that things began to go wrong; someone must have seen me stealing out of the house and have reported the matter to Sir Reuben. He became suspicious and hunted up my references, and soon discovered the fact that they were forged. The crisis came on the day of the murder. I think he thought I was after his wife's jewels. Whatever his suspicions were, he had no intention to allow me to remain any longer at Mon Repos, though he agreed not to prosecute me on account of the references. Lady Astwell took my part throughout and stood up valiantly to Sir Reuben."

She paused. Poirot's face was very grave.

"And now, Mademoiselle," he said, "we come to the night of the murder."

Lily swallowed hard and nodded her head.

"To begin with, M, Poirot, I must tell you that my brother had come down again, and that I had arranged to creep out and meet him once more. I went up to my room, as I have said, but I did not go to

bed. Instead, I waited till I thought everyone was asleep, and then stole downstairs again and out by the side door. I met Humphrey and acquainted him in a few hurried words what had occurred. I told him that I believed the papers he wanted were in Sir Reuben's safe in the Tower room, and we agreed as a last desperate adventure to try and get hold of them that night.

"I was to go in first and see that the way was clear. I heard the church clock strike twelve as I went in by the side door. I was halfway up the stairs leading to the Tower room, when I heard a thud of something falling, and a voice cried out, 'My God!' A minute or two afterward the door of the Tower room opened, and Charles Leverson came out. I could see his face quite clearly in the moonlight, but I was crouching some way below him on the stairs where it was dark, and he did not see me at all.

"He stood there a moment swaying on his feet and looking ghastly. He seemed to be listening; then with an effort he seemed to pull himself together and, opening the door into the Tower room, called out something about there being no harm done. His voice was quite jaunty and debonair, but his face gave the lie to it. He waited a minute more, and then slowly went on upstairs and out of sight.

"When he had gone I waited a minute or two and then crept to the Tower room door, I had a feeling that something tragic had happened. The main light was out, but the desk lamp was on, and by its light I saw Sir Reuben lying on the floor by the desk. I don't know how I managed it, but I nerved myself at last to go over and kneel down by him. I saw at once that he was dead, struck down from behind, and also that he couldn't have been dead long; I

touched his hand and it was still quite warm. It was just horrible, M. Poirot. Horrible!"

She shuddered again at the remembrance.

"And then?" said Poirot, looking at her keenly.

Lily Margrave nodded.

"Yes, M. Poirot, I know what you are thinking. Why didn't I give the alarm and raise the house? I should have done so, I know, but it came over me in a flash, as I knelt there, that my quarrel with Sir Reuben, my stealing out to meet Humphrey, the fact that I was being sent away on the morrow, made a fatal sequence. They would say that I had let Humphrey in, and that Humphrey had killed Sir Reuben out of revenge. If I said that I had seen Charles Leverson leaving the room, no one would believe me.

"It was terrible, M. Poirot! I knelt there, and thought and thought, and the more I thought the more my nerve failed me. Presently I noticed Sir Reuben's keys which had dropped from his pocket as he fell. Among them was the key of the safe, the combination word I already knew, since Lady Astwell had mentioned it once in my hearing. I went over to that safe, M. Poirot, unlocked it and rummaged through the papers I found there.

"In the end I found what I was looking for. Humphrey had been perfectly right. Sir Reuben was behind the Mpala Gold Fields, and he had deliberately swindled Humphrey. That made it all the worse. It gave a perfectly definite motive for Humphrey having comitted

the crime. I put the papers back in the safe, left the key in the door of it, and went straight upstairs to my room. In the morning I pretended to be surprised and horror-stricken, like everyone else, when the housemaid discovered the body."

She stopped and looked piteously across at Poirot.

"You do believe me, M. Poirot. Oh, do say you believe me!"

"I believe you, Mademoiselle," said Poirot; "you have explained many things that puzzled me. Your absolute certainty, for one thing, that Charles Leverson had committed the crime and at the same time your persistent efforts to keep me from coming down here."

Lily nodded.

"I was afraid of you," she admitted frankly. "Lady Astwell could not know, as I did, that Charles was guilty, and I couldn't say anything. I hoped against hope that you would refuse to take the case."

"But for that obvious anxiety on your part, I might have done so," said Poirot dryly.

Lily looked at him swiftly, her lips trembled a little.

"And now, M. Poirot, what - what are you going to do?"

"As far as you are concerned, Mademoiselle, nothing. I believe your story, and I accept it. The next step is to go to London and see Inspector Miller."

"And then?" asked Lily.

"And then," said Poirot, "we shall see."

Outside the door of the study he looked once more at the little square of stained green chiffon which he held in his hand.

"Amazing," he murmured to himself complacently, "the ingenuity of Hercule Poirot."

Detective Inspector Miller was not particularly fond of M. Hercule Poirot. He did not belong to that small band of inspectors at the Yard who welcomed the little Belgian's cooperation. He was wont to say that Hercule Poirot was much overrated. In this case he felt pretty sure of himself, and greeted Poirot with high good humor in consequence.

"Acting for Lady Astwell, are you? Well, you have taken up a mare's nest in that case."

"There is, then, no possible doubt about the matter?"

Miller winked. "Never was a clearer case, short of catching a murderer absolutely red-handed."

"M. Leverson has made a statement, I understand?"

"He had better have kept his mouth shut," said the detective. "He repeats over and over again that he went straight up to his room and never went near his uncle. That's a fool story on the face of it."

"It is certainly against the weight of evidence," murmured Poirot. "How does he strike you, this young M. Leverson?"

"Darned young fool."

"A weak character, eh?"

The inspector nodded.

"One would hardly think a young man of that type would have the - how do you say it - the bowels to commit such a crime."

"On the face of it, no," agreed the inspector. "But, bless you, I have come across the same thing many times. Get a weak, dissipated young man into a corner, fill him up with a drop too much to drink, and for a limited amount of time you can turn him into a fire-eater. A weak man in a corner is more dangerous than a strong man."

"That is true, yes; that is true what you say."

Miller unbent a little further.

"Of course, it is all right for you, M. Poirot," he said. "You get your fees just the same, and naturally you have to make a pretense of examining the evidence to satisfy her Ladyship. I can understand all that."

"You understand such interesting things," murmured Poirot, and took his leave.

His next call was upon the solicitor representing Charles Leverson. Mr Mayhew was a thin, dry, cautious gentleman. He received Poirot with reserve. Poirot, however, had his own ways of inducing confidence. In ten minutes' time the two were talking together amicably.

"You will understand," said Poirot, "I am acting in this case solely on behalf of M. Leverson. That is Lady Astwell's wish. She is convinced that he is not guilty."

"Yes, yes, quite so," said Mr Mayhew without enthusiasm. Poirot's eyes twinkled. "You do not perhaps attach much importance to the opinions, of Lady Astwell?" he suggested.

"She might be just as sure of his guilt tomorrow," said the lawyer dryly.

"Her intuitions are not evidence certainly," agreed Poirot, "and on the face of it the case looks very black against this poor young man."

"It is a pity he said what he did to the police," said the lawyer; "it will be no good his sticking to that story."

"Has he stuck to it with you?" inquired Poirot.

Mayhew nodded. "It never varies an iota. He repeats it like a parrot."

"And that is what destroys your faith in him," mused the other. "Ah, don't deny it," he added quickly, holding up an arresting hand. "I see it only too plainly. In your heart you believe him guilty. But listen now to me, to me, Hercule Poirot. I present to you a case.

"This young man comes home, he has drunk the cocktail, the cocktail, and again the cocktail, also without doubt the English whisky and soda many times. He is full of, what you call it? the courage Dutch, and in that mood he lets himself into the house with his latchkey, and he goes with unsteady steps up to the Tower room. He looks in at the door and sees in the dim light his uncle, apparently bending over the desk.

"M. Leverson is full, as we have said, of the courage Dutch. He lets himself go, he tells his uncle just what he thinks of him. He defies him, he insults him, and the more his uncle does not answer back, the more he is encouraged to go on, to repeat himself, to say the same thing over and over again, and each time more loudly. But at last the continued silence of his uncle awakens an apprehension. He goes nearer to him, he lays his hand on his uncle's shoulder, and his uncle's figure crumples under his touch and sinks in a heap to the ground.

"He is sobered, then, this M. Leverson. The chair falls with a crash, and he bends over Sir Reuben. He realizes what has happened, he looks at his hand covered with something warm and red. He is in a panic then, he would give anything on earth to recall the cry which

has just sprung from his lips, echoing through the house. Mechanically he picks up the chair, then he hastens out through the door and listens. He fancies he hears a sound, and immediately, automatically, he pretends to be speaking to his uncle through the open door.

"The sound is not repeated. He is convinced he has been mistaken in thinking he heard one. Now all is silence, he creeps up to his room, and at once it occurs to him how much better it will be if he pretends never to have been near his uncle that night. So he tells his story. Parsons at that time, remember, has said nothing of what he heard. When he does do so, it is too late for M. Leverson to change. He is stupid, and he is obstinate, he sticks to his story. Tell me, Monsieur, is that not possible?"

"Yes," said the lawyer, "I suppose in the way you put it that it is possible."

Poirot rose to his feet.

"You have the privilege of seeing M. Leverson," he said. "Put to him the story I have told you, and ask him if it is not true."

Outside the lawyer's office, Poirot hailed a taxi.

"348 Harley Street," he murmured to the driver.

Poirot's departure for London had taken Lady Astwell by surprise, for the little man had not made any mention of what he proposed

doing. On his return, after an absence of twenty-four hours, he was informed by Parsons that Lady Astwell would like to see him as soon as possible. Poirot found the lady in her own boudoir. She was lying down on the divan, her head propped up by cushions, and she looked startlingly ill and haggard; far more so than she had done on the day Poirot arrived.

"So you have come back, M. Poirot?"

"I have returned, milady."

"You went to London?"

Poirot nodded.

"You didn't tell me you were going," said Lady Astwell sharply.

"A thousand apologies, milady, I am in error, I should have done so. La prochaine fois -"

"You will do exactly the same," interrupted Lady Astwell with a shrewd touch of humor. "Do things first and tell people afterward, that is your motto right enough."

"Perhaps it has also been milady's motto?" His eyes twinkled.

"Now and then, perhaps," admitted the other. "What did you go up to London for, M. Poirot? You can tell me now, I suppose?"

"I had an interview with the good Inspector Miller, and also with the excellent Mr Mayhew."

Lady Astwell's eyes searched his face.

"And you think, now -?" she said slowly.

Poirot's eyes were fixed on her steadily.

"That there is a possibility of Charles Leverson's innocence," he said gravely.

"Ah!" Lady Astwell moved suddenly, sending two cushions rolling to the ground. "I was right, then, I was right!"

"I said a possibility, Madame, that is all."

Something in his tone seemed to strike her. She raised herself on one elbow and regarded him piercingly.

"Can I do anything?" she asked.

"Yes," he nodded his head, "you can tell me, Lady Astwell, why you suspect Owen Trefusis."

"I have told you I know - that's all."

"Unfortunately that is not enough," said Poirot dryly. "Cast your mind back to the fatal evening, milady. Remember each detail, each tiny happening. What did you notice or observe about the

secretary? I, Hercule Poirot, tell you there must have been something."

Lady Astwell shook her head.

"I hardly noticed him at all that evening," she said, "and I certainly was not thinking of him."

"Your mind was taken up by something else?"

"Yes."

"With your husband's animus against Miss Lily Margrave?"

"That's right," said Lady Astwell, nodding her head; "you seem to know all about it, M. Poirot."

"Me, I know everything," declared the little man with an absurdly grandiose air.

"I am fond of Lily, M. Poirot; you have seen that for yourself. Reuben began kicking up a rumpus about some reference or other of hers. Mind you, I don't say she hadn't cheated about it. She had. But, bless you, I have done many worse things than that in the old days. You have got to be up to all sorts of tricks to get around theatrical managers. There is nothing I wouldn't have written, or said, or done, in my time.

"Lily wanted this job, and she put in a lot of slick work that was not quite - well, quite the thing, you know. Men are so stupid about that

sort of thing; Lily really might have been a bank clerk absconding with millions for the fuss he made about it. I was terribly worried all the evening, because, although I could usually get round Reuben in the end, he was terribly pigheaded at times, poor darling. So of course I hadn't time to go noticing secretaries, not that one does notice M. Trefusis much, anyway. He is just there and that's all there is to it."

"I have noticed that fact about M. Trefusis," said Poirot. "His is not a personality that stands forth, that shines, that hits you cr-r-rack."

"No," said Lady Astwell, "he is not like Victor."

"M. Victor Astwell is, I should say, explosive."

"That is a splendid word for him," said Lady Astwell. "He explodes all over the house, like one of those thingamy-jig firework things."

"A somewhat quick temper, I should imagine?" suggested Poirot.

"Oh, he's a perfect devil when roused," said Lady Astwell, "but bless you, I'm not afraid of him. All bark and no bite to Victor."

Poirot looked at the ceiling.

"And you can tell me nothing about the secretary that evening?" he murmured gently.

"I tell you, M. Poirot, I know. It's intuition. A woman's intuition -"

"Will not hang a man," said Poirot, "and what is more to the point, it will not save a man from being hanged. Lady Astwell, if you sincerely believe that M. Leverson is innocent, and that your suspicions of the secretary are well-founded, will you consent to a little experiment?"

"What kind of an experiment?" demanded Lady Astwell suspiciously.

"Will you permit yourself to be put into a condition of hypnosis?"

"Whatever for?"

Poirot leaned forward.

"If I were to tell you, Madame, that your intuition is based on certain facts recorded subconsciously, you would probably be skeptical. I will only say, then, that this experiment I propose may be of great importance to that unfortunate young man, Charles Leverson. You will not refuse?"

"Who is going to put me into a trance?" demanded Lady Astwell suspiciously. "You?"

"A friend of mine, Lady Astwell, arrives, if I mistake not, at this very minute. I hear the wheels of the car outside."

"Who is he?"

"A Doctor Cazalet of Harley Street."

"Is he - all right?" asked Lady Astwell apprehensively.

"He is not a quack, Madame, if that is what you mean. You can trust yourself in his hands quite safely."

"Well," said Lady Astwell with a sigh, "I think it is all bunkum, but you can try if you like. Nobody is going to say that I stood in your way."

"A thousand thanks, milady."

Poirot hurried from the room. In a few minutes he returned ushering in a cheerful, round-faced little man, with spectacles, who was very upsetting to Lady Astwell's conception of what a hypnotist should look like. Poirot introduced them.

"Well," said Lady Astwell good-humoredly, "how do we start this tomfoolery?"

"Quite simple, Lady Astwell, quite simple," said the little doctor. "Just lean back, so - that's right, that's right. No need to be uneasy."

"I am not in the least uneasy," said Lady Astwell. "I should like to see anyone hypnotizing me against my will."

Doctor Cazalet smiled broadly.

"Yes, but if you consent, it won't be against your will, will it?" he said cheerfully. "That's right. Turn off that other light, will you, M. Poirot? Just let yourself go to sleep, Lady Astwell."

He shifted his position a little.

"It's getting late. You are sleepy - very sleepy. Your eyelids are heavy, they are closing - closing - closing. Soon you will be asleep..."

His voice droned on, low, soothing, and monotonous. Presently he leaned forward and gently lifted Lady Astwell's right eyelid. Then he turned to Poirot, nodding in a satisfied manner.

"That's all right," he said in a low voice. "Shall I go ahead?"

"If you please."

The doctor spoke out sharply and authoritatively: "You are asleep, Lady Astwell, but you hear me, and you can answer my questions."

Without stirring or raising an eyelid, the motionless figure on the sofa replied in a low, monotonous voice:

"I hear you. I can answer your questions."

"Lady Astwell, I want you to go back to the evening on which your husband was murdered. You remember that evening?"

"Yes."

"You are at the dinner table. Describe to me what you saw and felt."

The prone figure stirred a little restlessly.

"I am in great distress. I am worried about Lily."

"We know that; tell us what you saw."

"Victor is eating all the salted almonds; he is greedy. Tomorrow I shall tell Parsons not to put the dish on that side of the table."

"Go on. Lady Astwell."

"Reuben is in a bad humor tonight. I don't think it is altogether about Lily. It is something to do with business. Victor looks at him in a queer way."

"Tell us about Mr Trefusis, Lady Astwell."

"His left shirt cuff is frayed. He puts a lot of grease on his hair. I wish men didn't, it ruins the covers in the drawing-room."

Cazalet looked at Poirot; the other made a motion with his head.

"It is after dinner, Lady Astwell, you are having coffee. Describe the scene to me."

"The coffee is good tonight. It varies. Cook is very unreliable over her coffee. Lily keeps looking out of the window, I don't know why.

Now, Reuben comes into the room; he is in one of his worst moods tonight, and bursts out with a perfect flood of abuse to poor Mr Trefusis. Mr Trefusis has his hand round the paper-knife, the big one with the sharp blade like a knife. How hard he is grasping it; his knuckles are quite white. Look, he has dug it so hard in the table that the point snaps. He holds it just as you would hold a dagger you were going to stick into someone. There, they have gone out together now. Lily has got her green evening dress on; she looks so pretty in green, just like a lily. I must have the covers cleaned next week."

"Just a minute, Lady Astwell."

The doctor leaned across to Poirot.

"We have got it, I think," he murmured; "that action with the paper-knife, that's what convinced her that the secretary did the thing."

"Let us go on to the Tower room now."

The doctor nodded, and began once more to question Lady Astwell in his high, decisive voice.

"It is later in the evening; you are in the Tower room with your husband. You and he have had a terrible scene together, have you not?"

Again the figure stirred uneasily.

"Yes - terrible - terrible. We said dreadful things - both of us."

"Never mind that now. You can see the room clearly, the curtains were drawn, the lights were on."

"Not the middle light, only the desk light."

"You are leaving your husband now, you are saying good night to him."

"No, I was too angry."

"It is the last time you will see him; very soon he will be murdered. Do you know who murdered him, Lady Astwell?"

"Yes. Mr Trefusis."

"Why do you say that?"

"Because of the bulge - the bulge in the curtain."

"There was a bulge in the curtain?"

"Yes."

"You saw it?"

"Yes. I almost touched it."

"Was there a man concealed there - Mr Trefusis?"

"Yes."

"How do you know?"

For the first time the monotonous answering voice hesitated and lost confidence.

"I - I - because of the paper-knife."

Poirot and the doctor again interchanged swift glances.

"I don't understand you, Lady Astwell. There was a bulge in the curtain, you say? Someone concealed there? You didn't see that person?"

"No."

"You thought it was Mr Trefusis because of the way he held the paper-knife earlier?"

"Yes."

"But Mr Trefusis had gone upstairs, had he not?"

"Yes - yes, that's right, he had gone upstairs."

"So he couldn't have been behind the curtain in the window?"

"No - no, of course not, he wasn't there."

"He had said good night to your husband some time before, hadn't he?"

"Yes."

"And you didn't see him again?"

"No."

She was stirring now, throwing herself about, moaning faintly.

"She is coming out," said the doctor. "Well, I think we have got all we can, eh?"

Poirot nodded. The doctor leaned over Lady Astwell.

"You are waking," he murmured softly. "You are waking now. In another minute you will open your eyes."

The two men waited, and presently Lady Astwell sat upright and stared at them both.

"Have I been having a nap?"

"That's it, Lady Astwell, just a little sleep," said the doctor.

She looked at him.

"Some of your hocus-pocus, eh?"

"You don't feel any the worse, I hope?" he asked.

Lady Astwell yawned.

"I feel rather tired and done up."

The doctor rose.

"I will ask them to send you up some coffee," he said, "and we will leave you for the present."

"Did I - say anything?" Lady Astwell called after them as they reached the door.

Poirot smiled back at her.

"Nothing of great importance, Madame. You informed us that the drawing-room covers needed cleaning."

"So they do," said Lady Astwell. "You needn't have put me into a trance to get me to tell you that." She laughed good-humoredly. "Anything more?"

"Do you remember M. Trefusis picking up a paper-knife in the drawing-room that night?" asked Poirot.

"I don't know, I'm sure," said Lady Astwell. "He may have done so."

"Does a bulge in the curtain convey anything to you?"

Lady Astwell frowned.

"I seem to remember," she said slowly. "No - it's gone, and yet -"

"Do not distress yourself, Lady Astwell," said Poirot quickly, "it is of no importance - of no importance whatever."

The doctor went with Poirot to the latter's room.

"Well," said Cazalet, "I think this explains things pretty clearly. No doubt when Sir Reuben was dressing down the secretary, the latter grabbed tight hold on a paper-knife, and had to exercise a good deal of self-control to prevent himself answering back. Lady Astwell's conscious mind was wholly taken up with the problem of Lily Margrave, but her subconscious mind noticed and misconstrued the action.

"It implanted in her the firm conviction that Trefusis murdered Sir Reuben. Now we come to the bulge in the curtain. That is interesting. I take it from what you have told me of the Tower room that the desk was right in the window. There are curtains across that window, of course?"

"Yes, mon ami, black velvet curtains."

"And there is room in the embrasure of the window for anyone to remain concealed behind them?"

"There would be just room, I think."

"Then there seems at least a possibility," said the doctor slowly, "that someone was concealed in the room, but if so it could not be the secretary, since they both saw him leave the room. It could not be Victor Astwell, for Trefusis met him going out, and it could not be Lily Margrave. Whoever it was must have been concealed there before Sir Reuben entered the room that evening. You have told me pretty well how the land lies. Now what about Captain Naylor? Could it have been he who was concealed there?"

"It is always possible," admitted Poirot. "He certainly dined at the hotel, but how soon he went out afterward is difficult to fix exactly. He returned about half-past twelve."

"Then it might have been he," said the doctor, "and if so, he committed the crime. He had the motive, and there was a weapon near at hand. You don't seem satisfied with the idea, though?"

"Me, I have other ideas," confessed Poirot. "Tell me now, M. le Docteur, supposing for one minute that Lady Astwell herself had committed this crime, would she necessarily betray the fact in the hypnotic state?"

The doctor whistled.

"So that's what you are getting at? Lady Astwell is the criminal, eh? Of course - it is possible; I never thought of it till this minute. She was the last to be with him, and no one saw him alive afterward. As to your question: I should be inclined to say - No. Lady Astwell would go into the hypnotic state with a strong mental reservation to say nothing of her own part in the crime. She would answer my

questions truthfully, but she would be dumb on that one point. Yet I should hardly have expected her to be so insistent on Mr Trefusis's guilt."

"I comprehend," said Poirot. "But I have not said that I believe Lady Astwell to be the criminal. It is a suggestion, that is all."

"It is an interesting case," said the doctor after a minute or two. "Granting Charles Leverson is innocent, there are so many possibilities, Humphrey Naylor, Lady Astwell, and even Lily, Margrave."

"There is another you have not mentioned," said Poirot quietly, "Victor Astwell. According to his own story, he sat in his room with the door open waiting for Charles Leverson's return, but we have only his own word for it, you comprehend?"

"He is the bad-tempered fellow, isn't he?" asked the doctor. "The one you told me about?"

"That is so," agreed Poirot.

The doctor rose to his feet.

"Well, I must be getting back to town. You will let me know how things shape, won't you?"

After the doctor had left, Poirot pulled the bell for George.

"A cup of tisane, George. My nerves are much disturbed."

"Certainly, sir," said George. "I will prepare it immediately."

Ten minutes later he brought a steaming cup to his master. Poirot inhaled the noxious fumes with pleasure. As he sipped it, he soliloquized aloud.

"The chase is different all over the world. To catch the fox you ride hard with the dogs. You shout, you run, it is a matter of speed. I have not shot the stag myself, but I understand that to do so you crawl for many long, long hours upon your stomach. My friend Hastings has recounted the affair to me. Our method here, my good George, must be neither of these. Let us reflect upon the household cat. For many long, weary hours, he watches the mouse hole, he makes no movement, he betrays no energy, but - he does not go away."

He sighed and put the empty cup down on its saucer.

"I told you to pack for a few days. Tomorrow, my good George, you will go to London and bring down what is necessary for a fortnight."

"Very good, sir," said George. As usual he displayed no emotion.

The apparently permanent presence of Hercule Poirot at Mon Repos was disquieting to many people. Victor Astwell remonstrated with his sister-in-law about it.

"It's all very well, Nancy. You don't know what fellows of that kind are like. He has found jolly comfortable quarters here, and he is

evidently going to settle down comfortably for about a month, charging you two guineas a day all the while."

Lady Astwell's reply was to the effect that she could manage her own affairs without interference.

Lily Margrave tried earnestly to conceal her perturbation. At the time, she had felt sure that Poirot believed her story. Now she was not so certain.

Poirot did not play an entirely quiescent game. On the fifth day of his sojourn he brought down a small thumbograph album to dinner. As a method of getting the thumbprints of the household, it seemed a rather clumsy device, yet not perhaps so clumsy as it seemed, since no one could afford to refuse his thumbprints. Only after the little man had retired to bed did Victor Astwell state his views.

"You see what it means, Nancy. He is out after one of us."

"Don't be absurd, Victor."

"Well, what other meaning could that blinking little book of his have?"

"M, Poirot knows what he is doing," said Lady Astwell complacently, and looked with some meaning at Owen Trefusis.

On another occasion Poirot introduced the game of tracing footprints on a sheet of paper. The following morning, going with

his soft cat-like tread into the library, the detective startled Owen Trefusis, who leaped from his chair as though he had been shot.

"You must really excuse me, M. Poirot," he said primly, "but you have us on the jump."

"Indeed, how is that?" demanded the little man innocently.

"I will admit," said the secretary, "that I thought the case against Charles Leverson utterly overwhelming, You apparently do not find it so."

Poirot was standing looking out of the window. He turned suddenly to the other.

"I shall tell you something, M. Trefusis - in confidence."

"Yes?"

Poirot seemed in no hurry to begin. He waited a minute, hesitating. When he did speak, his opening words were coincident with the opening and shutting of the front door. For a man saying something in confidence, he spoke rather loudly, his voice drowning the sound of a footstep in the hall outside.

"I shall tell you this in confidence, Mr Trefusis. There is new evidence. It goes to prove that when Charles Leverson entered the Tower room that night, Sir Reuben was already dead."

The secretary stared at him.

"But what evidence? Why have we not heard of it?"

"You will hear," said the little man mysteriously. "In the meantime, you and I alone know the secret."

He skipped nimbly out of the room, and almost collided with Victor Astwell in the hall outside.

"You have just come in, eh, Monsieur?"

Astwell nodded.

"Beastly day outside," he said, breathing hard, "cold and blowy."

"Ah," said Poirot, "I shall not promenade myself today - me, I am like a cat, I sit by the fire and keep myself warm."

"Ça marche, George," he said that evening to the faithful valet, rubbing his hands as he spoke, "they are on the tenterhooks - the jump! It is hard, George, to play the game of the cat, the waiting game, but it answers, yes, it answers wonderfully. Tomorrow we make a further effect."

On the following day, Trefusis was obliged to go up to town. He went up by the same train as Victor Astwell. No sooner had they left the house than Poirot was galvanized into a fever of activity.

"Come, George, let us hurry to work. If the housemaid should approach these rooms, you must delay her. Speak to her sweet nothings, George, and keep her in the corridor."

He went first to the secretary's room, and began a thorough search. Not a drawer or a shelf was left uninspected. Then he replaced everything hurriedly, and declared his quest finished. George, on guard in the doorway, gave way to a deferential cough.

"If you will excuse me, sir?"

"Yes, my good George?"

"The shoes, sir. The two pairs of brown shoes were on the second shelf, and the patent-leather ones were on the shelf underneath. In replacing them you have reversed the order."

"Marvelous!" cried Poirot, holding up his hands. "But let us not distress ourselves over that. It is of no importance, I assure you, George. Never will M. Trefusis notice such a trifling matter."

"As you think, sir," said George.

"It is your business to notice such things," said Poirot encouragingly as he clapped the other on the shoulder. "It reflects credit upon you."

The valet did not reply, and when, later in the day, the proceeding was repeated in the room of Victor Astwell, he made no comment on the fact that Mr Astwell's underclothing was not returned to its

drawers strictly according to plan. Yet, in the second case at least, events proved the valet to be right and Poirot wrong. Victor Astwell came storming into the drawing-room that evening.

"Now, look here, you blasted little Belgian jackanapes, what do you mean by searching my room? What the devil do you think you are going to find there? I won't have it, do you hear? That's what comes of having a ferreting little spy in the house."

Poirot's hands spread themselves out eloquently as his words tumbled one over the other. He offered a hundred apologies, a thousand, a million. He had been maladroit, officious, he was confused. He had taken an unwarranted liberty. In the end the infuriated gentleman was forced to subside, still growling. And again that evening, sipping his tisane, Poirot murmured to George: "It marches, my good George, yet - it marches."

"Friday," observed Hercule Poirot thoughtfully, "is my lucky day."

"Indeed, sir."

"You are not superstitious, perhaps, my good George?"

"I prefer not to sit down thirteen at table, sir, and I am adverse to passing under ladders. I have no superstitions about a Friday, sir."

"That is well," said Poirot, "for, see you, today we make our Waterloo."

"Really, sir."

"You have such enthusiasm, my good George, you do not even ask what I propose to do."

"And what is that, sir?"

"Today, George, I make a final thorough search of the Tower room."

True enough, after breakfast, Poirot, with the permission of Lady Astwell, went to the scene of the crime. There, at various times of the morning, members of the household saw him crawling about on all fours, examining minutely the black velvet curtains and standing on high chairs to examine the picture frames on the wall. Lady Astwell for the first time displayed uneasiness.

"I have to admit it," she said. "He is getting on my nerves at last. He has something up his sleeve, and I don't know what it is. And the way he is crawling about on the floor up there like a dog makes me downright shivery. What is he looking for, I'd like to know? Lily, my dear, I wish you would go up and see what he is up to now. No, on the whole, I'd rather you stayed with me."

"Shall I go, Lady Astwell?" asked the secretary, rising from the desk.

"If you would, Mr Trefusis."

Owen Trefusis left the room and mounted the stairs to the Tower room. At first glance, he thought the room was empty, there was certainly no sign of Hercule Poirot there. He was just turning to go down again when a sound caught his ears; he then saw the little man halfway down the spiral staircase that led to the bedroom above.

He was on his hands and knees; in his left hand was a little pocket lens, and through this he was examining minutely something on the woodwork beside the stair carpet.

As the secretary watched him, he uttered a sudden grunt, and slipped the lens into his pocket. He then rose to his feet, holding something between his finger and thumb. At that moment he became aware of the secretary's presence.

"Ah, hah! M. Trefusis, I didn't hear you enter."

He was in that moment a different man. Triumph and exultation beamed all over his face. Trefusis stared at him in surprise.

"What is the matter, M. Poirot? You look very pleased."

The little man puffed out his chest.

"Yes, indeed. See you I have at last found that which I have been looking for from the beginning. I have here between my finger and thumb the one thing necessary to convict the criminal."

"Then," the secretary raised his eyebrows, "it was not Charles Leverson?"

"It was not Charles Leverson," said Poirot. "Until this moment, though I know the criminal, I am not sure of his name but at last all is clear."

He stepped down the stairs and tapped the secretary on the shoulder.

"I am obliged to go to London immediately. Speak to Lady Astwell for me. Will you request of her that everyone should be assembled in the Tower room this evening at nine o'clock? I shall be there then, and I shall reveal the truth. Ah, me, but I am well content."

And breaking into a fantastic little dance, he skipped from the Tower room. Trefusis was left staring after him.

A few minutes later Poirot appeared in the library, demanding if anyone could supply him with a little cardboard box.

"Unfortunately, I have not such a thing with me," he explained, "and there is something of great value that it is necessary for me to put inside."

From one of the drawers in the desk Trefusis produced a small box, and Poirot professed himself highly delighted with it.

He hurried upstairs with his treasure-trove; meeting George on the landing, he handed the box to him.

"There is something of great importance inside," he explained. "Place it, my good George, in the second drawer of my dressing-table, beside the jewel-case that contains my pearl studs."

"Very good, sir," said George.

"Do not break it." said Poirot. "Be very careful. Inside that box is something that will hang a criminal."

"You don't say, sir," said George.

Poirot hurried down the stairs again and, seizing his hat, departed from the house at a brisk run.

His return was more unostentatious. The faithful George, according to orders, admitted him by the side door.

"They are all in the Tower room?" inquired Poirot.

"Yes, sir."

There was a murmured interchange of a few words, and then Poirot mounted with the triumphant step of the victor to that room where the murder had taken place less than a month ago. His eyes swept around the room. They were all there, Lady Astwell, Victor Astwell, Lily Margrave, the secretary, and Parsons, the butler. The latter was hovering by the door uncertainly.

"George, sir, said I should be needed here," said Parsons as Poirot made his appearance. "I don't know if that is right, sir?"

"Quite right," said Poirot. "Remain, I pray of you."

He advanced to the middle of the room.

"This has been a case of great interest," he said in a slow, reflective voice. "It is interesting because anyone might have murdered Sir Reuben Astwell. Who inherits his money? Charles Leverson and Lady Astwell. Who was with him last that night? Lady Astwell. Who quarreled with him violently? Again Lady Astwell."

"What are you talking about?" cried Lady Astwell. "I don't understand, I -"

"But someone else quarreled with Sir Reuben," continued Poirot in a pensive voice. "Someone else left him that night white with rage. Supposing Lady Astwell left her husband alive at a quarter to twelve that night, there would be ten minutes before Mr Charles Leverson returned, ten minutes in which it would be possible for someone from the second floor to steal down and do the deed, and then return to his room again."

Victor Astwell sprang up with a cry.

"What the hell -?" He stopped, choking with rage.

"In a rage, Mr Astwell, you once killed a man in West Africa."

"I don't believe it," cried Lily Margrave.

She came forward, her hands clenched, two bright spots of color in her cheeks.

"I don't believe it," repeated the girl. She came close to Victor Astwell's side.

"It's true, Lily," said Astwell, "but there are things this man doesn't know. The fellow I killed was a witch doctor who had just massacred fifteen children. I consider that I was justified."

Lily came up to Poirot.

"M. Poirot," she said earnestly, "you are wrong. Because a man has a sharp temper, because he breaks out and says all kinds of things, that is not any reason why he should do a murder. I know - I know, I tell you - that Mr Astwell is incapable of such a thing."

Poirot looked at her, a very curious smile on his face. Then he took her hand in his and patted it gently.

"You see, Mademoiselle," he said gently, "you also have your intuitions. So you believe in Mr Astwell, do you?"

Lily spoke quietly.

"Mr Astwell is a good man," she said, "and he is honest. He had nothing to do with the inside work of the Mpala Gold Fields. He is good through and through, and - I have promised to marry him."

Victor Astwell came to her side and took her other hand.

"Before God, M. Poirot," he said, "I didn't kill my brother."

"I know you did not," said Poirot.

His eyes swept around the room.

"Listen, my friends. In an hypnotic trance, Lady Astwell mentioned having seen a bulge in the curtain that night."

Everyone's eyes swept to the window.

"You mean there was a burglar concealed there?" exclaimed Victor Astwell. "What a splendid solution!"

"Ah!" said Poirot gently. "But it was not that curtain."

He wheeled around and pointed to the curtain that masked the little staircase.

"Sir Reuben used the bedroom the night prior to the crime. He breakfasted in bed, and he had Mr Trefusis up there to give him instructions. I don't know what it was that Mr Trefusis left in that bedroom, but there was something. When he said good night to Sir Reuben and Lady Astwell, he remembered this thing and ran up the stairs to fetch it. I don't think either the husband or wife noticed him, for they had already begun a violent discussion. They were in

the middle of this quarrel when Mr Trefusis came down the stairs again.

"The things they were saying to each other were of so intimate and personal a nature that Mr Trefusis was placed in a very awkward position. It was clear to him that they imagined he had left the room some time ago. Fearing to arouse Sir Reuben's anger against himself, he decided to remain where he was and slip out later. He stayed there behind the curtain, and as Lady Astwell left the room she subconsciously noticed the outline of his form there.

"When Lady Astwell had left the room, Trefusis tried to steal out unobserved, but Sir Reuben happened to turn his head, and became aware of the secretary's presence. Already in a bad temper, Sir Reuben hurled abuse at his secretary, and accused him of deliberately eavesdropping and spying.

"Messieurs and Mesdames, I am a student of psychology. All through this case I have looked, not for the bad-tempered man or woman, for bad temper is its own safety valve. He who can bark does not bite. No, I have looked for the good-tempered man, for the man who is patient and self-controlled, for the man who for nine years has played the part of the under dog. There is no strain so great as that which has endured for years, there is no resentment like that which accumules slowly.

"For nine years Sir Reuben has bullied and browbeaten his secretary, and for nine years that man has endured in silence. But there comes a day when at last the strain reaches its breaking point. Something snaps! It was so that night. Sir Reuben sat down

at his desk again, but the secretary, instead of turning humbly and meekly to the door, picks up the heavy wooden club, and strikes down the man who had bullied him once too often."

He turned to Trefusis, who was staring at him as though turned to stone.

"It was so simple, your alibi. Mr Astwell thought you were in your room, but no one saw you go there. You were just stealing out after striking down Sir Reuben, when you heard it sound, and you hastened back to cover, behind the curtain. You were behind there when Charles Leverson entered the room you were there when Lily Margrave came. It was not till long after that that you crept up through a silent house to your bedroom. Do you deny it?"

Trefusis began to stammer.

"I - I never -"

"Ah! Let us finish this. For two weeks now I have played the comedy, I have showed you the net closing slowly around you. The fingerprints, footprints, the search of your room with the things artistically replaced. I have struck terror into you with all of this; you have lain awake at night fearing and wondering; did you leave a fingerprint in the room or a footprint somewhere?

"Again and again you have gone over the events of that night wondering what you have done or left undone, and so I brought you to the state where you made a slip. I saw the fear leap into your eyes today when I picked up something from the stairs where you

had stood hidden that night. Then I made a great parade, the little box, the entrusting of it to George, and I go out."

Poirot turned toward the door.

"George?"

"I am here, sir."

The valet came forward.

"Will you tell these ladies and gentlemen what my instructions were?"

"I was to remain concealed in the wardrobe in your room, sir, having placed the cardboard box where you told me to. At half-past three this afternoon, sir, Mr Trefusis entered the room; he went to the drawer and took out the box in question."

"And in that box," continued Poirot, "was a common pin. Me, I speak always the truth. I did pick up something on the stairs this morning. That is your English saying, is it not? 'See a pin and pick it up, all the day you'll have good luck.' Me, I have had good luck, I have found the murderer."

He turned to the secretary.

"You see?" he said gently. "You betrayed yourself."

Suddenly Trefusis broke down. He sank into a chair sobbing, his face buried in his hands.

"I was mad," he groaned. "I was mad. But, oh, my God, he badgered and bullied me beyond bearing. For years I had hated and loathed him."

"I knew!" cried Lady Astwell.

She sprang forward, her face irradiated with savage triumph.

"I knew that man had done it."

She stood there, savage and triumphant.

"And you were right," said Poirot. "One may call things by different names, but the fact remains. Your 'intuition,' Lady Astwell, proved correct. I felicitate you."

FOUR-AND-TWENTY BLACKBIRDS

Hercule Poirot was dining with his friend, Henry Bonnington at the Gallant Endeavour in the King's Road, Chelsea.

Mr Bonnington was fond of the Gallant Endeavour. He liked the leisurely atmosphere, he liked the food which was 'plain' and 'English' and 'not a lot of made up messes.' He liked to tell people

who dined with him there just exactly where Augustus John had been wont to sit and draw the attention to the famous artists' names in the visitors' book. Mr Bonnington was himself the least artistic of men - but he took a certain pride in the artistic activities of others.

Molly, the sympathetic waitress, greeted Mr Bonnington as an old friend. She prided herself on remembering her customers' likes and dislikes in the way of food.

'Good evening, sir,' she said, as the two men took their seats at a corner table. 'You're in luck today - turkey stuffed with chestnuts - that's your favourite, isn't it? And ever such a nice Stilton we've got! Will you have soup first or fish?'

Mr Bonnington deliberated the point. He said to Poirot warningly as the latter studied the menu:

'None of your French kickshaws now. Good well-cooked English food.'

'My friend,' Hercule Poirot waved his hand, 'I ask no better! I put myself in your hands unreservedly.'

'Ah - hm - er - hm,' replied Mr Bonnington and gave careful attention to the matter.

These weighty matters, and the question of wine, settled, Mr Bonnington leaned back with a sigh and unfolded his napkin as Molly sped away.

'Good girl, that,' he said approvingly. 'Was quite a beauty once - artists used to paint her. She knows about food, too and that's a great deal more important. Women are very unsound on food as a rule. There's many a woman if she goes out with a fellow she fancies, won't even notice what she eats. She'll just order the first thing she sees.'

Hercule Poirot shook his head. 'C'est terrible.'

'Men aren't like that, thank God!' said Mr Bonnington complacently.

'Never?' There was a twinkle in Hercule Poirot's eye.

'Well, perhaps when they're very young,' conceded Mr Bonnington. 'Young puppies! Young fellows nowadays are all the same - no guts - no stamina. I've no use for the young - and they,' he added with strict impartiality, 'have no use for me. Perhaps they're right! But to hear some of these young fellows talk you'd think no man had a right to be alive after sixty! From the way they go on, you'd wonder more of them didn't help their elderly relations out of the world.'

'It is possible,' said Hercule Poirot, 'that they do.'

'Nice mind you've got, Poirot, I must say. All this police work saps your ideals.'

Hercule Poirot smiled.

'Tout de même,' he said. 'It would be interesting to make a table of accidental deaths over the age of sixty. I assure you it would raise some curious speculations in your mind.'

'The trouble with you is that you've started going to look for crime - instead of waiting for crime to come to you.'

'I apologize,' said Poirot. 'I talk what you call "the shop." Tell me, my friend, of your own affairs. How does the world go with you?'

'Mess!' said Mr Bonnington. 'That's what's the matter with the world nowadays. Too much mess. And too much fine language. The fine language helps to conceal the mess. Like a highly-flavoured sauce concealing the fact that the fish underneath it is none of the best! Give me an honest fillet of sole and no messy sauce over it.'

It was given him at that moment by Molly and he grunted approval.

'You know just what I like, my girl,' he said.

'Well, you come here pretty regular, don't you, sir? I ought to know what you like.'

Hercule Poirot said:

'Do people then always like the same things? Do not they like a change sometimes?'

'Not gentlemen, sir. Ladies like variety - gentlemen always like the same thing.'

'What did I tell you?' grunted Bonnington. 'Women are fundamentally unsound where food is concerned!'

He looked round the restaurant.

'The world's a funny place. See that odd-looking old fellow with a beard in the corner? Molly'll tell you he's always here Tuesdays and Thursday nights. He has come here for close on ten years now - he's a kind of landmark in the place. Yet nobody here knows his name or where he lives or what his business is. It's odd when you come to think of it.'

When the waitress brought the portions of turkey he said: 'I see you've still got Old Father Time over there.'

'That's right, sir. Tuesdays and Thursdays, his days are. Not but what he came in here on a Monday last week! It quite upset me! I felt I'd got my dates wrong and that it must be Tuesday without my knowing it! But he came in the next night as well - so the Monday was just a kind of extra, so to speak.'

'An interesting deviation from habit,' murmured Poirot. 'I wonder what the reason was?'

'Well, sir, if you ask me, I think he'd had some kind of upset or worry.'

'Why did you think that? His manner?'

'No, sir - not his manner exactly. He was very quiet as he always is. Never says much except good evening when he comes and goes. No, it was his order.'

'His order?'

'I dare say you gentlemen will laugh at me,' Molly flushed up, 'but when a gentleman has been here for ten years, you get to know his likes and dislikes. He never could bear suet pudding or blackberries and I've never known him take thick soup - but on that Monday night he ordered thick tomato soup, beefsteak and kidney pudding and blackberry tart! Seemed as though he just didn't notice what he ordered!'

'Do you know,' said Hercule Poirot, 'I find that extraordinarily interesting.'

Molly looked gratified and departed.

'Well, Poirot,' said Henry Bonnington with a chuckle. 'Let's have a few deductions from you. All in your best manner.'

'I would prefer to hear yours first.'

'Want me to be Watson, eh? Well, old fellow went to a doctor and the doctor changed his diet.'

'To thick tomato soup, steak and kidney pudding and blackberry tart? I cannot imagine any doctor doing that.'

'Don't believe it, old boy. Doctors will put you on to anything.'

'That is the only solution that occurs to you?'

Henry Bonnington said:

'Well, seriously, I suppose there's only one explanation possible. Our unknown friend was in the grip of some powerful mental emotion. He was so perturbed by it that he literally did not notice what he was ordering or eating.' He paused a minute and then said: 'You'll be telling me next that you know just what was on his mind. You'll say perhaps that he was making up his mind to commit a murder.'

He laughed at his own suggestion.

Hercule Poirot did not laugh.

He has admitted that at that moment he was seriously worried. He claims that he ought then to have had some inkling of what was likely to occur.

His friends assure him that such an idea is quite fantastic.

It was some three weeks later that Hercule Poirot and Bonnington met again - this time their meeting was in the Tube.

They nodded to each other, swaying about, hanging on to adjacent straps. Then at Piccadilly Circus there was a general exodus and

they found seats right at the forward end of the car - a peaceful spot since nobody passed in or out that way.

'That's better,' said Mr Bonnington. 'Selfish lot, the human race, they won't pass up the car however much you ask 'em to!'

Hercule Poirot shrugged his shoulders.

'What will you?' he said. 'Life is too uncertain.'

'That's it. Here today, gone tomorrow,' said Mr Bonnington with a kind of gloomy relish. 'And talking of that, d'you remember that old boy we noticed at the Gallant Endeavour? I shouldn't wonder if he'd hopped it to a better world. He's not been there for a whole week. Molly's quite upset about it.'

Hercule Poirot sat up. His green eyes flashed.

'Indeed?' he said. 'Indeed?'

Bonnington said:

'D'you remember I suggested he'd been to a doctor and been put on a diet? Diet's nonsense of course - but I shouldn't wonder if he had consulted a doctor about his health and what the doctor said gave him a bit of a jolt. That would account for him ordering things off the menu without noticing what he was doing. Quite likely the jolt he got hurried him out of the world sooner than he would have gone otherwise. Doctors ought to be careful what they tell a chap.'

'They usually are,' said Hercule Poirot.

'This is my station,' said Mr Bonnington. 'Bye, bye. Don't suppose we shall ever know now who the old boy was - not even his name. Funny world!'

He hurried out of the carriage.

Hercule Poirot, sitting frowning, looked as though he did not think it was such a funny world.

He went home and gave certain instructions to his faithful valet, George.

Hercule Poirot ran his finger down a list of names. It was a record of deaths within a certain area.

Poirot's finger stopped.

'Henry Gascoigne. Sixty-nine. I might try him first.'

Later in the day, Hercule Poirot was sitting in Dr MacAndrew's surgery just off the King's Road. MacAndrew was a tall red-haired Scotsman with an intelligent face.

'Gascoigne?' he said. 'Yes, that's right. Eccentric old bird. Lived alone in one of those derelict old houses that are being cleared away in order to build a block of modern flats. I hadn't attended him before, but I'd seen him about and I knew who he was. It was the

dairy people got the wind up first. The milk bottles began to pile up outside. In the end the people next door sent word to the police and they broke the door in and found him. He'd pitched down the stairs and broken his neck. Had on an old dressing-gown with a ragged cord - might easily have tripped himself up with it.'

'I see,' said Hercule Poirot. 'It was quite simple - an accident.'

'That's right.'

'Had he any relations?'

'There's a nephew. Used to come along and see his uncle about once a month. Lorrimer, his name is, George Lorrimer. He's a medico himself. Lives at Wimbledon.'

'Was he upset at the old man's death?'

'I don't know that I'd say he was upset. I mean, he had an affection for the old man, but he didn't really know him very well.'

'How long had Mr Gascoigne been dead when you saw him?'

'Ah!' said Dr MacAndrew. 'This is where we get official. Not less than forty-eight hours and not more than seventy-two hours. He was found on the morning of the sixth. Actually, we got closer than that. He'd got a letter in the pocket of his dressing-gown - written on the third - posted in Wimbledon that afternoon - would have been delivered somewhere around nine-twenty p.m. That puts the time of death at after nine-twenty on the evening of the third. That agrees

with the contents of the stomach and the processes of digestion. He had had a meal about two hours before death. I examined him on the morning of the sixth and his condition was quite consistent with death having occurred about sixty hours previously - round about ten p.m. on the third.'

'It all seems very consistent. Tell me, when was he last seen alive?'

'He was seen in the King's Road about seven o'clock that same evening, Thursday the third, and he dined at the Gallant Endeavour restaurant at seven-thirty. It seems he always dined there on Thursdays. He was by way of being an artist, you know. An extremely bad one.'

'He had no other relations? Only this nephew?'

'There was a twin brother. The whole story is rather curious. They hadn't seen each other for years. It seems the other brother, Anthony Gascoigne, married a very rich woman and gave up art - and the brothers quarrelled over it. Hadn't seen each other since, I believe. But oddly enough, they died on the same day. The elder twin passed away at three o'clock on the afternoon of the third. Once before I've known a case of twins dying on the same day - in different parts of the world! Probably just a coincidence- but there it is.'

'Is the other brother's wife alive?'

'No, she died some years ago.'

'Where did Anthony Gascoigne live?'

'He had a house on Kingston Hill. He was, I believe, from what Dr Lorrimer tells me, very much of a recluse.'

Hercule Poirot nodded thoughtfully.

The Scotsman looked at him keenly.

'What exactly have you got in your mind, M. Poirot?' he asked bluntly. 'I've answered your questions - as was my duty seeing the credentials you brought. But I'm in the dark as to what it's all about.'

Poirot said slowly:

'A simple case of accidental death, that's what you said. What I have in mind is equally simple - a simple push.'

Dr MacAndrew looked startled.

'In other words, murder! Have you any grounds for that belief?'

'No,' said Poirot. 'It is a mere supposition.'

'There must be something -' persisted the other.

Poirot did not speak.

MacAndrew said: 'If it's the nephew, Lorrimer, you suspect, I don't mind telling you here and now that you are barking up the wrong

tree. Lorrimer was playing bridge in Wimbledon from eight-thirty till midnight. That came out at the inquest.'

Poirot murmured:

'And presumably it was verified. The police are careful.'

The doctor said:

'Perhaps you know something against him?'

'I didn't know that there was such a person until you mentioned him.'

'Then you suspect somebody else?'

'No, no. It is not that at all. It's a case of the routine habits of the human animal. That is very important. And the dead M. Gascoigne does not fit in. It is all wrong, you see.'

'I really don't understand.'

Hercule Poirot murmured:

'The trouble is, there is too much sauce over the bad fish.'

'My dear sir?'

Hercule Poirot smiled.

'You will be having me locked up as a lunatic soon, Monsieur le Docteur. But I am not really a mental case - just a man who has a liking for order and method and who is worried when he comes across a fact that does not fit in. I must ask you to forgive me for having given you so much trouble.'

He rose and the doctor rose also.

'You know,' said MacAndrew, 'honestly, I can't see anything the least bit suspicious about the death of Henry Gascoigne. I say he fell - you say somebody pushed him. It's all - well - in the air.'

Hercule Poirot sighed.

'Yes,' he said. 'It is workmanlike. Somebody has made the good job of it!'

'You still think -'

The little man spread out his hands.

"I'm an obstinate man - a man with a little idea - and nothing to support it! By the way, did Henry Gascoigne have false teeth?'

'No, his own teeth were in excellent preservation. Very creditable indeed at his age.'

'He looked after them well - they were white and well brushed?'

'Yes, I noticed them particularly. Teeth tend to grow a little yellow as one grows older, but they were in good condition.'

'Not discoloured in any way?'

'No. I don't think he was a smoker if that is what you mean.'

'I did not mean that precisely - it was just a long shot - which probably will not come off! Goodbye, Dr MacAndrew, and thank you for your kindness.'

He shook the doctor's hand and departed.

'And now,' he said, 'for the long shot.'

At the Gallant Endeavour, he sat down at the same table which he had shared with Bonnington. The girl who served him was not Molly. Molly, the girl told him, was away on a holiday.

It was only just seven and Hercule Poirot found no difficulty in entering into conversation with the girl on the subject of old Mr Gascoigne.

'Yes,' she said. 'He'd been here for years and years. But none of us girls ever knew his name. We saw about the inquest in the paper, and there was a picture of him. "There," I said to Molly. "If that isn't our 'Old Father Time'" as we used to call him.'

'He dined here on the evening of his death, did he not?'

'That's right, Thursday, the third. He was always here on a Thursday. Tuesdays and Thursdays punctual as a clock.'

'You don't remember, I suppose, what he had for dinner?'

'Now let me see, it was mulligatawny soup, that's right, and beefsteak pudding or was it the mutton? - no pudding, that's right, and blackberry and apple pie and cheese. And then to think of him going home and falling down those stairs that very same evening. A frayed dressing-gown cord they said it was as caused it. Of course, his clothes were always something awful - old-fashioned and put on anyhow, and all tattered, and yet he had a kind of air, all the same, as though he was somebody! Oh, we get all sorts of interesting customers here.'

She moved off.

Hercule Poirot ate his filleted sole. His eyes showed a green light.

'It is odd,' he said to himself, 'how the cleverest people slip over details. Bonnington will be interested.'

But the time had not yet come for leisurely discussion with Bonnington.

Armed with introductions from a certain influential quarter, Hercule Poirot found no difficulty at all in dealing with the coroner for the district.

'A curious figure, the deceased man Gascoigne,' he observed. 'A lonely, eccentric old fellow. But his decease seems to arouse an unusual amount of attention?'

He looked with some curiosity at his visitor as he spoke.

Hercule Poirot chose his words carefully. 'There are circumstances connected with it, Monsieur, which make investigation desirable.'

'Well, how can I help you?'

'It is, I believe, within your province to order documents produced in your court to be destroyed, or to be impounded - as you think fit. A certain letter was found in the pocket of Henry Gascoigne's dressing-gown, was it not?'

'That is so.'

'A letter from his nephew, Dr George Lorrimer?'

'Quite correct. The letter was produced at the inquest as helping to fix the time of death.'

'Which was corroborated by the medical evidence?'

'Exactly.'

'Is that letter still available?'

Hercule Poirot waited rather anxiously for the reply.

When he heard that the letter was still available for examination he drew a sigh of relief. When it was finally produced he studied it with some care. It was written in a slightly cramped handwriting with a stylographic pen. It ran as follows:

Dear Uncle Henry,

I am sorry to tell you that I have had no success as regards Uncle Anthony. He showed no enthusiasm for a visit from you and would give me no reply to your request that he would let bygones be bygones. He is, of course, extremely ill, and his mind is inclined to wander. I should fancy that the end is very near. He seemed hardly to remember who you were.

I am sorry to have failed you, but I can assure you that I did my best.

Your affectionate nephew,

George Lorrimer

The letter itself was dated 3rd November. Poirot glanced at the envelope's postmark - 4.30 p.m. 3 Nov.

He murmured:

'It is beautifully in order, is it not?'

Kingston Hill was his next objective. After a little trouble, with the exercise of good-humoured pertinacity, he obtained an interview with Amelia Hill, cook-housekeeper to the late Anthony Gascoigne.

Mrs Hill was inclined to be stiff and suspicious at first, but the charming geniality of this strange-looking foreigner would have had its effect on a stone. Mrs Amelia Hill began to unbend. She found herself, as had so many other women before her, pouring out her troubles to a really sympathetic listener. For fourteen years she had had charge of Mr Gascoigne's household - not an easy job! No, indeed! Many a woman would have quailed under the burdens she had had to bear! Eccentric the poor gentleman was and no denying it. Remarkably close with his money - a kind of mania with him it was - and he as rich a gentleman as might be! But Mrs Hill had served him faithfully, and put up with his ways, and naturally she'd expected at any rate a remembrance. But no - nothing at all! Just an old will that left all his money to his wife and if she predeceased him then everything to his brother, Henry. A will made years ago. It didn't seem fair!

Gradually Hercule Poirot detached her from her main theme of unsatisfied cupidity. It was indeed a heartless injustice! Mrs Hill could not be blamed for feeling hurt and surprised. It was well known that Mr Gascoigne was tight-fisted about money. It had even been said that the dead man had refused his only brother assistance. Mrs Hill probably knew all about that.

'Was it that that Dr Lorrimer came to see him about?' asked Mrs Hill. 'I knew it was something about his brother, but I thought it was just that his brother wanted to be reconciled. They'd quarrelled years ago.'

'I understand,' said Poirot, 'that Mr Gascoigne refused absolutely?'

'That's right enough,' said Mrs Hill with a nod. '"Henry?" he says, rather weak like. "What's this about Henry? Haven't seen him for years and don't want to. Quarrelsome fellow, Henry." Just that.'

The conversation then reverted to Mrs Hill's own special grievances, and the unfeeling attitude of the late Mr Gascoigne's solicitor.

With some difficulty Hercule Poirot took his leave without breaking off the conversation too abruptly.

And so, just after the dinner hour, he came to Elmcrest, Dorset Road, Wimbledon, the residence of Dr George Lorrimer.

The doctor was in. Hercule Poirot was shown into the surgery and there presently Dr George Lorrimer came to him, obviously just risen from the dinner table.

'I'm not a patient, Doctor,' said Hercule Poirot. 'And my coming here is, perhaps, somewhat of an impertinence - but I'm an old man and I believe in plain and direct dealing. I do not care for lawyers and their long-winded roundabout methods.'

He had certainly aroused Lorrimer's interest. The doctor was a clean-shaven man of middle height. His hair was brown, but his eyelashes were almost white which gave his eyes a pale, boiled appearance. His manner was brisk and not without humour.

'Lawyers?' he said, raising his eyebrows. 'Hate the fellows! You rouse my curiosity, my dear sir. Pray sit down.'

Poirot did so and then produced one of his professional cards which he handed to the doctor.

George Lorrimer's white eyelashes blinked.

Poirot leaned forward confidentially. 'A good many of my clients are women,' he said.

'Naturally,' said Dr George Lorrimer, with a slight twinkle.

'As you say, naturally,' agreed Poirot. 'Women distrust the official police. They prefer private investigations. They do not want to have their troubles made public. An elderly woman came to consult me a few days ago. She was unhappy about a husband she'd quarrelled with many years before. This husband of hers was your uncle, the late Mr Gascoigne.'

George Lorrimer's face went purple.

'My uncle? Nonsense! His wife died many years ago.'

'Not your uncle, Mr Anthony Gascoigne. Your uncle, Mr Henry Gascoigne.'

'Uncle Henry? But he wasn't married!'

'Oh yes, he was,' said Hercule Poirot, lying unblushingly. 'Not a doubt of it. The lady even brought along her marriage certificate.'

'It's a lie!' cried George Lorrimer. His face was now as purple as a plum. 'I don't believe it. You're an impudent liar.'

'It is too bad, is it not?' said Poirot. 'You have committed murder for nothing.'

'Murder?' Lorrimer's voice quavered. His pale eyes bulged with terror.

'By the way,' said Poirot, 'I see you have been eating blackberry tart again. An unwise habit. Blackberries are said to be full of vitamins, but they may be deadly in other ways. On this occasion I rather fancy they have helped to put a rope round a man's neck - your neck, Dr Lorrimer.'

'You see, mon ami, where you went wrong was over your fundamental assumption.' Hercule Poirot, beaming placidly across the table at his friend, waved an expository hand. 'A man under severe mental stress doesn't choose that time to do something that he's never done before. His reflexes just follow the track of least resistance. A man who is upset about something might conceivably

come down to dinner dressed in his pyjamas - but they will be his own pyjamas - not somebody else's.

'A man who dislikes thick soup, suet pudding and blackberries suddenly orders all three one evening. You say, because he is thinking of something else. But I say that a man who has got something on his mind will order automatically the dish he has ordered most often before.

'Eh bien, then, what other explanation could there be? I simply could not think of a reasonable explanation. And I was worried! The incident was all wrong. It did not fit! I have an orderly mind and I like things to fit. Mr Gascoigne's dinner order worried me.

'Then you told me that the man had disappeared. He had missed a Tuesday and a Thursday the first time for years. I liked that even less. A queer hypothesis sprang up in my mind. If I were right about it the man was dead. I made inquiries. The man was dead. And he was very neatly and tidily dead. In other words the bad fish was covered up with the sauce!

'He had been seen in the King's Road at seven o'clock. He had had dinner here at seven-thirty - two hours before he died. It all fitted in - the evidence of the stomach contents, the evidence of the letter. Much too much sauce! You couldn't see the fish at all!

'Devoted nephew wrote the letter, devoted nephew had beautiful alibi for time of death. Death very simple - a fall down the stairs. Simple accident? Simple murder? Everyone says the former.

'Devoted nephew only surviving relative. Devoted nephew will inherit - but is there anything to inherit? Uncle notoriously poor.

'But there is a brother. And brother in his time had had married a rich wife. And brother lives in a big rich house on Kingston Hill, so it would seem that rich wife must have left him all her money. You see the sequence - rich wife leaves money to Anthony, Anthony leaves money to Henry, Henry's money goes to George - a complete chain.'

'All very pretty in theory,' said Bonnington. 'But what did you do?'

'Once you know - you can usually get hold of what you want. Henry had died two hours after a meal - that is all the inquest really bothered about. But supposing the meal was not dinner, but lunch. Put yourself in George's place. George wants money - badly. Anthony Gascoigne is dying - but his death is no good to George. His money goes to Henry, and Henry Gascoigne may live for years. So Henry must die too - and the sooner the better - but his death must take place after Anthony's, and at the same time George must have an alibi. Henry's habit of dining regularly at a restaurant on two evenings of the week suggest an alibi to George. Being a cautious fellow, he tries his plan out first. He impersonates his uncle on Monday evening at the restaurant in question. It goes without a hitch. Everyone there accepts him as his uncle. He is satisfied. He has only to wait till Uncle Anthony shows definite signs of pegging out. The time comes. He writes a letter to his uncle on the afternoon of the second November but dates it the third. He comes up to town on the afternoon of the third, calls on his uncle, and carries his scheme into action. A sharp shove and down the stairs goes Uncle Henry. George hunts about for the letter he has

written, and shoves it in the pocket of his uncle's dressing-gown. At seven-thirty he is at the Gallant Endeavour, beard, bushy eyebrows all complete. Undoubtedly Mr Henry Gascoigne is alive at seven-thirty. Then a rapid metamorphosis in a lavatory and back full speed in his car to Wimbledon and an evening of bridge. The perfect alibi.'

Mr Bonnington looked at him.

'But the postmark on the letter?'

'Oh, that was very simple. The postmark was smudgy. Why? It had been altered with lamp black from second November to third November. You would not notice it unless you were looking for it. And finally there were the blackbirds.'

'Blackbirds?'

'Four-and-twenty blackbirds baked in a pie! Or black-berries if you prefer to be literal! George, you comprehend, was after all not quite a good enough actor. Do you remember the fellow who blacked himself all over to play Othello? That is the kind of actor you have got to be in crime. George looked like his uncle and walked like his uncle and spoke like his uncle and had his uncles' beard and eyebrows, but he forgot to eat like his uncle. He ordered the dishes that he himself liked. Blackberries discolour the teeth - the corpse's teeth were not discoloured, and yet Henry Gascoigne ate blackberries at the Gallant Endeavour that night. But there were no blackberries in the stomach. I asked this morning. And George had been fool enough to keep the beard and the rest of the make-up.

Oh! plenty of evidence once you look for it. I called on George and rattled him. That finished it! He had been eating blackberries again, by the way. A greedy fellow - cared a lot about his food. Eh bien, greed will hang him all right unless I am very much mistaken.'

A waitress brought them two portions of blackberry and apple tart.

'Take it away,' said Mr Bonnington. 'One can't be too careful. Bring me a small helping of sago pudding.'

THE DREAM

Hercule Poirot gave the house a steady appraising glance. His eyes wandered a moment to its surroundings, the shops, the big factory building on the right, the blocks of cheap mansion flats opposite.

Then once more his eyes returned to Northway House, relic of an earlier age - an age of space and leisure, when green fields had surrounded its well-bred arrogance. Now it was an anachronism, submerged and forgotten in the hectic sea of modern London, and not one man in fifty could have told you where it stood.

Furthermore, very few people could have told you to whom it belonged, though its owner's name would have been recognized as one of the world's richest men. But money can quench publicity as well as flaunt it. Benedict Farley, that eccentric millionaire, chose not to advertise his choice of residence. He himself was rarely

seen, seldom making a public appearance. From time to time he appeared at board meetings, his lean figure, beaked nose, and rasping voice easily dominating the assembled directors. Apart from that, he was just a well-known figure of legend. There were his strange meannesses, his incredible generosities, as well as more personal details - his famous patch-work dressing-gown, now reputed to be twenty-eight years old, his invariable diet of cabbage soup and caviare, his hatred of cats. All these things the public knew.

Hercule Poirot knew them also. It was all he did know of the man he was about to visit. The letter which was in his coat pocket told him little more.

After surveying this melancholy landmark of a past age for a minute or two in silence, he walked up the steps to the front door and pressed the bell, glancing as he did so at the neat wrist-watch which had at last replaced an earlier favorite - the large turnip-faced watch of earlier days. Yes, it was exactly nine-thirty. As ever, Hercule Poirot was exact to the minute.

The door opened after just the right interval. A perfect specimen of the genus butler stood outlined against the lighted hall.

"Mr Benedict Farley?" asked Hercule Poirot.

The impersonal glance surveyed him from head to foot, inoffensively but effectively.

"En gros et en détail," thought Hercule Poirot to himself with appreciation.

"You have an appointment, sir?" asked the suave voice.

"Yes."

"Your name, sir?"

"M. Hercule Poirot."

The butler bowed and drew back. Hercule Poirot entered the house. The butler closed the door behind him.

But there was yet one more formality before the deft hands took hat and stick from the visitor.

"You will excuse me, sir. I was to ask for a letter."

With deliberation Poirot took from his pocket the folded letter and handed it to the butler. The latter gave it a mere glance, then returned it with a bow. Hercule Poirot returned it to his pocket. Its contents were simple.

Northway House, W.8.

M. Hercule Poirot.

Dear Sir,

Mr Benedict Farley would like to have the benefit of your advice. If convenient to yourself he would be glad if you would call upon him at the above address at 9:30 tomorrow (Thursday) evening.

Yours truly,

Hugo Cornworthy
(Secretary).

P.S. - Please bring this letter with you.

Deftly the butler relieved Poirot of hat, stick, and overcoat. He said:

"Will you please come up to Mr Cornworthy's room?"

He led the way up the broad staircase. Poirot followed him, looking with appreciation at such objets d'art as were of an opulent and florid nature. His taste in art was always somewhat bourgeois.

On the first floor the butler knocked on a door.

Hercule Poirot's eyebrows rose very slightly. It was the first jarring note. For the best butlers do not knock at doors - and yet indubitably this was a first-class butler!

It was, so to speak, the first intimation of contact with the eccentricity of a millionaire.

A voice from within called out something. The butler threw open the door. He announced (and again Poirot sensed the deliberate departure from orthodoxy):

"The gentleman you are expecting, sir."

Poirot passed into the room. It was a fair-sized room, very plainly furnished in a workmanlike fashion. Filing cabinets, books of reference, a couple of easy chairs, and a large and imposing desk covered with neatly docketed papers. The corners of the room were dim, for the only light came from a big green-shaded reading-lamp which stood on a small table by the arm of one of the easy chairs. It was placed so as to cast its full light on anyone approaching from the door. Hercule Poirot blinked a little, realizing that the lamp bulb was at least 150 watts. In the armchair sat a thin figure in a patchwork dressing-gown - Benedict Farley. His head was stuck forward in a characteristic attitude, his beaked nose projecting like that of a bird. A crest of white hair like that of a cockatoo rose above his forehead. His eyes glittered behind thick lenses as he peered suspiciously at his visitor.

"Hey," he said at last - and his voice was shrill and harsh, with a rasping note in it. "So you're Hercule Poirot, hey?"

"At your service," said Poirot politely and bowed, one hand on the back of the chair.

"Sit down - sit down," said the old man testily.

Hercule Poirot sat down - in the full glare of the lamp. From behind it the old man seemed to be studying him attentively.

"How do I know you're Hercule Poirot - hey?" he demanded fretfully. "Tell me that - hey?"

Once more Poirot drew the letter from his pocket and handed it to Farley.

"Yes," admitted the millionaire grudgingly. "That's it. That's what I got Cornworthy to write." He folded it up and tossed it back. "So you're the fellow, are you?"

With a little wave of his hand Poirot said:

"I assure you there is no deception!"

Benedict Farley chuckled suddenly.

"That's what the conjuror says before he takes the goldfish out of the hat! Saying that is part of the trick, you know."

Poirot did not reply. Farley said suddenly:

"Think I'm a suspicious old man, hey? So I am. Don't trust anybody! That's my motto. Can't trust anybody when you're rich. No, no, it doesn't do."

"You wished," Poirot hinted gently, "to consult me?"

The old man nodded.

"That's right. Always buy the best. That's my motto. Go to the expert and don't count the cost. You'll notice, M. Poirot, I haven't asked you your fee. I'm not going to! Send me in the bill later - shan't cut up rough over it. Damned fools at the dairy thought they could charge me two and nine for eggs when two and seven's the market price - lot of swindlers! I won't be swindled. But the man at the top's different. He's worth the money. I'm at the top myself - I know."

Hercule Poirot made no reply. He listened attentively, his head poised a little on one side.

Behind his impassive exterior he was conscious of a feeling of disappointment. He could not exactly put his finger on it. So far Benedict Farley had run true to type - that is, he had conformed to the popular idea of himself; and yet - Poirot was disappointed.

"The man," he said disgustedly to himself, "is a mountebank - nothing but a mountebank!"

He had known other millionaires, eccentric men too, but in nearly every case he had been conscious of a certain force, an inner energy that had commanded his respect. If they had worn a patchwork dressing-gown, it would have been because they liked wearing such a dressing-gown. But the dressing-gown of Benedict Farley, or so it seemed to Poirot, was essentially a stage property.

And the man himself was essentially stagey. Every word he spoke was uttered, so Poirot felt assured, sheerly for effect.

He repeated again unemotionally, "You wished to consult me, Mr Farley?"

Abruptly the millionaire's manner changed.

He leaned forward. His voice dropped to a croak.

"Yes. Yes... I want to hear what you've got to say - what you think... Go to the top! That's my way! The best doctor - the best detective - it's between the two of them."

"As yet, Monsieur, I do not understand."

"Naturally," snapped Farley. "I haven't begun to tell you."

He leaned forward once more and shot out an abrupt question.

"What do you know, M. Poirot, about dreams?"

The little man's eyebrows rose. Whatever he had expected, it was not this.

"For that, Monsieur Farley, I should recommend Napoleon's Book of Dreams - or the latest practicing psychologist from Harley Street."

Benedict Farley said soberly, "I've tried both..."

There was a pause, then the millionaire spoke, at first almost in a whisper, then with a voice growing higher and higher.

"It's the same dream - night after night. And I'm afraid, I tell you - I'm afraid... It's always the same. I'm sitting in my room next door to this. Sitting at my desk, writing. There's a clock there and I glance at it and see the time - exactly twenty-eight minutes past three. Always the same time, you understand.

"And when I see the time, M. Poirot, I know I've got to do it. I don't want to do it - I loathe doing it - but I've got to -"

His voice had risen shrilly.

Unperturbed, Poirot said, "And what is it that you have to do?"

"At twenty-eight minutes past three," Benedict Farley said hoarsely, "I open the second drawer down on the right of my desk, take out the revolver that I keep there, load it and walk over to the window. And then - and then -"

"Yes?"

Benedict Farley said in a whisper: "Then I shoot myself..."

There was silence.

Then Poirot said, "That is your dream?"

"Yes."

"The same every night?"

"Yes."

"What happens after you shoot yourself?"

"I wake up."

Poirot nodded his head slowly and thoughtfully.

"As a matter of interest, do you keep a revolver in that particular drawer?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"I have always done so. It is as well to be prepared."

"Prepared for what?"

Farley said irritably, "A man in my position has to be on his guard. All rich men have enemies."

Poirot did not pursue the subject. He remained silent for a moment or two, then he said:

"Why exactly did you send for me?"

"I will tell you. First of all I consulted a doctor - three doctors to be exact."

"Yes?"

"The first told me it was all a question of diet. He was an elderly man. The second was a young man of the modern school. He assured me that it all hinged on a certain event that took place in infancy at that particular time of day - three twenty-eight. I am so determined, he says, not to remember that event, that I symbolize it by destroying myself. That is his explanation."

"And the third doctor?" asked Poirot.

Benedict Farley's voice rose in shrill anger.

"He's a young man too. He has a preposterous theory! He asserts that I, myself, am tired of life, that my life is so unbearable to me that I deliberately want to end it! But since to acknowledge that fact would be to acknowledge that essentially I am a failure, I refuse in my waking moments to face the truth. But when I am asleep, all inhibitions are removed, and I proceed to do that which I really wish to do. I put an end to myself."

"His view is that you really wish, unknown to yourself, to commit suicide?" said Poirot.

Benedict Farley cried shrilly:

"And that's impossible - impossible! I'm perfectly happy! I've got everything I want - everything money can buy! It's fantastic - unbelievable even to suggest a thing like that!"

Poirot looked at him with interest. Perhaps something in the shaking hands, the trembling shrillness of the voice, warned him that the denial was too vehement, that its very insistence was in itself suspect. He contented himself with saying:

"And where do I come in, Monsieur?"

Benedict Farley calmed down suddenly. He tapped with an emphatic finger on the table beside him.

"There's another possibility. And if it's right, you're the man to know about it! You're famous, you've had hundreds of cases - fantastic, improbable cases! You'd know if anyone does."

"Know what?"

Farley's voice dropped to a whisper.

"Supposing someone wants to kill me... Could they do it this way? Could they make me dream that dream night after night?"

"Hypnotism, you mean?"

"Yes."

Hercule Poirot considered the question.

"It would be possible, I suppose," he said at last. "It is more a question for a doctor."

"You don't know of such a case in your experience?"

"Not precisely on those lines, no."

"You see what I'm driving at? I'm made to dream the same dream, night after night, night after night - and then - one day the suggestion is too much for me - and I act upon it. I do what I've dreamed of so often - kill myself!"

Slowly Hercule Poirot shook his head.

"You don't think that is possible?" asked Farley.

"Possible?" Poirot shook his head. "That is not a word I care to meddle with."

"But you think it improbable?"

"Most improbable."

Benedict Farley murmured, "The doctor said so too..." Then his voice rising shrilly again, he cried out, "But why do I have this dream? Why? Why?"

Hercule Poirot shook his head. Benedict Farley said abruptly, "You're sure you've never come across anything like this in your experience?"

"Never."

"That's what I wanted to know."

Delicately, Poirot cleared his throat.

"You permit," he said, "a question?"

"What is it? What is it? Say what you like."

"Who is it you suspect of wanting to kill you?"

Farley snapped out, "Nobody. Nobody at all."

"But the idea presented itself to your mind?" Poirot persisted.

"I wanted to know - if it was a possibility."

"Speaking from my own experience, I should say No. Have you ever been hypnotized, by the way?"

"Of course not. D'you think I'd lend myself to such tomfoolery?"

"Then I think one can say that your theory is definitely improbable."

"But the dream, you fool, the dream."

"The dream is certainly remarkable," said Poirot thoughtfully. He paused and then went on. "I should like to see the scene of this drama - the table, the clock, and the revolver."

"Of course, I'll take you next door."

Wrapping the folds of his dressing-gown round him, the old man half-rose from his chair. Then suddenly, as though a thought had struck him, he resumed his seat.

"No," he said. "There's nothing to see there. I've told you all there is to tell."

"But I should like to see for myself -"

"There's no need," Farley snapped. "You've given me your opinion. That's the end."

Poirot shrugged his shoulders. "As you please."

He rose to his feet. "I am sorry, Mr Farley, that I have not been able to be of assistance to you."

Benedict Farley was staring straight ahead of him.

"Don't want a lot of hanky-pankying around," he growled out. "I've told you the facts - you can't make anything of them. That closes the matter. You can send me in a bill for a consultation fee."

"I shall not fail to do so," said the detective dryly. He walked towards the door.

"Stop a minute." The millionaire called him back. "That letter - I want it."

"The letter from your secretary?"

"Yes."

Poirot's eyebrows rose. He put his hand into his pocket, drew out a folded sheet, and handed it to the old man. The latter scrutinized it, then put it down on the table beside him with a nod.

Once more Hercule Poirot walked to the door. He was puzzled. His busy mind was going over and over the story he had been told. Yet in the midst of his mental preoccupation, a nagging sense of something wrong obtruded itself. And that something had to do with himself - not with Benedict Farley.

With his hand on the door knob, his mind cleared. He, Hercule Poirot, had been guilty of an error! He turned back into the room once more.

"A thousand pardons! In the interest of your problem I have committed a folly! That letter I handed to you - by mischance I put my hand into my right-hand pocket instead of the left -"

"What's all this? What's all this?"

"The letter that I handed you just now - an apology from my laundress concerning the treatment of my collars." Poirot was smiling, apologetic. He dipped into his left-hand pocket. "This is your letter."

Benedict Farley snatched at it - grunted: "Why the devil can't you mind what you're doing?"

Poirot retrieved his laundress's communication, apologized gracefully once more, and left the room.

He paused for a moment outside on the landing. It was a spacious one. Directly facing him was a big old oak settle with a refectory table in front of it. On the table were magazines. There were also two armchairs and a table with flowers. It reminded him a little of a dentist's waiting-room.

The butler was in the hall below waiting to let him out.

"Can I get you a taxi, sir?"

"No, I thank you. The night is fine. I will walk."

Hercule Poirot paused a moment on the pavement waiting for a lull in the traffic before crossing the busy street.

A frown creased his forehead.

"No," he said to himself. "I do not understand at all. Nothing makes sense. Regrettable to have to admit it, but I, Hercule Poirot, am completely baffled."

That was what might be termed the first act of the drama. The second act followed a week later. It opened with a telephone call from one John Stillingfleet, M.D.

He said with a remarkable lack of medical decorum:

"That you, Poirot, old horse? Stillingfleet here."

"Yes, my friend. What is it?"

"I'm speaking from Northway House - Benedict Farley's."

"Ah, yes?" Poirot's voice quickened with interest. "What of - Mr Farley?"

"Farley's dead. Shot himself this afternoon."

There was a pause, then Poirot said:

"Yes..."

"I notice you're not overcome with surprise. Know something about it, old horse?"

"Why should you think that?"

"Well, it isn't brilliant deduction or telepathy or anything like that. We found a note from Farley to you making an appointment about a week ago."

"I see."

"We've got a tame police inspector here - got to be careful, you know, when one of these millionaire blokes bumps himself off. Wondered whether you could throw any light on the case. If so, perhaps you'd come round?"

"I will come immediately."

"Good for you, old boy. Some dirty work at the cross-roads - eh?"

Poirot merely repeated that he would set forth immediately.

"Don't want to spill the beans over the telephone? Quite right. So long."

A quarter of an hour later Poirot was sitting in the library, a low long room at the back of Northway House on the ground floor. There were five other persons in the room, Inspector Barnett, Dr Stillingfleet, Mrs Farley, the widow of the millionaire, Joanna Farley, his only daughter, and Hugo Cornworthy, his private secretary.

Of these, Inspector Barnett was a discreet soldierly-looking man. Dr Stillingfleet, whose professional manner was entirely different from his telephonic style, was a tall, long-faced young man of thirty.

Mrs Farley was obviously very much younger than her husband. She was a handsome dark-haired woman. Her mouth was hard and her black eyes gave absolutely no clue to her emotions. She appeared perfectly self-possessed. Joanna Farley had fair hair and a freckled face. The prominence of her nose and chin was clearly inherited from her father. Her eyes were intelligent and shrewd. Hugo Cornworthy was a somewhat colorless young man, very correctly dressed. He seemed intelligent and efficient.

After greetings and introductions, Poirot narrated simply and clearly the circumstances of his visit and the story told him by Benedict Farley. He could not complain of any lack of interest.

"Most extraordinary story I've ever heard!" said the inspector. "A dream, eh? Did you know anything about this, Mrs Farley?"

She bowed her head.

"My husband mentioned it to me. It upset him very much. I - I told him it was indigestion - his diet, you know, was very peculiar - and suggested his calling in Dr Stillingfleet."

That young man shook his head.

"He didn't consult me. From M. Poirot's story, I gather he went to Harley Street."

"I would like your advice on that point, doctor," said Poirot. "Mr Farley told me that he consulted three specialists. What do you think of the theories they advanced?"

Stillingfleet frowned.

"It's difficult to say. You've got to take into account that what he passed on to you wasn't exactly what had been said to him. It was a layman's interpretation."

"You mean he had got the phraseology wrong?"

"Not exactly. I mean they would put a thing to him in professional terms, he'd get the meaning a little distorted, and then recast it in his own language."

"So that what he told me was not really what the doctors said."

"That's what it amounts to. He's just got it all a little wrong, if you know what I mean."

Poirot nodded thoughtfully. "Is it known whom he consulted?" he asked.

Mrs Farley shook her head, and Joanna Farley remarked:

"None of us had any idea he had consulted anyone."

"Did he speak to you about his dream?" asked Poirot.

The girl shook her head.

"And you, Mr Cornworthy?"

"No, he said nothing at all. I took down a letter to you at his dictation, but I had no idea why he wished to consult you. I thought it might possibly have something to do with some business irregularity."

Poirot asked: "And now as to the actual facts of Mr Farley's death?"

Inspector Barnett looked interrogatively at Mrs Farley and at Dr Stillingfleet, and then took upon himself the role of spokesman.

"Mr Farley was in the habit of working in his own room on the first floor every afternoon. I understand that there was a big amalgamation of businesses in prospect -"

He looked at Hugo Cornworthy who said, "Consolidated Coachlines."

"In connection with that," continued Inspector Barnett, "Mr Farley had agreed to give an interview to two members of the Press. He very seldom did anything of the kind - only about once in five years, I understand. Accordingly two reporters, one from the Associated Newsgroups, and one from Amalgamated Press-sheets, arrived at a quarter past three by appointment. They waited on the first floor outside Mr Farley's door - which was the customary place for people to wait who had an appointment with Mr Farley. At twenty past three a messenger arrived from the office of Consolidated Coachlines with some urgent papers. He was shown into Mr Farley's room where he handed over the documents. Mr Farley

accompanied him to the door of the room, and from there spoke to the two members of the Press. He said:

"'I am sorry, gentlemen, to have to keep you waiting, but I have some urgent business to attend to. I will be as quick as I can.'

"The two gentlemen, Mr Adams and Mr Stoddart, assured Mr Farley that they would await his convenience. He went back into his room, shut the door - and was never seen alive again!"

"Continue," said Poirot.

"At a little after four o'clock," went on the inspector, "Mr Cornworthy here came out of his room which is next door to Mr Farley's, and was surprised to see the two reporters still waiting. He wanted Mr Farley's signature to some letters and thought he had also better remind him that these two gentlemen were waiting. He accordingly went into Mr Farley's room. To his surprise he could not at first see Mr Farley and thought the room was empty. Then he caught sight of a boot sticking out behind the desk (which is placed in front of the window). He went quickly across and discovered Mr Farley lying there dead, with a revolver beside him.

"Mr Cornworthy hurried out of the room and directed the butler to ring up Dr Stillingfieet. By the latter's advice, Mr Cornworthy also informed the police."

"Was the shot heard?" asked Poirot.

"No. The traffic is very noisy here, the landing window was open. What with lorries and motor horns it would be most unlikely if it had been noticed."

Poirot nodded thoughtfully. "What time is it supposed he died?" he asked.

Stillingfieet said:

"I examined the body as soon as I got here - that is, at thirty-two minutes past four. Mr Farley had been dead at least an hour."

Poirot's face was very grave.

"So then, it seems possible that his death could have occurred at the time he mentioned to me - that is, at twenty-eight minutes past three."

"Exactly," said Stillingfleet.

"Any finger-marks on the revolver?"

"Yes, his own."

"And the revolver itself?"

The inspector took up the tale.

"Was one which he kept in the second right-hand drawer of his desk, just as he told you. Mrs Farley has identified it positively.

Moreover, you understand, there is only one entrance to the room, the door giving on to the landing. The two reporters were sitting exactly opposite that door and they swear that no one entered the room from the time Mr Farley spoke to them, until Mr Cornworthy entered it at a little after four o'clock."

"So that there is every reason to suppose that Mr Farley committed suicide?"

Inspector Barnett smiled a little.

"There would have been no doubt at all but for one point."

"And that?"

"The letter written to you."

Poirot smiled too.

"I see! Where Hercule Poirot is concerned - immediately the suspicion of murder arises!"

"Precisely," said the inspector dryly. "However, after your clearing up of the situation -"

Poirot interrupted him. "One little minute."

He turned to Mrs Farley. "Had your husband ever been hypnotized?"

"Never."

"Had he studied the question of hypnotism? Was he interested in the subject?"

She shook her head. "I don't think so."

Suddenly her self-control seemed to break down. "That horrible dream! It's uncanny! That he should have dreamed that - night after night - and then - and then - it's as though he were - hounded to death!"

Poirot remembered Benedict Farley saying - "I proceed to do that which I really wish to do. I put an end to myself."

He said, "Had it ever occurred to you that your husband might be tempted to do away with himself?"

"No - at least - sometimes he was very queer..."

Joanna Farley's voice broke in clear and scornful. "Father would never have killed himself. He was far too careful of himself."

Dr Stillingfleet said, "It isn't the people who threaten to commit suicide who usually do it, you know, Miss Farley. That's why suicides sometimes seem unaccountable."

Poirot rose to his feet. "Is it permitted," he asked, "that I see the room where the tragedy occurred?"

"Certainly. Dr Stillingfleet -"

The doctor accompanied Poirot upstairs. Benedict Farley's room was a much larger one than the secretary's next door. It was luxuriously furnished with deep leather-covered armchairs, a thick pile carpet, and a superb outsize writing-desk.

Poirot passed behind the latter to where a dark stain on the carpet showed just before the window. He remembered the millionaire saying, "At twenty-eight minutes past three I open the second drawer down on the right of my desk, take out the revolver that I keep there, load it, and walk over to the window. And then - and then I shoot myself."

He nodded slowly. Then he said:

"The window was open like this?"

"Yes. But nobody could have got in that way."

Poirot put his head out. There was no sill or parapet and no pipes near. Not even a cat could have gained access that way. Opposite rose the blank wall of the factory, a dead wall with no windows in it.

Stillingfleet said, "Funny room for a rich man to choose as his own sanctum with that outlook. It's like looking out on to a prison wall."

"Yes," said Poirot. He drew his head in and stared at the expanse of solid brick. "I think," he said, "that that wall is important."

Stillingfleet looked at him curiously. "You mean - psychologically?"

Poirot had moved to the desk. Idly, or so it seemed, he picked up a pair of what are usually called lazy-tongs. He pressed the handles; the tongs shot out to their full length. Delicately, Poirot picked up a burnt match stump with them from beside a chair some feet away and conveyed it carefully to the waste-paper basket.

"When you've finished playing with those things..." said Stillingfleet irritably.

Hercule Poirot murmured, "An ingenious invention," and replaced the tongs neatly on the writing-table. Then he asked:

"Where were Mrs Farley and Miss Farley at the time of the - death?"

"Mrs Farley was resting in her room on the floor above this. Miss Farley was painting in her studio at the top of the house."

Hercule Poirot drummed idly with his fingers on the table for a minute or two. Then he said:

"I should like to see Miss Farley. Do you think you could ask her to come here for a minute or two?"

"If you like."

Stillingfleet glanced at him curiously, then left the room. In another minute or two the door opened and Joanna Farley came in.

"You do not mind, mademoiselle, if I ask you a few questions?"

She returned his glance coolly. "Please ask anything you choose."

"Did you know that your father kept a revolver in his desk?"

"No."

"Where were you and your mother - that is to say your stepmother - that is right?"

"Yes, Louise is my father's second wife. She is only eight years older than I am. You were about to say -?"

"Where were you and she on Thursday of last week? That is to say, on Thursday night."

She reflected for a minute or two.

"Thursday? Let me see. Oh, yes, we had gone to the theater. To see Little Dog Laughed."

"Your father did not suggest accompanying you?"

"He never went out to theaters."

"What did he usually do in the evenings?"

"He sat in here and read."

"He was not a very sociable man?"

The girl looked at him directly. "My father," she said, "had a singularly unpleasant personality. No one who lived in close association with him could possibly be fond of him."

"That, mademoiselle, is a very candid statement."

"I am saving you time, M. Poirot. I realize quite well what you are getting at. My stepmother married my father for his money. I live here because I have no money to live elsewhere. There is a man I wish to marry - a poor man; my father saw to it that he lost his job. He wanted me, you see, to marry well - an easy matter since I was to be his heiress!"

"Your father's fortune passes to you?"

"Yes. That is, he left Louise, my stepmother, a quarter of a million free of tax, and there are other legacies, but the residue goes to me." She smiled suddenly. "So you see, M. Poirot, I had every reason to desire my father's death!"

"I see, mademoiselle, that you have inherited your father's intelligence."

She said thoughtfully, "Father was clever... One felt that with him - that he had force - driving power - but it had all turned sour - bitter - there was no humanity left... "

Hercule Poirot said softly, "Grand Dieu, but what an imbecile I am..."

Joanna Farley turned towards the door. "Is there anything more?"

"Two little questions. These tongs here," he picked up the lazytongs, "were they always on the table?"

"Yes. Father used them for picking up things. He didn't like stooping."

"One other question. Was your father's eye-sight good?"

She stared at him.

"Oh, no - he couldn't see at all - I mean he couldn't see without his glasses. His sight had always been bad from a boy."

"But with his glasses?"

"Oh, he could see all right then, of course."

"He could read newspapers and fine print?"

"Oh, yes."

"That is all, mademoiselle."

She went out of the room.

Poirot murmured, "I was stupid. It was there, all the time, under my nose. And because it was so near I could not see it."

He leaned out of the window once more. Down below, in the narrow way between the house and the factory, he saw a small dark object.

Hercule Poirot nodded, satisfied, and went downstairs again.

The others were still in the library. Poirot addressed himself to the secretary:

"I want you, Mr Cornworthy, to recount to me in detail the exact circumstances of Mr Farley's summons to me. When, for instance, did Mr Farley dictate that letter?"

"On Wednesday afternoon - at five-thirty, as far as I can remember."

"Were there any special directions about posting it?"

"He told me to post it myself."

"And you did so?"

"Yes."

"Did he give any special instructions to the butler about admitting me?"

"Yes. He told me to tell Holmes (Holmes is the butler) that a gentleman would be calling at 9:30. He was to ask the gentleman's name. He was also to ask to see the letter."

"Rather peculiar precautions to take, don't you think?"

Cornworthy shrugged his shoulders.

"Mr Farley," he said carefully, "was rather a peculiar man."

"Any other instructions?"

"Yes. He told me to take the evening off."

"Did you do so?"

"Yes, immediately after dinner I went to the cinema."

"When did you return?"

"I let myself in about a quarter past eleven."

"Did you see Mr Farley again that evening?"

"No."

"And he did not mention the matter the next morning?"

"No."

Poirot paused a moment, then resumed, "When I arrived I was not shown into Mr Farley's own room."

"No. He told me that I was to tell Holmes to show you into my room."

"Why was that? Do you know?"

Cornworthy shook his head. "I never questioned any of Mr Farley's orders," he said dryly. "He would have resented it if I had."

"Did he usually receive visitors in his own room?"

"Usually, but not always. Sometimes he saw them in my room."

"Was there any reason for that?"

Hugo Cornworthy considered.

"No - I hardly think so - I've never really thought about it."

Turning to Mrs Farley, Poirot asked:

"You permit that I ring for your butler?"

"Certainly, M. Poirot."

Very correct, very urbane, Holmes answered the bell.

"You rang, madam?"

Mrs Farley indicated Poirot with a gesture.

Holmes turned politely. "Yes, sir?"

"What were your instructions, Holmes, on the Thursday night when I came here?"

Holmes cleared his throat, then said:

"After dinner Mr Cornworthy told me that Mr Farley expected a Mr Hercule Poirot at 9:30. I was to ascertain the gentleman's name, and I was to verify the information by glancing at a letter. Then I was to show him up to Mr Cornworthy's room."

"Were you also told to knock on the door?"

An expression of distaste crossed the butler's countenance.

"That was one of Mr Farley's orders. I was always to knock when introducing visitors - business visitors, that is," he added.

"Ah, that puzzled me! Were you given any other instructions concerning me?"

"No, sir. When Mr Cornworthy had told me what I have just repeated to you he went out."

"What time was that?"

"Ten minutes to nine, sir."

"Did you see Mr Farley after that?"

"Yes, sir, I took him up a glass of hot water as usual at nine o'clock."

"Was he then in his own room or in Mr Cornworthy's?"

"He was in his own room, sir."

"You noticed nothing unusual about that room?"

"Unusual? No, sir."

"Where were Mrs Farley and Miss Farley?"

"They had gone to the theater, sir."

"Thank you, Holmes, that will do."

Holmes bowed and left the room. Poirot turned to the millionaire's widow.

"One more question, Mrs Farley. Had your husband good sight?"

"No. Not without his glasses."

"He was very shortsighted?"

"Oh, yes, he was quite helpless without his spectacles."

"He had several pairs of glasses?"

"Yes."

"Ah," said Poirot. He leaned back. "I think that that concludes the case..."

There was silence in the room. They were all looking at the little man who sat there complacently stroking his mustache. On the inspector's face was perplexity, Dr Stillingfleet was frowning, Cornworthy merely stared uncomprehendingly, Mrs Farley gazed in blank astonishment, Joanna Farley looked eager.

Mrs Farley broke the silence.

"I don't understand, M. Poirot." Her voice was fretful. "The dream -"

"Yes," said Poirot. "That dream was very important."

Mrs Farley shivered. She said:

"I've never believed in anything supernatural before - but now - to dream it night after night beforehand -"

"It's extraordinary," said Stillingfieet. "Extraordinary! If we hadn't got your word for it, Poirot, and if you hadn't had it straight from the horse's mouth -" he coughed in embarrassment, and readopting his professional manner, "I beg your pardon, Mrs Farley. If Mr Farley himself had not told that story -"

"Exactly," said Poirot. His eyes, which had been half-closed, opened suddenly. They were very green. "If Benedict Farley hadn't told me -"

He paused a minute, looking round at a circle of blank faces.

"There are certain things, you comprehend, that happened that evening which I was quite at a loss to explain. First, why make such a point of my bringing that letter with me?"

"Identification," suggested Cornworthy.

"No, no, my dear young man. Really that idea is too ridiculous. There must be some much more valid reason. For not only did Mr Farley require to see that letter produced, but he definitely demanded that I should leave it behind me. And moreover even then he did not destroy it! It was found among his papers this afternoon. Why did he keep it?"

Joanna Farley's voice broke in. "He wanted, in case anything happened to him, that the facts of his strange dream should be made known."

Poirot nodded approvingly.

"You are astute, Mademoiselle. That must be - that can only be - the point of the keeping of the letter. When Mr Farley was dead, the story of that strange dream was to be told! That dream was very important. That dream, Mademoiselle, was vital!

"I will come now," he went on, "to the second point. After hearing his story I ask Mr Farley to show me the desk and the revolver. He seems about to get up to do so, then suddenly refuses. Why did he refuse?"

This time no one advanced an answer.

"I will put that question differently. What was there in that next room that Mr Farley did not want me to see?"

There was still silence.

"Yes," said Poirot, "it is difficult, that. And yet there was some reason - some urgent reason why Mr Farley received me in his secretary's room and refused point blank to take me into his own room. There was something in that room he could not afford to have me see.

"And now I come to the third inexplicable thing that happened on that evening. Mr Farley, just as I was leaving, requested me to hand him the letter I had received. By inadvertence I handed him a communication from my laundress. He glanced at it and laid it down beside him. Just before I left the room I discovered my error - and rectified it! After that I left the house and - I admit it - I was completely at sea! The whole affair and especially that last incident seemed to me quite inexplicable."

He looked round from one to the other.

"You do not see?"

Stillingfleet said, "I don't really see how your laundress comes into it, Poirot."

"My laundress," said Poirot, "was very important. That miserable woman who ruins my collars, was, for the first time in her life, useful to somebody. Surely you see - it is so obvious. Mr Farley glanced at that communication - one glance would have told him that it was the wrong letter - and yet he knew nothing. Why? Because he could not see it properly!"

Inspector Barnett said sharply, "Didn't he have his glasses on?"

Hercule Poirot smiled. "Yes," he said. "He had his glasses on. That is what makes it so very interesting."

He leaned forward.

"Mr Farley's dream was very important. He dreamed, you see, that he committed suicide. And a little later on, he did commit suicide. That is to say he was alone in a room and was found there with a revolver by him, and no one entered or left the room at the time that he was shot. What does that mean? It means, does it not, that it must be suicide!"

"Yes," said Stillingfleet.

Hercule Poirot shook his head.

"On the contrary," he said. "It was murder. An unusual and a very cleverly planned murder."

Again he leaned forward, tapping the table, his eyes green and shining.

"Why did Mr Farley not allow me to go into his own room that evening? What was there in there that I must not be allowed to see? I think, my friends, that there was - Benedict Farley himself!"

He smiled at the blank faces.

"Yes, yes, it is not nonsense what I say. Why could the Mr Farley to whom I had been talking not realize the difference between two totally dissimilar letters? Because, mes amis, he was a man of normal sight wearing a pair of very powerful glasses. Those glasses would render a man of normal eyesight practically blind. Isn't that so, doctor?"

Stillingfleet murmured, "That's so - of course."

"Why did I feel that in talking to Mr Farley I was talking to a mountebank, to an actor playing a part? Because he was playing a part! Consider the setting. The dim room, the green shaded light turned blindingly away from the figure in the chair. What did I see - the famous patchwork dressing-gown, the beaked nose (faked with that useful substance, nose putty), the white crest of hair, the powerful lenses concealing the eyes. What evidence is there that Mr Farley ever had a dream? Only the story I was told and the evidence of Mrs Farley. What evidence is there that Benedict Farley

kept a revolver in his desk? Again only the story told me and the word of Mrs Farley. Two people carried this fraud through - Mrs Farley and Hugo Cornworthy. Cornworthy wrote the letter to me, gave instructions to the butler, went out ostensibly to the cinema, but let himself in again immediately with a key, went to his room, made himself up, and played the part of Benedict Farley.

"And so we come to this afternoon. The opportunity for which Mr Cornworthy has been waiting arrives. There are two witnesses on the landing to swear that no one goes in or out of Benedict Farley's room. Cornworthy waits until a particularly heavy batch of traffic is about to pass. Then he leans out of his window, and with the lazytongs which he has purloined from the desk next door he holds an object against the window of that room. Benedict Farley comes to the window. Cornworthy snatches back the tongs and as Farley leans out, and the lorries are passing outside, Cornworthy shoots him with the revolver that he has ready. There is a blank wall opposite, remember. There can be no witness of the crime. Cornworthy waits for over half an hour, then gathers up some papers, conceals the lazytongs and the revolver between them, and goes out on to the landing and into the next room. He replaces the tongs on the desk, lays down the revolver after pressing the dead man's fingers on it, and hurries out with the news of Mr Farley's 'suicide.'

"He arranges that the letter to me shall be found and that I shall arrive with my story - the story I heard from Mr Farley's own lips - of his extraordinary 'dream' - the strange compulsion he felt to kill himself! A few credulous people will discuss the hypnotism theory -

but the main result will be to confirm without a doubt that the actual hand that held the revolver was Benedict Farley's own."

Hercule Poirot's eyes went to the widow's face - the dismay - the ashy pallor - the blind fear.

"And in due course," he finished gently, "the happy ending would have been achieved. A quarter of a million and two hearts that beat as one..."

John Stillingfleet, M.D., and Hercule Poirot walked along the side of Northway House. On their right was the towering wall of the factory. Above them, on their left, were the windows of Benedict Farley's and Hugo Cornworthy's rooms. Hercule Poirot stopped and picked up a small object - a black stuffed cat.

"Voilà," he said. "That is what Cornworthy held in the lazytongs against Farley's window. You remember, he hated cats? Naturally he rushed to the window."

"Why on earth didn't Cornworthy come out and pick it up after he'd dropped it?"

"How could he? To do so would have been definitely suspicious. After all, if this object where found what would anyone think - that some child had wandered round here and dropped it."

"Yes," said Stillingfleet with a sigh. "That's probably what the ordinary person would have thought. But not good old Hercule!

D'you know, old horse, up to the very last minute I thought you were leading up to some subtle theory of highfalutin' psychological 'suggested' murder? I bet those two thought so too! Nasty bit of goods, the Farley. Goodness, how she cracked! Cornworthy might have got away with it if she hadn't had hysterics and tried to spoil your beauty by going for you with her nails. I only got her off you just in time."

He paused a minute and then said:

"I rather like the girl. Grit, you know, and brains. I suppose I'd be thought to be a fortune hunter if I had a shot at her...?"

"You are too late, my friend. There is already someone sur le tapis. Her father's death has opened the way to happiness."

"Take it all round, she had a pretty good motive for bumping off the unpleasant parent."

"Motive and opportunity are not enough," said Poirot. "There must also be the criminal temperament!"

"I wonder if you'll ever commit a crime, Poirot?" said Stillingfleet. "I bet you could get away with it all right. As a matter of fact, it would be too easy for you - I mean the thing would be off as definitely too unsporting."

"That," said Poirot, "is a typically English idea."

GREENSHAW'S FOLLY

The two men rounded the corner of the shrubbery.

"Well, there you are," said Raymond West. "That's it."

Horace Bindler took a deep, appreciative breath.

"How wonderful," he cried. His voice rose in a high screech of aesthetic delight, then deepened in reverent awe. "It's unbelievable. Out of this world! A period piece of the best."

"I thought you'd like it," said Raymond West complacently.

"Like it?" Words failed Horace. He unbuckled the strap of his camera and got busy. "This will be one of the gems of my collection," he said happily. "I do think, don't you, that it's rather amusing to have a collection of monstrosities? The idea came to me one night seven years ago in my bath. My last real gem was in the Campo Santo at Genoa, but I really think this beats it. What's it called?"

"I haven't the least idea," said Raymond.

"I suppose it's got a name?"

"It must have. But the fact is that it's never referred to round here as anything but Greenshaw's Folly."

"Greenshaw being the man who built it?"

"Yes. In eighteen sixty or seventy or thereabouts. The local success story of the time. Barefoot boy who had risen to immense prosperity. Local opinion is divided as to why he built this house, whether it was sheer exuberance of wealth or whether it was done to impress his creditors. If the latter, it didn't impress them. He either went bankrupt or the next thing to it. Hence the name, Greenshaw's Folly." Horace's camera clicked.

"There," he said in a satisfied voice. "Remind me to show you Number Three-ten in my collection. A really incredible marble mantelpiece in the Italian manner." He added, looking at the house, "I can't conceive of how Mr Greenshaw thought of it all."

"Rather obvious in some ways," said Raymond. "He had visited the chвteaux of the Loire, don't you think? Those turrets. And then, rather unfortunately, he seems to have travelled in the Orient. The influence of the Taj Mahal is unmistakable. I rather like the Moorish wing," he added, "and the traces of a Venetian palace."

"One wonders how he ever got hold of an architect to carry out these ideas."

Raymond shrugged his shoulders.

"No difficulty about that, I expect," he said. "Probably the architect retired with a good income for life while poor old Greenshaw went bankrupt."

"Could we look at it from the other side?" asked Horace, "or are we trespassing?"

"We're trespassing all right," said Raymond, "but I don't think it will matter."

He turned toward the corner of the house and Horace skipped after him.

"But who lives here? Orphans or holiday visitors? It can't be a school. No playing fields or brisk efficiency."

"Oh, a Greenshaw lives here still," said Raymond over his shoulder. "The house itself didn't go in the crash. Old Greenshaw's son inherited it. He was a bit of a miser and lived here in a corner of it. Never spent a penny. Probably never had a penny to spend. His daughter lives here now. Old lady - very eccentric."

As he spoke Raymond was congratulating himself on having thought of Greenshaw's Folly as a means of entertaining his guest. These literary critics always professed themselves as longing for a weekend in the country and were wont to find the country extremely boring when they got there. Tomorrow there would be the Sunday papers, and for today Raymond West congratulated himself on suggesting a visit to Greenshaw's Folly to enrich Horace Bindler's well-known collection of monstrosities.

They turned the corner of the house and came out on a neglected lawn. In one corner of it was a large artificial rockery, and bending

over it was a figure at the sight of which Horace clutched Raymond delightedly by the arm.

"Do you see what she's got on?" he exclaimed. "A sprigged print dress. Just like a housemaid - when there were housemaids. One of my most cherished memories is staying at a house in the country when I was quite a boy where a real housemaid called you in the morning, all crackling in a print dress and a cap. Yes, my boy, really - a cap. Muslin with streamers. No, perhaps it was the parlourmaid who had the streamers. But anyway, she was a real housemaid and she brought in an enormous brass can of hot water. What an exciting day we're having."

The figure in the print dress had straightened up and turned toward them, trowel in hand. She was a sufficiently startling figure. Unkempt locks of iron-grey fell wispily on her shoulders, and a straw hat, rather like the hats that horses wear in Italy, was crammed down on her head. The coloured print dress she wore fell nearly to her ankles. Out of a weather-beaten, not too clean face, shrewd eyes surveyed them appraisingly.

"I must apologize for trespassing, Miss Greenshaw," said Raymond West, as he advanced toward her, "but Mr Horace Bindler who is staying with me -"

Horace bowed and removed his hat.

"- is most interested in - er - ancient history and - er - fine buildings."

Raymond West spoke with the ease of a famous author who knows that he is a celebrity, that he can venture where other people may not.

Miss Greenshaw looked up at the sprawling exuberance behind her.

"It is a fine house," she said appreciatively. "My grandfather built it - before my time, of course. He is reported as having said that he wished to astonish the natives."

"I'll say he did that, ma'am," said Horace Bindler.

"Mr Bindler is the well-known literary critic," said Raymond West.

Miss Greenshaw had clearly no reverence for literary critics. She remained unimpressed.

"I consider it," said Miss Greenshaw, referring to the house, "as a monument to my grandfather's genius. Silly fools come here and ask me why I don't sell it and go and live in a flat. What would I do in a flat? It's my home and I live in t," said Miss Greenshaw. "Always have lived here." She considered, brooding over the past. "There were three of us. Laura married the curate. Papa wouldn't give her any money, said clergymen ought to be unworldly. She died, having a baby. Baby died too. Nettie ran away with the riding master. Papa cut her out of his will, of course. Handsome fellow, Harry Fletcher, but no good. Don't think Nettie was happy with him. Anyway, she didn't live long. They had a son. He writes to me sometimes, but of course he isn't a Greenshaw. I'm the last of the Greenshaws." She

drew up her bent shoulders with a certain pride and readjusted the rakish angle of the straw hat. Then, turning, she said sharply:

"Yes, Mrs Cresswell, what is it?"

Approaching them from the house was a figure that, seen side by side with Miss Greenshaw, seemed ludicrously dissimilar. Mrs Cresswell had a marvelously dressed head of well-blued hair towering upward in meticulously arranged curls and rolls. It was as though she had dressed her head to go as a French marquise to a fancy dress party. The rest of her middle-aged person was dressed in what ought to have been rustling black silk but was actually one of the shinier varieties of black rayon. Although she was not a large woman, she had a well-developed and sumptuous bosom. Her voice was unexpectedly deep. She spoke with exquisite diction - only a slight hesitation over words beginning with h, and the final pronunciation of them with an exaggerated aspirate gave rise to a suspicion that at some remote period in her youth she might have had trouble over dropping her h's.

"The fish, madam," said Mrs Cresswell, "the slice of cod. It has not arrived. I have asked Alfred to go down for it and he refuses."

Rather unexpectedly, Miss Greenshaw gave a cackle of laughter.

"Refuses, does he?"

"Alfred, madam, has been most disobliging."

Miss Greenshaw raised two earth-stained fingers to her lips, suddenly produced an earsplitting whistle, and at the same time yelled, "Alfred, Alfred, come here."

Round the corner of the house a young man appeared in answer to the summons, carrying a spade in his hand. He had a bold, handsome face, and as he drew near he cast an unmistakably malevolent glance toward Mrs Cresswell.

"You wanted me, miss?" he said.

"Yes, Alfred. I hear you've refused to go down for the fish. What about it, eh?"

Alfred spoke in a surly voice.

"I'll go down for it if you wants it, miss. You've only got to say."

"I do want it. I want it for my supper."

"Right you are, miss. I'll go right away."

He threw an insolent glance at Mrs Cresswell, who flushed and murmured below her breath.

"Now that I think of it," said Miss Greenshaw, "a couple of strange visitors are just what we need, aren't they, Mrs Cresswell?"

Mrs Cresswell looked puzzled.

"I'm sorry, madam -"

"For you-know-what," said Miss Greenshaw, nodding her head. "Beneficiary to a will mustn't witness it. That's right, isn't it?" She appealed to Raymond West.

"Quite correct," said Raymond.

"I know enough law to know that," said Miss Greenshaw, "and you two are men of standing."

She flung down the trowel on her weeding basket.

"Would you mind coming up to the library with me?"

"Delighted," said Horace eagerly.

She led the way through French windows and through a vast yellow-and- gold drawing-room with faded brocade on the walls and dust covers arranged over the furniture, then through a large dim hall, up a staircase, and into a room on the second floor.

"My grandfather's library," she announced.

Horace looked round with acute pleasure. It was a room from his point of view quite full of monstrosities. The heads of sphinxes appeared on the most unlikely pieces of furniture; there was a colossal bronze representing, he thought, Paul and Virginia, and a vast bronze clock with classical motifs of which he longed to take a photograph.

"A fine lot of books," said Miss Greenshaw.

Raymond was already looking at the books. From what he could see from a cursory glance there was no book here of any real interest or, indeed, any book which appeared to have been read. They were all superbly bound sets of the classics as supplied ninety years ago for furnishing a gentleman's library. Some novels of a bygone period were included. But they too showed little signs of having been read.

Miss Greenshaw was fumbling in the drawers of a vast desk. Finally she pulled out a parchment document.

"My will," she explained. "Got to leave your money to someone - or so they say. If I died without a will, I suppose that son of a horse trader would get it. Handsome fellow, Harry Fletcher, but a rogue if ever there was one. Don't see why his son should inherit this place. No," she went on, as though answering some unspoken objection, "I've made up my mind. I'm leaving it to Cresswell."

"Your housekeeper?"

"Yes. I've explained it to her. I make a will leaving her all I've got and then I don't need to pay her any wages. Saves me a lot in current expenses, and it keeps her up to the mark. No giving me notice and walking off at any minute. Very la-di-dah and all that, isn't she? But her father was a working plumber in a very small way. She's nothing to give herself airs about."

By now Miss Greenshaw had unfolded the parchment. Picking up a pen, she dipped it in the inkstand and wrote her signature, Katherine Dorothy Greenshaw.

"That's right," she said. "You've seen me sign it, and then you two sign it, and that makes it legal."

She handed the pen to Raymond West. He hesitated a moment, feeling an unexpected repulsion to what he was asked to do. Then he quickly scrawled his well-known autograph, for which his morning's mail usually brought at least six requests.

Horace took the pen from him and added his own minute signature.

"That's done," said Miss Greenshaw.

She moved across the bookcases and stood looking at them uncertainly, then she opened a glass door, took out a book, and slipped the folded parchment inside.

"I've my own places for keeping things," she said.

"Lady Audley's Secret," Raymond West remarked, catching sight of the title as she replaced the book.

Miss Greenshaw gave another cackle of laughter.

"Bestseller in its day," she remarked. "But not like your books, eh?"

She gave Raymond a sudden friendly nudge in the ribs. Raymond was rather surprised that she even knew he wrote books. Although Raymond West was a "big name" in literature, he could hardly be described as a best-seller. Though softening a little with the advent of middle age, his books dealt bleakly with the sordid side of life.

"I wonder," Horace demanded breathlessly, "if I might just take a photograph of the clock."

"By all means," said Miss Greenshaw. "It came, I believe, from the Paris Exhibition."

"Very probably," said Horace. He took his picture. "This room's not been used much since my grandfather's time," said Miss Greenshaw. "This desk's full of old diaries of his. Interesting, I should think. I haven't the eyesight to read them myself. I'd like to get them published, but I suppose one would have to work on them a good deal."

"You could engage someone to do that," said Raymond West.

"Could I really? It's an idea, you know. I'll think about it."

Raymond West glanced at his watch.

"We mustn't trespass on your kindness any longer," he said.

"Pleased to have seen you," said Miss Greenshaw graciously. "Thought you were the policeman when I heard you coming round the corner of the house."

"Why a policeman?" demanded Horace, who never minded asking questions.

Miss Greenshaw responded unexpectedly.

"If you want to know the time, ask a policeman," she carolled, and with this example of Victorian wit she nudged Horace in the ribs and roared with laughter.

"It's been a wonderful afternoon." Horace sighed as he and Raymond walked home. "Really, that place has everything. The only thing the library needs is a body. Those old-fashioned detective stories about murder in the library - that's just the kind of library I'm sure the authors had in mind."

"If you want to discuss murder," said Raymond, "you must talk to my Aunt Jane."

"Your Aunt Jane? Do you mean Miss Marple?" Horace felt a little at a loss.

The charming old-world lady to whom he had been introduced the night before seemed the last person to be mentioned in connection with murder.

"Oh yes," said Raymond. "Murder is a specialty of hers."

"How intriguing! What do you really mean?"

"I mean just that," said Raymond. He paraphrased: "Some commit murder, some get mixed up in murders, others have murder thrust upon them. My Aunt Jane comes into the third category."

"You are joking."

"Not in the least. I can refer you to the former Commissioner of Scotland Yard, several chief constables, and one or two hard-working inspectors of the C.I.D."

Horace said happily that wonders would never cease. Over the tea table they gave Joan West, Raymond's wife, Louise her niece, and old Miss Marple a résumé of the afternoon's happenings, recounting in detail everything that Miss Greenshaw had said to them.

"But I do think," said Horace, "that there is something a little sinister about the whole setup. That duchess-like creature, the housekeeper - arsenic, perhaps, in the teapot, now that she knows her mistress has made the will in her favour?"

"Tell us, Aunt Jane," said Raymond, "will there be murder or won't there? What do you think?"

"I think," said Miss Marple, winding up her wool with a rather severe air, "that you shouldn't joke about these things as much as you do, Raymond. Arsenic is, of course, quite a possibility. So easy to obtain. Probably present in the tool shed already in the form of weed killer."

"Oh, really, darling," said Joan West affectionately. "Wouldn't that be rather too obvious?"

"It's all very well to make a will," said Raymond. "I don't suppose the poor old thing has anything to leave except that awful white elephant of a house, and who would want that?"

"A film company possibly," said Horace, "or a hotel or an institution?"

"They'd expect to buy it for a song," said Raymond, but Miss Marple was shaking her head.

"You know, dear Raymond, I cannot agree with you there. About the money, I mean. The grandfather was evidently one of those lavish spenders who make money easily but can't keep it. He may have gone broke, as you say, but hardly bankrupt, or else his son would not have had the house. Now the son, as is so often the case, was of an entirely different character from his father. A miser. A man who saved every penny. I should say that in the course of his lifetime he probably put by a very good sum. This Miss Greenshaw appears to have taken after him - to dislike spending money, that is. Yes, I should think it quite likely that she has quite a substantial sum tucked away."

"In that case," said Joan West, "I wonder now - what about Louise?"

They looked at Louise as she sat, silent, by the fire.

Louise was Joan West's niece. Her marriage had recently, as she herself put it, come unstuck, leaving her with two young children and a bare sufficiency of money to keep them on.

"I mean," said Joan, "if this Miss Greenshaw really wants someone to go through diaries and get a book ready for publication..."

"It's an idea," said Raymond.

Louise said in a low voice. "It's work I could do - and I think I'd enjoy it."

"I'll write to her," said Raymond.

"I wonder," said Miss Marple thoughtfully, "what the old lady meant by that remark about a policeman?"

"Oh, it was just a joke."

"It reminded me," said Miss Marple, nodding her head vigorously, "yes, it reminded me very much of Mr Naysmith."

"Who was Mr Naysmith?" asked Raymond curiously.

"He kept bees," said Miss Marple, "and was very good at doing the acrostics in the Sunday papers. And he liked giving people false impressions just for fun. But sometimes it led to trouble."

Everybody was silent for a moment, considering Mr Naysmith, but as there did not seem to be any points of resemblance between him and Miss Greenshaw, they decided that dear Aunt Jane was perhaps getting a little bit disconnected in her old age.

Horace Bindler went back to London without having collected any more monstrosities, and Raymond West wrote a letter to Miss Greenshaw telling her that he knew of a Mrs Louise Oxley who would be competent to undertake work on the diaries. After a lapse of some days a letter arrived, written in spidery old-fashioned handwriting, in which Miss Greenshaw declared herself anxious to avail herself of the services of Mrs Oxley, and making an appointment for Mrs Oxley to come and see her.

Louise duly kept the appointment, generous terms were arranged, and she started work the following day.

"I'm awfully grateful to you," she said to Raymond. "It will fit in beautifully. I can take the children to school, go on to Greenshaw's Folly, and pick them up on my way back. How fantastic the whole setup is! That old woman has to be seen to be believed."

On the evening of her first day at work she returned and described her day.

"I've hardly seen the housekeeper," she said. "She came in with coffee and biscuits at half-past eleven, with her mouth pursed up very prunes and prisms, and would hardly speak to me. I think she disapproves deeply of my having been engaged." She went on, "It

seems there's quite a feud between her and the gardener, Alfred. He's a local boy and fairly lazy, I should imagine, and he and the housekeeper won't speak to each other. Miss Greenshaw said in her rather grand way, 'There have always been feuds as far as I can remember between the garden and the house staff. It was so in my grandfather's time. There were three men and a boy in the garden then, and eight maids in the house, but there was always friction.'"

On the next day Louise returned with another piece of news.

"Just fancy," she said, "I was asked to ring up the nephew today."

"Miss Greenshaw's nephew?"

"Yes. It seems he's an actor playing in the stock company that's doing a summer season at Boreham-on-Sea. I rang up the theater and left a message asking him to lunch tomorrow. Rather fun, really. The old girl didn't want the housekeeper to know. I think Mrs Cresswell has done something that's annoyed her."

"Tomorrow another installment of this thrilling serial," murmured Raymond.

"It's exactly like a serial, isn't it? Reconciliation with the nephew, blood is thicker than water - another will to be made and the old will destroyed.

"Aunt Jane, you're looking very serious."

"Was I, my dear? Have you heard any more about the policeman?"

Louise looked bewildered. "I don't know anything about a policeman."

"That remark of hers, my dear," said Miss Marple, "must have meant something."

Louise arrived, at her work the following day in a cheerful mood. She passed through the open front door - the doors and windows of the house were always open. Miss Greenshaw appeared to have no fear of burglars, and was probably justified, as most things in the house weighed several tons and were of no marketable value. Louise had passed Alfred in the drive. When she first noticed him he had been leaning against a tree smoking a cigarette, but as soon as he had caught sight of her he had seized a broom and begun diligently to sweep leaves. An idle young man, she thought, but good-looking. His features reminded her of someone. As she passed through the hall on the way upstairs to the library, she glanced at the large picture of Nathaniel Greenshaw which presided over the mantelpiece, showing him in the acme of Victorian prosperity, leaning back in a large armchair, his hands resting on the gold Albert chain across his capacious stomach. As her glance swept up from the stomach to the face with its heavy jowls, its bushy eyebrows and its flourishing black moustache, the thought occurred to her that Nathaniel Greenshaw must have been handsome as a young man. He had looked, perhaps, a little like Alfred...

She went into the library on the second floor, shut the door behind her, opened her typewriter, and got out the diaries from the drawer

at the side of her desk. Through the open window she caught a glimpse of Miss Greenshaw below, in a pure-coloured sprigged print, bending over the rockery, weeding assiduously. They had had two wet days, of which the weeds had taken full advantage.

Louise, a town-bred girl, decided that if she ever had a garden, it would never contain a rockery which needed weeding by hand. Then she settled down to her work.

When Mrs Cresswell entered the library with the coffee tray at half-past eleven, she was clearly in a very bad temper. She banged the tray down on the table and observed to the universe:

"Company for lunch - and nothing in the house! What am I supposed to do, I should like to know? And no sign of Alfred."

"He was sweeping the drive when I got here," Louise offered.

"I daresay. A nice soft job."

Mrs Cresswell swept out of the room, slamming the door behind her. Louise grinned to herself. She wondered what "the nephew" would be like.

She finished her coffee and settled down to her work again. It was so absorbing that time passed quickly. Nathaniel Greenshaw, when he started to keep a diary, had succumbed to the pleasures of frankness. Typing out a passage relating to the personal charms of a barmaid in the neighbouring town, Louise reflected that a good deal of editing would be necessary.

As she was thinking this, she was startled by the scream from the garden. Jumping up, she ran to the open window. Below her Miss Greenshaw was staggering away from the rockery toward the house. Her hands were clasped to her breast, and between her hands there protruded a feathered shaft that Louise recognised with stupefaction to be the shaft of an arrow.

Miss Greenshaw's head, in its battered straw hat, fell forward on her breast. She called up to Louise in a failing voice: "... shot... he shot me... with an arrow... get help..."

Louise rushed to the door. She turned the handle, but the door would not open. It took her a moment or two of futile endeavour to realize that she was locked in. She ran back to the window and called down.

"I'm locked in!"

Miss Greenshaw, her back toward Louise and swaying a little on her feet, was calling up to the housekeeper at a window farther along.

"Ring police... telephone..."

Then, lurching from side to side like a drunkard, Miss Greenshaw disappeared from Louise's view through the window and staggered into the drawing-room on the ground floor. A moment later Louise heard a crash of broken china, a heavy fall, and then silence. Her

imagination reconstructed the scene. Miss Greenshaw must have stumbled blindly into a small table with a Sévres tea set on it.

Desperately Louise pounded on the library door, calling and shouting. There was no creeper or drainpipe outside the window that could help her to get out that way.

Tired at last of beating on the door, Louise returned to the window. From the window of her sitting-room farther along the housekeeper's head appeared.

"Come and let me out, Mrs Oxley. I'm locked in."

"So am I," said Louise.

"Oh, dear, isn't it awful? I've telephoned the police. There's an extension in this room, but what I can't understand, Mrs Oxley, is our being locked in. I never heard a key turn, did you?"

"No, I didn't hear anything at all. Oh, dear, what shall we do? Perhaps Alfred might hear us." Louise shouted at the top of her voice, "Alfred, Alfred."

"Gone to his dinner as likely as not. What time is it?"

Louise glanced at her watch.

"Twenty-five past twelve."

"He's not supposed to go until half-past, but he sneaks off earlier whenever he can."

"Do you think - do you think -"

Louise meant to ask, "Do you think she's dead?" - but the words stuck in her throat.

There was nothing to do but wait. She sat down on the window sill. It seemed an eternity before the stolid helmeted figure of a police constable came round the corner of the house. She leaned out of the window and he looked up at her, shading his eyes with his hand.

"What's going on here?" he demanded.

From their respective windows Louise and Mrs Cresswell poured a flood of excited information down on him.

The constable produced a notebook and pencil. "You ladies ran upstairs and locked yourselves in? Can I have your names, please?"

"Somebody locked us in. Come and let us out."

The constable said reprovingly, "All in good time," and disappeared through the French window below.

Once again time seemed infinite. Louise heard the sound of a car arriving, and after what seemed an hour, but was actually only

three minutes, first Mrs Cresswell and then Louise were released by a police sergeant more alert than the original constable.

"Miss Greenshaw?" Louise's voice faltered. "What - what's happened?"

The sergeant cleared his throat.

"I'm sorry to have to tell you, madam," he said, "what I've already told Mrs Cresswell here. Miss Greenshaw is dead."

"Murdered," said Mrs Cresswell. "That's what it is - murder?

The sergeant said dubiously, "Could have been an accident - some country lads shooting arrows."

Again there was the sound of a car arriving.

The sergeant said, "That'll be the M.O.," and he started downstairs.

But it was not the M.O. As Louise and Mrs Cresswell came down the stairs, a young man stepped hesitatingly through the front door and paused, looking around him with a somewhat bewildered air.

Then, speaking in a pleasant voice that in some way seemed familiar to Louise - perhaps it reminded her of Miss Greenshaw's - he asked, "Excuse me, does - er - does Miss Greenshaw live here?"

"May I have your name if you please?" said the sergeant, advancing upon him.

"Fletcher," said the young man. "Nat Fletcher. I'm Miss Greenshaw's nephew, as a matter of fact."

"Indeed, sir, well - I'm sorry -"

"Has anything happened?" asked Nat Fletcher.

"There's been an - accident. Your aunt was shot with an arrow - penetrated the jugular vein -"

Mrs Cresswell spoke hysterically and without her usual refinement:

"Your h'aunt's been murdered, that's what's happened. Your h'aunt's been murdered."

Inspector Welch drew his chair a little nearer to the table and let his gaze wander from one to the other of the four people in the room. It was evening of the same day. He had called at the Wests' house to take Louise Oxley once more over her statement.

"You are sure of the exact words? Shot - he shot me - with an arrow - get help?"

Louise nodded.

"And the time?"

"I looked at my watch a minute or two later - it was then twelve twenty-five -"

"Your watch keeps good time?"

"I looked at the clock as well." Louise left no doubt of her accuracy.

The inspector turned to Raymond West.

"It appears, sir, that about a week ago you and a Mr Horace Bindler were witnesses to Miss Greenshaw's will?"

Briefly Raymond recounted the events of the afternoon visit he and Horace Bindler had paid to Greenshaw's Folly.

"This testimony of yours may be important," said Welch. "Miss Greenshaw distinctly told you, did she, that her will was being made in favour of Mrs Cresswell, the housekeeper, and that she was not paying Mrs Cresswell any wages in view of the expectations Mrs Cresswell had of profiting by her death?"

"That is what she told me - yes."

"Would you say that Mrs Cresswell was definitely aware of these facts?"

"I should say undoubtedly. Miss Greenshaw made a reference in my presence to beneficiaries not being able to witness a will, and Mrs Creswell clearly understood what she meant by it. Moreover, Miss

Greenshaw herself told me that she had come to this arrangement with Mrs Cresswell."

"So Mrs Cresswell had reason to believe she was an interested party. Motive clear enough in her case, and I daresay she'd be our chief suspect now if it wasn't for the fact that she was securely locked in her room like Mrs Oxley here, and also that Miss Greenshaw definitely said a man shot her -"

"She definitely was locked in her room?"

"Oh yes. Sergeant Cayley let her out. It's a big old-fashioned lock with a big old-fashioned key. The key was in the lock and there's not a chance that it could have been turned from inside or any hanky-panky of that kind. No, you can take it definitely that Mrs Cresswell was locked inside that room and couldn't get out. And there were no bows and arrows in the room and Miss Greenshaw couldn't in any case have been shot from her window - the angle forbids it. No, Mrs Cresswell's out." He paused, then went on: "Would you say that Miss Greenshaw, in your opinion, was a practical joker?"

Miss Marple looked up sharply from her corner.

"So the will wasn't in Mrs Cresswell's favour after all?" she said.

Inspector Welch looked over at her in a rather surprised fashion.

"That's a very clever guess of yours, madam," he said. "No, Mrs Cresswell isn't named as beneficiary."

"Just like Mr Naysmith," said Miss Marple, nodding her head. "Miss Greenshaw told Mrs Cresswell she was going to leave her everything and so got out of paying her wages, and then she left her money to somebody else. No doubt she was vastly pleased with herself. No wonder she chortled when she put the will away in Lady Audley's Secret."

"It was lucky Mrs Oxley was able to tell us about the will and where it was put," said the inspector. "We might have had a long hunt for it otherwise."

"A Victorian sense of humour," murmured Raymond West.

"So she left her money to her nephew after all," said Louise.

The inspector shook his head.

"No," he said, "she didn't leave it to Nat Fletcher. The story goes around here - of course, I'm new to the place and I only get the gossip that's secondhand but it seems that in the old days both Miss Greenshaw and her sister were set on the handsome young riding master, and the sister got him. No, she didn't leave the money to her nephew -" Inspector Welch paused, rubbing his chin. "She left it to Alfred," he said.

"Alfred - the gardener?" Joan spoke in a surprised voice.

"Yes, Mrs West. Alfred Pollock."

"But why?" cried Louise.

"I daresay," said Miss Marple, "that she thought Alfred Pollock might have a pride in the house, might even want to live in it, whereas her nephew would almost certainly have no use for it whatever and would sell it as soon as he could possibly do so. He's an actor, isn't he? What play exactly is he acting in at present?"

Trust an old lady to wander from the point, thought Inspector Welch; but he replied civilly, "I believe, madam, they are doing a season of Sir James M. Barrie's plays."

"Barrie," said Miss Marple thoughtfully.

"What Every Woman Knows," said Inspector Welch, and then blushed.

"Name of a play," he said quickly. "I'm not much of a theater-goer myself," he added, "but the wife went along and saw it last week. Quite well done, she said it was."

"Barrie, wrote some very charming plays," said Miss Marple, "though I must say that when I went with an old friend of mine, General Easterly, to see Barrie's Little Mary -" she shook her head sadly - "neither of us knew where to look."

The inspector, unacquainted with the play 'Little Mary', seemed completely fogged.

Miss Marple explained: "When I was a girl, Inspector, nobody ever mentioned the word stomach."

The inspector looked even more at sea. Miss Marple was murmuring titles under her breath.

"'The Admirable Crichton.' Very clever. 'Mary Rose' - a charming play. I cried, I remember. 'Quality Street' I didn't care for so much. Then there was 'A Kiss for Cinderella.' Oh, of course!"

Inspector Welch had no time to waste on theatrical discussion. He returned to the matter at hand.

"The question is," he said, "did Alfred Pollock know the old lady had made a will in his favour? Did she tell him?" He added, "You see - there's an archery club over at Boreham - and Alfred Pollock's a member. He's a very good shot indeed with a bow and arrow."

"Then isn't your case quite clear?" asked Raymond West. "It would fit in with the doors being locked on the two women - he'd know just where they were in the house."

The inspector looked at him. He spoke with deep melancholy.

"He's got an alibi," said the inspector.

"I always think alibis are definitely suspicious," Raymond remarked.

"Maybe, sir," said Inspector Welch. "You're talking as a writer."

"I don't write detective stories," said Raymond West, horrified at the mere idea.

"Easy enough to say that alibis are suspicious," went on Inspector Welch, "but unfortunately we've got to deal with facts." He sighed. "We've got three good suspects," he went on. "Three people who, as it happened, were very close upon the scene at the time. Yet the odd thing is that it looks as though none of the three could have done it. The housekeeper I've already dealt with; the nephew, Nat Fletcher, at the moment Miss Greenshaw was shot, was a couple of miles away, filling up his car at a garage and asking his way; as for Alfred Pollock, six people will swear that he entered the Dog and Duck at twenty past twelve and was there for an hour, having his usual bread and cheese and beer."

"Deliberately establishing an alibi," said Raymond West hopefully.

"Maybe," said Inspector Welch, "but if so, he did establish it."

There was a long silence. Then Raymond turned his head to where Miss Marple sat upright and thoughtful.

"It's up to you, Aunt Jane," he said. "The inspector's baffled, the sergeant's baffled, Joan's baffled, Louise is baffled. But to you, Aunt Jane, it is crystal clear. Am I right?"

"I wouldn't say that," said Miss Marple, "not crystal clear. And murder, dear Raymond, isn't a game. I don't suppose poor Miss Greenshaw wanted to die, and it was a particularly brutal murder.

Very well-planned and quite cold-blooded. It's not a thing to make jokes about."

"I'm sorry," said Raymond. "I'm not really as callous as I sound. One treats a thing lightly to take away from the - well, the horror of it."

"That is, I believe, the modern tendency," said Miss Marple. "All these wars, and having to joke about funerals. Yes, perhaps I was thoughtless when I implied that you were callous."

"It isn't," said Joan, "as though we'd known her at all well."

"That is very true," said Miss Marple. "You, dear Joan, did not know her at all. I did not know her at all. Raymond gathered an impression of her from one afternoon's conversation. Louise knew her for only two days."

"Come now, Aunt Jane," said Raymond, "tell us your views. You don't mind, Inspector?"

"Not at all," said the inspector politely.

"Well, my dear, it would seem that we have three people who had - or might have thought they had - a motive to kill the old lady. And three quite simple reasons why none of the three could have done so. The housekeeper could not have killed Miss Greenshaw because she was locked in her room and because her mistress definitely stated that a man shot her. The gardener was inside the Dog and Duck at the time, the nephew at the garage."

"Very clearly put, madam," said the inspector.

"And since it seems most unlikely that any outsider should have done it, where, then, are we?"

"That's what the inspector wants to know," said Raymond West.

"One so often looks at a thing the wrong way round," said Miss Marple apologetically. "If we can't alter the movements or the positions of those three people, then couldn't we perhaps alter the time of the murder?"

"You mean that both my watch and the clock were wrong?" asked Louise.

"No, dear," said Miss Marple, "I didn't mean that at all. I mean that the murder didn't occur when you thought it occurred."

"But I saw it," cried Louise.

"Well, what I have been wondering, my dear, was whether you weren't meant to see it. I've been asking myself, you know, whether that wasn't the real reason why you were engaged for this job."

"What do you mean, Aunt Jane?"

"Well, dear, it seems odd. Miss Greenshaw did not like spending money - yet she engaged you and agreed quite willingly to the terms you asked. It seems to me that perhaps you were meant to be there in that library on the second floor, looking out of the window

so that you could be the key witness - someone from outside of irreproachably good character - to fix a definite time and place for the murder."

"But you can't mean," said Louise incredulously, "that Miss Greenshaw intended to be murdered."

"What I mean, dear," said Miss Marple, "is that you didn't really know Miss Greenshaw. There's no real reason, is there, why the Miss Greenshaw you saw when you went up to the house should be the same Miss Greenshaw that Raymond saw a few days earlier? Oh yes, I know," she went on, to prevent Louise's reply, "she was wearing the peculiar old-fashioned print dress and the strange straw hat and had unkempt hair. She corresponded exactly to the description Raymond gave us last weekend. But those two women, you know, were much the same age, height, and size. The housekeeper, I mean, and Miss Greenshaw."

"But the housekeeper is fat!" Louise exclaimed. "She's got an enormous bosom."

Miss Marple coughed.

"But, my dear, surely, nowadays I have seen - er - them myself in shops most indelicately displayed. It is very easy for anyone to have a - a bosom - of any size and dimension."

"What are you trying to say?" demanded Raymond.

"I was just thinking that during the two days Louise was working there, one woman could have played both parts. You said yourself, Louise, that you hardly saw the housekeeper, except for the one minute in the morning when she brought you the tray with coffee. One sees those clever artists on the stage coming in as different characters with only a moment or two to spare, and I am sure the change could have been effected quite easily. That marquise headdress could be just a wig slipped on and off."

"Aunt Jane! Do you mean that Miss Greenshaw was dead before I started work there?"

"Not dead. Kept under drugs, I should say. A very easy job for an unscrupulous woman like the housekeeper to do. Then she made the arrangements with you and got you to telephone to the nephew to ask him to lunch at a definite time. The only person who would have known that this Miss Greenshaw was not Miss Greenshaw would have been Alfred. And if you remember, the first two days you were working there it was wet, and Miss Greenshaw stayed in the house. Alfred never came into the house because of his feud with the housekeeper. And on the last morning Alfred was in the drive, while Miss Greenshaw was working on the rockery - I'd like to have a look at that rockery."

"Do you mean it was Mrs Cresswell who killed Miss Greenshaw?"

"I think that after bringing you your coffee, the housekeeper locked the door on you as she went out, then carried the unconscious Miss Greenshaw down to the drawing room, then assumed her 'Miss Greenshaw' disguise and went out to work on the rockery where

you could see her from the upstairs window. In due course she screamed and came staggering to the house clutching an arrow as though it had penetrated her throat. She called for help and was careful to say 'he shot me' so as to remove suspicion from the housekeeper - from herself. She also called up to the housekeeper's window as though she saw her there. Then, once inside the drawing-room, she threw over a table with porcelain on it, ran quickly upstairs, put on her marquise wig, and was able a few moments later to lean her head out of the window and tell you that she, too, was locked in."

"But she was locked in," said Louise.

"I know. That is where the policeman comes in."

"What policeman?"

"Exactly - what policeman? I wonder, Inspector, if you would mind telling me how and when you arrived on the scene?"

The inspector looked a little puzzled.

"At twelve twenty-nine we received a telephone call from Mrs Cresswell, housekeeper to Miss Greenshaw, stating that her mistress had been shot. Sergeant Cayley and myself went out there at once in a car and arrived at the house at twelve thirty-five. We found Miss Greenshaw dead and the two ladies locked in their rooms."

"So, you see, my dear," said Miss Marple to Louise, "the police constable you saw wasn't a real police constable at all. You never thought of him again - one doesn't - one just accept one more uniform as part of the law."

"But who - why?"

"As to who - well, if they are playing A Kiss for Cinderella, a policeman is the principal character. Nat Fletcher would only have to help himself to the costume he wears on the stage. He'd ask his way at a garage, being careful to call attention to the time - twelve twenty-five; then he would drive on quickly, leave his car round a corner, slip on his police uniform, and do his 'act.'"

"But why - why?"

"Someone had to lock the housekeeper's door on the outside, and someone had to drive the arrow through Miss Greenshaw's throat. You can stab anyone with an arrow just as well as by shooting it but it needs force."

"You mean they were both in it?"

"Oh yes, I think so. Mother and son as likely as not."

"But Miss Greenshaw's sister died long ago."

"Yes, but I've no doubt Mr Fletcher married again - he sounds like the sort of man who would. I think it possible that the child died, too, and that this so-called nephew was the second wife's child and

not really a relation at all. The woman got the post as housekeeper and spied out the land. Then he wrote to Miss Greenshaw as her nephew and proposed to call on her - he may have even made some joking reference to coming in his policeman's uniform - remember, she said she was expecting a policeman. But I think Miss Greenshaw suspected the truth and refused to see him. He would have been her heir if she had died without making a will but of course once she had made a will in the housekeeper's favour, as they thought, then it was clear sailing."

"But why use an arrow?" objected Joan. "So very farfetched."

"Not far-fetched at all, dear. Alfred belonged to an archery club- Alfred was meant to take the blame. The fact that he was in the pub as early as twelve-twenty was most unfortunate from their point of view. He always left a little before his proper time and that would have been just right." She shook her head. "It really seems all wrong - morally, I mean, that Alfred's laziness should have saved his life."

The inspector cleared his throat.

"Well, madam, these suggestions of yours are very interesting. I shall, of course, have to investigate -"

Miss Marple and Raymond West stood by the rockery and looked down at a gardening basket full of dying vegetation.

Miss Marple murmured: "Alyssum, saxifrage, cystis, thimble campanula... Yes, that's all the proof I need. Whoever was weeding here yesterday morning was no gardener - she pulled up plants as well as weeds. So now I know I'm right. Thank you, dear Raymond, for bringing me here. I wanted to see the place for myself."

She and Raymond both looked up at the outrageous pile of Greenshaw's Folly.

A cough made them turn. A handsome young man was also looking at the monstrous house.

"Plaguey big place," he said. "Too big for nowadays - or so they say. I dunno about that. If I won a football pool and made a lot of money, that's the kind of house I'd like to build."

He smiled bashfully at them, then rumpled his hair.

"Reckon I can say so now," said Alfred Pollock. "And a fine house it is, for all they call it Greenshaw's Folly!"

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THE AFFAIR AT THE VICTORY BALL

Pure chance led my friend Hercule Poirot, formerly chief of the Belgian force, to be connected with the Styles Case. His success brought him notoriety, and he decided to devote himself to the solving of problems in crime. Having been wounded on the Somme and invalided out of the Army, I finally took up my quarters with him in London. Since I have a first-hand knowledge of most of his cases,

it has been suggested to me that I select some of the most interesting and place them on record. In doing so, I feel that I cannot do better than begin with that strange tangle which aroused such widespread public interest at the time. I refer to the affair at the Victory Ball.

Although perhaps it is not so fully demonstrative of Poirot's peculiar methods as some of the more obscure cases, its sensational features, the well-known people involved, and the tremendous publicity given it by the press, make it stand out as a cause célèbre and I have long felt that it is only fitting that Poirot's connection with the solution should be given to the world.

It was a fine morning in spring, and we were sitting in Poirot's rooms. My little friend, neat and dapper as ever, his egg-shaped head tilted slightly on one side, was delicately applying a new pomade to his moustache. A certain harmless vanity was a characteristic of Poirot's and fell into line with his general love of order and method. The Daily Newsmonger, which I had been reading, had slipped to the floor, and I was deep in a brown study when Poirot's voice recalled me.

'Of what are you thinking so deeply, mon ami?'

'To tell you the truth,' I replied, 'I was puzzling over this unaccountable affair at the Victory Ball. The papers are full of it.'

I tapped the sheet with my finger as I spoke.

'Yes?'

'The more one reads of it, the more shrouded in mystery the whole thing becomes!' I warmed to my subject. 'Who killed Lord Cronshaw? Was Coco Courtenay's death on the same night a mere coincidence? Was it an accident? Or did she deliberately take an overdose of cocaine?' I stopped, and then added dramatically: 'These are the questions I ask myself.'

Poirot, somewhat to my annoyance, did not play up. He was peering into the glass, and merely murmured: 'Decidedly, this new pomade, it is a marvel for the moustaches!' Catching my eye, however, he added hastily: 'Quite so - and how do you reply to your questions?'

But before I could answer, the door opened, and our landlady announced Inspector Japp.

The Scotland Yard man was an old friend of ours and we greeted him warmly.

'Ah, my good Japp,' cried Poirot, 'and what brings you to see us?'

'Well, Monsieur Poirot,' said Japp, seating himself and nodding to me, 'I'm on a case that strikes me as being very much in your line, and I came along to know whether you'd care to have a finger in the pie?'

Poirot had a good opinion of Japp's abilities, though deploring his lamentable lack of method; but I, for my part, considered that the detective's highest talent lay in the gentle art of seeking favours under the guise of conferring them!

'It's this Victory Ball,' said Japp persuasively. 'Come, now, you'd like to have a hand in that.'

Poirot smiled at me.

'My friend Hastings would, at all events. He was just holding forth on the subject, n'est-ce pas, mon ami?'

'Well, sir,' said Japp condescendingly, 'you shall be in it too. I can tell you, it's something of a feather in your cap to have inside knowledge of a case like this. Well, here's to business. You know the main facts of the case, I suppose, Monsieur Poirot?'

'From the papers only - and the imagination of the journalist is sometimes misleading. Recount the whole story to me.'

Japp crossed his legs comfortably and began.

'As all the world and his wife knows, on Tuesday last a grand Victory Ball was held. Every twopenny-halfpenny hop calls itself that nowadays, but this was the real thing, held at the Colossus Hall, and all London at it - including young Lord Cronshaw and his party.'

'His dossier?' interrupted Poirot. 'I should say his bioscope - no, how do you call it - biograph?'

'Viscount Cronshaw was the fifth viscount, twenty-five years of age, rich, unmarried, and very fond of the theatrical world. There were

rumours of his being engaged to Miss Courtenay of the Albany Theatre, who was known to her friends as "Coco" and who was, by all accounts, a very fascinating young lady.'

'Good. Continuez!'

'Lord Cronshaw's party consisted of six people: he himself, his uncle, the Honourable Eustace Beltane, a pretty American widow, Mrs Mallaby, a young actor, Chris Davidson, his wife, and last but not least, Miss Coco Courtenay. It was a fancy-dress ball, as you know, and the Cronshaw party represented the old Italian Comedy - whatever that may be.'

'The Commedia dell' Arte,' murmured Poirot. 'I know.'

'Anyway, the costumes were copied from a set of china figures forming part of Eustace Beltane's collection. Lord Cronshaw was Harlequin; Beltane was Punchinello; Mrs Mallaby matched him as Pulcinella; the Davidsons were Pierrot and Pierrette; and Miss Courtenay, of course, was Columbine. Now, quite early in the evening it was apparent that there was something wrong. Lord Cronshaw was moody and strange in his manner. When the party met together for supper in a small private room engaged by the host, everyone noticed that he and Miss Courtenay were no longer on speaking-terms. She had obviously been crying, and seemed on the verge of hysterics. The meal was an uncomfortable one, and as they all left the supper-room, she turned to Chris Davidson and requested him audibly to take her home, as she was "sick of the ball". The young actor hesitated, glancing at Lord Cronshaw, and finally drew them both back to the supper-room.

'But all his efforts to secure a reconciliation were unavailing, and he accordingly got a taxi and escorted the now weeping Miss Courtenay back to her flat. Although obviously very much upset, she did not confide in him, merely reiterating again and again that she would "make old Cronch sorry for this." That is the only hint we have that her death might not have been accidental, and it's precious little to go upon. By the time Davidson had quieted her down somewhat, it was too late to return to the Colossus Hall, and Davidson accordingly went straight home to his flat in Chelsea, where his wife arrived shortly afterwards, bearing the news of the terrible tragedy that had occurred after his departure.

'Lord Cronshaw, it seems, became more and more moody as the ball went on. He kept away from his party, and they hardly saw him during the rest of the evening. It was about one-thirty a.m., just before the grand cotillion when everyone was to unmask, that Captain Digby, a brother officer who knew his disguise, noticed him standing in a box gazing down on the scene.

'"Hullo, Cronch!" he called. "Come down and be sociable! What are you moping about up there for like a boiled owl? Come along; there's a good old rag coming on now."

'"Right." responded Cronshaw. "Wait for me, or I'll never find you in the crowd."

'He turned and left the box as he spoke. Captain Digby, who had Mrs Davidson with him, waited. The minutes passed, but Lord Cronshaw did not appear. Finally Digby grew impatient.

'"Does the fellow think we're going to wait all night for him?" he exclaimed.

'At that moment Mrs Mallaby joined them, and they explained the situation.

'"Say, now," cried the pretty widow vivaciously, "he's like a bear with a sore head tonight. Let's go right away and rout him out."

'The search commenced, but met with no success until it occurred to Mrs Mallaby that he might possibly be found in the room where they had supped an hour earlier. They made their way there. What a sight met their eyes! There was Harlequin, sure enough, but stretched on the ground with a table-knife in his heart!'

Japp stopped, and Poirot nodded, and said with the relish of the specialist:

'Une belle affaire! And there was no clue as to the perpetrator of the deed? But how should there be!'

'Well,' continued the inspector, 'you know the rest. The tragedy was a double one. Next day there were headlines in all the papers, and a brief statement to the effect that Miss Courtenay, the popular actress, had been discovered dead in her bed, and that her death was due to an overdose of cocaine. Now, was it accident or suicide? Her maid, who was called upon to give evidence, admitted that Miss Courtenay was a confirmed taker of the drug, and a

verdict of accidental death was returned. Nevertheless we can't leave the possibility of suicide out of account. Her death is particularly unfortunate, since it leaves us no clue now to the cause of the quarrel the preceding night. By the way, a small enamel box was found on the dead man. It had Coco written across it in diamonds, and was half full of cocaine. It was identified by Miss Courtenay's maid as belonging to her mistress, who nearly always carried it about with her, since it contained her supply of the drug to which she was fast becoming a slave.'

'Was Lord Cronshaw himself addicted to the drug?'

'Very far from it. He held unusually strong views on the subject of dope.'

Poirot nodded thoughtfully.

'But since the box was in his possession, he knew that Miss Courtenay took it. Suggestive, that, is it not, my good Japp?'

'Ah!' said Japp rather vaguely.

I smiled.

'Well,' said Japp, 'that's the case. What do you think of it?'

'You found no clue of any kind that has not been reported?'

'Yes, there was this.' Japp took a small object from his pocket and handed it over to Poirot. It was a small pompon of emerald green

silk, with some ragged threads hanging from it, as though it had been wrenched violently away.

'We found it in the dead man's hand, which was tightly clenched over it,' explained the inspector.

Poirot handed it back without any comment and asked: 'Had Lord Cronshaw any enemies?'

'None that anyone knows of. He seemed a popular young fellow.'

'Who benefits by his death?'

'His uncle, the Honourable Eustace Beltane, comes into the title and estates. There are one or two suspicious facts against him. Several people declare that they heard a violent altercation going on in the little supper-room, and that Eustace Beltane was one of the disputants. You see, the table-knife being snatched up off the table would fit in with the murder being done in the heat of a quarrel.'

'What does Mr Beltane say about the matter?'

'Declares one of the waiters was the worse for liquor, and that he was giving him a dressing down. Also that it was nearer to one than half past. You see, Captain Digby's evidence fixes the time pretty accurately. Only about ten minutes elapsed between his speaking to Cronshaw and the finding of the body.'

'And in any case I suppose Mr Beltane, as Punchinello, was wearing a hump and a ruffle?'

'I don't know the exact details of the costumes,' said Japp, looking curiously at Poirot. 'And anyway, I don't quite see what that has got to do with it?'

'No?' There was a hint of mockery in Poirot's smile. He continued quietly, his eyes shining with the green light I had learned to recognize so well: 'There was a curtain in this little supper room, was there not?'

'Yes, but -'

'With a space behind it sufficient to conceal a man?'

'Yes - in fact, there's a small recess, but how you knew about it - you haven't been to the place, have you, Monsieur Poirot?'

'No, my good Japp, I supplied the curtain from my brain. Without it, the drama is not reasonable. And always one must be reasonable. But tell me, did they not send for a doctor?'

'At once, of course. But there was nothing to be done. Death must have been instantaneous.'

Poirot nodded rather impatiently.

'Yes, yes, I understand. This doctor, now, he gave evidence at the inquest?'

'Yes.'

'Did he say nothing of any unusual symptom - was there nothing about the appearance of the body which struck him as being abnormal?'

Japp stared hard at the little man.

'Yes, Monsieur Poirot. I don't know what you're getting at, but he did mention that there was a tension and stiffness about the limbs which he was quite at a loss to account for.'

'Aha!' said Poirot. 'Aha! Mon Dieu! Japp, that gives one to think, does it not?'

I saw that it had certainly not given Japp to think.

'If you're thinking of poison, monsieur, who on earth would poison a man first and then stick a knife into him?'

'In truth that would be ridiculous,' agreed Poirot placidly.

'Now is there anything you want to see, monsieur? If you'd like to examine the room where the body was found -'

Poirot waved his hand.

'Not in the least. You have told me the only thing that interests me - Lord Cronshaw's views on the subject of drug-taking.'

'Then there's nothing you want to see?'

'Just one thing.'

'What is that?'

'The set of china figures from which the costumes were copied.'

Japp stared.

'Well, you're a funny one!'

'You can manage that for me?'

'Come round to Berkeley Square now if you like. Mr Beltane - or His Lordship, as I should say now - won't object.'

We set off at once in a taxi. The new Lord Cronshaw was not at home, but at Japp's request we were shown into the 'china room', where the gems of the collection were kept. Japp looked round him rather helplessly.

'I don't see how you'll ever find the ones you want, Monsieur.'

But Poirot had already drawn a chair in front of the mantelpiece and was hopping up upon it like a nimble robin. Above the mirror, on a

small shelf to themselves, stood six china figures. Poirot examined them minutely, making a few comments to us as he did so.

'Les voilà! The old Italian Comedy. Three pairs! Harlequin and Columbine, Pierrot and Pierrette - very dainty in white and green - and Punchinello and Pulcinella in mauve and yellow. Very elaborate, the costume of Punchinello - ruffles and frills, a hump, a high hat. Yes, as I thought, very elaborate.'

He replaced the figures carefully, and jumped down.

Japp looked unsatisfied, but as Poirot had clearly no intention of explaining anything, the detective put the best face he could upon the matter. As we were preparing to leave, the master of the house came in, and Japp performed the necessary introductions.

The sixth Viscount Cronshaw was a man of about fifty, suave in manner, with a handsome, dissolute face. Evidently an elderly roué , with the languid manner of a poseur. I took an instant dislike to him. He greeted us graciously enough, declaring he had heard great accounts of Poirot's skill, and placing himself at our disposal in every way.

'The police are doing all they can, I know,' he said. 'But I much fear the mystery of my nephew's death will never be cleared up. The whole thing seems utterly mysterious.'

Poirot was watching him keenly. 'Your nephew had no enemies that you know of?'

'None whatever. I am sure of that.' He paused and then went on: 'If there are any questions you would like to ask -'

'Only one.' Poirot's voice was serious. 'The costumes - they were reproduced exactly from your figurines?'

'To the smallest detail.'

'Thank you, milord. That is all I wanted to be sure of. I wish you good day.'

'And what next?' inquired Japp as we hurried down the street. 'I've got to report at the Yard, you know.'

'Bien! I will not detain you. I have one other little matter to attend to, and then -'

'Yes?'

'The case will be complete.'

'What? You don't mean it! You know who killed Lord Cronshaw?'

'Parfaitement.'

'Who was it? Eustace Beltane?'

'Ah, mon ami, you know my little weakness! Always I have a desire to keep the threads in my own hands up to the last minute. But have no fear. I will reveal all when the time comes. I want no credit - the

affair shall be yours, on the condition that you permit me to play out the dé nouement my own way.'

'That's fair enough,' said Japp. 'That is, if the dé nouement ever comes! But I say, you are an oyster, aren't you?' Poirot smiled. 'Well, so long. I'm off to the Yard.'

He strode off down the street, and Poirot hailed a passing taxi.

'Where are we going now?' I asked in lively curiosity.

'To Chelsea to see the Davidsons.'

He gave the address to the driver.

'What do you think of the new Lord Cronshaw?' I asked.

'What says my good friend Hastings?'

'I distrust him instinctively.'

'You think he is the "wicked uncle" of the story-books, eh?'

'Don't you?'

'Me, I think he was most amiable towards us,' said Poirot noncommittally.

'Because he had his reasons!'

Poirot looked at me, shook his head sadly, and murmured something that sounded like: 'No method.'

The Davidsons lived on the third floor of a block of 'mansion' flats. Mr Davidson was out, we were told, but Mrs Davidson was at home. We were ushered into a long, low room with garish Oriental hangings. The air felt close and oppressive, and there was an overpowering fragrance of joss-sticks. Mrs Davidson came to us almost immediately, a small, fair creature whose fragility would have seemed pathetic and appealing had it not been for the rather shrewd and calculating gleam in her light blue eyes.

Poirot explained our connection with the case, and she shook her head sadly.

'Poor Cronch - and poor Coco too! We were both so fond of her, and her death has been a terrible grief to us. What is it you want to ask me? Must I really go over all that dreadful evening again?'

'Oh, madame, believe me, I would not harass your feelings unnecessarily. Indeed, Inspector Japp has told me all that is needful. I only wish to see the costume you wore at the ball that night.'

The lady looked somewhat surprised, and Poirot continued smoothly:

'You comprehend, madame, that I work on the system of my country. There we always "reconstruct" the crime. It is possible

that I may have an actual repré sentation, and if so, you understand, the costumes would be important.'

Mrs Davidson still looked a bit doubtful.

'I've heard of reconstructing a crime, of course,' she said. 'But I didn't know you were so particular about details. But I'll fetch the dress now.'

She left the room and returned almost immediately with a dainty wisp of white satin and green. Poirot took it from her and examined it, handing it back with a bow.

'Merci, madame! I see you have had the misfortune to lose one of your green pompons, the one on the shoulder here.'

'Yes, it got torn off at the ball. I picked it up and gave it to poor Lord Cronshaw to keep for me.'

'That was after supper?'

'Yes.'

'Not long before the tragedy, perhaps?'

A faint look of alarm came into Mrs Davidson's pale eyes, and she replied quickly: 'Oh no - long before that. Quite soon after supper, in fact.'

'I see. Well, that is all. I will not derange you further. Bonjour, madame.'

'Well,' I said, as we emerged from the building, 'that explains the mystery of the green pompon.'

'I wonder.'

'Why, what do you mean?'

'You saw me examine the dress, Hastings?'

'Yes?'

'Eh bien, the pompon that was missing had not been wrenched off, as the lady said. On the contrary, it had been cut off, my friend, cut off with scissors. The threads were all quite even.'

'Dear me!' I exclaimed. 'This becomes more and more involved.'

'On the contrary,' replied Poirot placidly, 'it becomes more and more simple.'

'Poirot,' I cried, 'one day I shall murder you! Your habit of finding everything perfectly simple is aggravating to the last degree!'

'But when I explain, mon ami, is it not always perfectly simple?'

'Yes; that is the annoying part of it! I feel then that I could have done it myself.'

'And so you could, Hastings, so you could. If you would but take the trouble of arranging your ideas! Without method -'

'Yes, yes,' I said hastily, for I knew Poirot's eloquence when started on his favourite theme only too well. 'Tell me, what do we do next? Are you really going to reconstruct the crime?'

'Hardly that. Shall we say that the drama is over, but that I propose to add a - Harlequinade?'

The following Tuesday was fixed upon by Poirot as the day for this mysterious performance. The preparations greatly intrigued me. A white screen was erected at one side of the room, flanked by heavy curtains at either side. A man with some lighting apparatus arrived next, and finally a group of members of the theatrical profession, who disappeared into Poirot's bedroom, which had been rigged up as a temporary dressing-room.

Shortly before eight, Japp arrived, in no very cheerful mood. I gathered that the official detective hardly approved of Poirot's plan.

'Bit melodramatic, like all his ideas. But there, it can do no harm, and as he says, it might save us a good bit of trouble. He's been very smart over the case. I was on the same scent myself, of course -' I felt instinctively that Japp was straining the truth here - 'but there, I promised to let him play the thing out his own way. Ah! Here is the crowd.'

His Lordship arrived first, escorting Mrs Mallaby, whom I had not as yet seen. She was a pretty, dark-haired woman, and appeared perceptibly nervous. The Davidsons followed. Chris Davidson also I saw for the first time. He was handsome enough in a rather obvious style, tall and dark, with the easy grace of the actor.

Poirot had arranged seats for the party facing the screen. This was illuminated by a bright light. Poirot switched out the other lights so that the room was in darkness except for the screen. Poirot's voice rose out of the gloom.

'Messieurs, mesdames, a word of explanation. Six figures in turn will pass across the screen. They are familiar to you. Pierrot and his Pierrette; Punchinello the buffoon, and elegant Pulcinella; beautiful Columbine, lightly dancing, Harlequin, the sprite, invisible to man!'

With these words of introduction, the show began. In turn each figure that Poirot had mentioned bounded before the screen, stayed there a moment poised, and then vanished. The lights went up, and a sigh of relief went round. Everyone had been nervous, fearing they knew not what. It seemed to me that the proceedings had gone singularly flat. If the criminal was among us, and Poirot expected him to break down at the mere sight of a familiar figure, the device had failed signally - as it was almost bound to do. Poirot, however, appeared not a whit discomposed. He stepped forward, beaming.

'Now, messieurs and mesdames, will you be so good as to tell me, one at a time what it is that we have just seen? Will you begin, milord?'

The gentleman looked rather puzzled. 'I'm afraid I don't quite understand.'

'Just tell me what we have been seeing.'

'I - er - well, I should say we have seen six figures passing in front of a screen and dressed to represent the personages in the old Italian Comedy, or - er - ourselves the other night.'

'Never mind the other night, milor',' broke in Poirot. 'The first part of your speech was what I wanted. Madame you agree with Milor' Cronshaw?'

He had turned as he spoke to Mrs Mallaby.

'I - er - yes, of course.'

'You agree that you have seen six figures representing the Italian Comedy?'

'Why, certainly.'

'Monsieur Davidson? You too?'

'Yes.'

'Madame?'

'Yes.'

'Hastings? Japp? Yes? You are all in accord?'

He looked around upon us; his face grew rather pale, and his eyes were green as any cat's.

'And yet - you are all wrong! Your eyes have lied to you - as they lied to you on the night of the Victory Ball. To "see things with your own eyes", as they say, is not always to see the truth. One must see with eyes of the mind; one must employ the little cells of grey! Know, then, that tonight and on the night of the Victory Ball, you saw not six figures but five! See!'

The lights went out again. A figure bounded in front of the screen - Pierrot!

'Who is that?' demanded Poirot. 'Is it Pierrot?'

'Yes,' we all cried.

'Look again!'

With a swift movement the man divested himself of his loose Pierrot garb. There in the limelight stood glittering Harlequin! At the same moment there was a cry and an overturned chair.

'Curse you,' snarled Davidson's voice. 'Curse you! How did you guess?'

Then came the clink of handcuffs and Japp's calm official voice. 'I arrest you, Christopher Davidson - charge of murdering Viscount Cronshaw - anything you say used in evidence against you.'

It was a quarter of an hour later. A recherché little supper had appeared; and Poirot, beaming all over his face, was dispensing hospitality and answering our eager questions.

'It was all very simple. The circumstances in which the green pompon was found suggested at once that it had been torn from the costume of the murderer. I dismissed Pierrette from my mind (since it takes considerable strength to drive a table-knife home) and fixed upon Pierrot as the criminal. But Pierrot left the ball nearly two hours before the murder was committed. So he must either have returned to the ball later to kill Lord Cronshaw, or - eh bien, he must have killed him before he left! Was that impossible? Who had seen Lord Cronshaw after supper that evening? Only Mrs Davidson, whose statement, I suspected, was a deliberate fabrication uttered with the object of accounting for the missing pompon, which, of course, she cut from her own dress to replace the one missing on her husband's costume. But then, Harlequin, who was seen in the box at one-thirty, must have been an impersonation. For a moment, earlier, I had considered the possibility of Mr Beltane being the guilty party. But with his elaborate costume, it was clearly impossible that he could have doubled the roles of Punchinello and Harlequin. On the other hand, to Davidson, a young man of about

the same height as the murdered man and an actor by profession, the thing was simplicity itself.

'But one thing worried me. Surely a doctor could not fail to perceive the difference between a man who had been dead two hours and one who had been dead ten minutes! Eh bien, the doctor did perceive it! But he was not taken to the body and asked "How long has this man been dead?" On the contrary, he was informed that the man had been seen alive ten minutes ago, and so he merely commented at the inquest on the abnormal stiffening of the limbs for which he was quite unable to account!

'All was now marching famously for my theory. Davidson had killed Lord Cronshaw immediately after supper, when, as you remember, he was seen to draw him back into the supper-room. Then he departed with Miss Courtenay, left her at the door of her flat (instead of going in and trying to pacify her as he affirmed) and returned post-haste to the Colossus - but as Harlequin, not Pierrot - a simple transformation effected by removing his outer costume.'

The uncle of the dead man leaned forward, his eyes perplexed.

'But if so, he must have come to the ball prepared to kill his victim. What earthly motive could he have had? The motive, that's what I can't get.'

'Ah! There we come to the second tragedy - that of Miss Courtenay. There was one simple point which everyone overlooked. Miss Courtenay died of cocaine poisoning - but her supply of the drug

was in the enamel box which was found on Lord Cronshaw's body. Where, then, did she obtain the dose which killed her? Only one person could have supplied her with it - Davidson. And that explains everything. It accounts for her friendship with the Davidsons and her demand that Davidson should escort her home. Lord Cronshaw, who was almost fanatically opposed to drug-taking, discovered that she was addicted to cocaine, and suspected that Davidson supplied her with it. Davidson doubtless denied this, but Lord Cronshaw determined to get the truth from Miss Courtenay at the ball. He could forgive the wretched girl, but he would certainly have no mercy on the man who made a living by trafficking in drugs. Exposure and ruin confronted Davidson. He went to the ball determined that Cronshaw's silence must be obtained at any cost.'

'Was Coco's death an accident, then?'

'I suspect that it was an accident cleverly engineered by Davidson. She was furiously angry with Cronshaw, first for his reproaches, and secondly for taking her cocaine from her. Davidson supplied her with more, and probably suggested her augmenting the dose as a defiance to "old Cronch"!'

'One other thing,' I said. 'The recess and the curtain? How did you know about them?'

'Why, mon ami, that was the most simple of all. Waiters had been in and out of that little room, so, obviously, the body could not have been lying where it was found on the floor. There must be some place in the room where it could be hidden. I deduced a curtain and a recess behind it. Davidson dragged the body there, and later,

after drawing attention to himself in the box, he dragged it out again before finally leaving the Hall. It was one of his best moves. He is a clever fellow.'

But in Poirot's green eyes I read unmistakably the unspoken remark:

'But not quite so clever as Hercule Poirot!'

THE ADVENTURE OF THE CLAPHAM COOK

At the time that I was sharing rooms with my friend Hercule Poirot, it was my custom to read aloud to him the headlines in the morning newspaper, the Daily Blare.

The Daily Blare was a paper that made the most of any opportunity for sensationalism. Robberies and murders did not lurk obscurely in its back pages. Instead they hit you in the eye in large type on the front page.

ABSCONDING BANK CLERK DISAPPEARS WITH FIFTY THOUSAND POUNDS' WORTH OF NEGOTIABLE SECURITIES, I read.

HUSBAND PUTS HIS HEAD IN GAS-OVEN. UNHAPPY HOME LIFE. MISSING TYPIST. PRETTY GIRL OF TWENTY-ONE. WHERE IS EDNA FIELD?

'There you are, Poirot, plenty to choose from. An absconding bank clerk, a mysterious suicide, a missing typist - which will you have?'

My friend was in a placid mood. He quietly shook his head.

'I am not greatly attracted to any of them, mon ami. Today I feel inclined for the life of ease. It would have to be a very interesting problem to tempt me from my chair. See you, I have affairs of importance of my own to attend to.'

'Such as?'

'My wardrobe, Hastings. If I mistake not, there is on my new grey suit the spot of grease - only the unique spot, but it is sufficient to trouble me. Then there is my winter overcoat - I must lay him aside in the powder of Keatings. And I think - yes, I think - the moment is ripe for the trimmings of my moustaches - and afterwards I must apply the pomade.'

'Well,' I said, strolling to the window, 'I doubt if you'll be able to carry out this delirious programme. That was a ring at the bell. You have a client.'

'Unless the affair is one of national importance, I touch it not,' declared Poirot with dignity.

A moment later our privacy was invaded by a stout red-faced lady who panted audibly as a result of her rapid ascent of the stairs.

'You're M. Poirot?' she demanded, as she sank into a chair.

'I am Hercule Poirot, yes, madame.'

'You're not a bit like what I thought you'd be,' said the lady, eyeing him with some disfavour. 'Did you pay for the bit in the paper saying what a clever detective you were, or did they put it in themselves?'

'Madame!' said Poirot, drawing himself up.

'I'm sorry, I'm sure, but you know what these papers are nowadays. You begin reading a nice article "What a bride said to her plain unmarried friend", and it's all about a simple thing you buy at the chemist's and shampoo your hair with. Nothing but puff. But no offence taken, I hope? I'll tell you what I want you to do for me. I want you to find my cook.'

Poirot stared at her; for once his ready tongue failed him. I turned aside to hide the broadening smile I could not control.

'It's all this wicked dole,' continued the lady. 'Putting ideas into servants' heads, wanting to be typists and what nots. Stop the dole, that's what I say. I'd like to know what my servants have to complain of - afternoon and evening off a week, alternate Sundays, washing put out, same food as we have - and never a bit of margarine in the house, nothing but the very best butter.'

She paused for want of breath and Poirot seized his opportunity. He spoke in his haughtiest manner rising to his feet as he did so.

'I fear you are making a mistake, madame. I am not holding an inquiry into the conditions of domestic service. I am a private detective.'

'I know that,' said our visitor. 'Didn't I tell you I wanted you to find my cook for me? Walked out of the house on Wednesday, without so much as a word to me, and never came back.'

'I am sorry, madame, but I do not touch this particular kind of business. I wish you good morning.'

Our visitor snorted with indignation.

'That's it, is it, my fine fellow? Too proud, eh? Only deal with Government secrets and countesses' jewels? Let me tell you a servant's every bit as important as a tiara to a woman in my position. We can't all be fine ladies going out in our motors with our diamonds and our pearls. A good cook's a good cook - and when you lose her, it's as much to you as her pearls are to some fine lady.'

For a moment or two it appeared to be a toss up between Poirot's dignity and his sense of humour. Finally he laughed and sat down again.

'Madame, you are in the right, and I am in the wrong. Your remarks are just and intelligent. This case will be a novelty. Never yet have I hunted a missing domestic. Truly here is the problem of national importance that I was demanding of fate just before your arrival. En

avant! You say this jewel of a cook went out on Wednesday and did not return. That is the day before yesterday.'

'Yes, it was her day out.'

'But probably, madame, she has met with some accident. Have you inquired at any of the hospitals?'

'That's exactly what I thought yesterday, but this morning, if you please, she sent for her box. And not so much as a line to me! If I'd been at home, I'd not have let it go - treating me like that! But I'd just stepped out to the butcher.'

'Will you describe her to me?'

'She was middle-aged, stout, black hair turning grey - most respectable. She'd been ten years in her last place. Eliza Dunn, her name was.'

'And you had had - no disagreement with her on the Wednesday?'

'None whatever. That's what makes it all so queer.'

'How many servants do you keep, madame?'

'Two. The house-parlourmaid, Annie, is a very nice girl. A bit forgetful and her head full of young men, but a good servant if you keep her up to her work.'

'Did she and the cook get on well together?'

'They had their ups and downs, of course - but on the whole, very well.'

'And the girl can throw no light on the mystery?'

'She says not - but you know what servants are - they all hang together.'

'Well, well, we must look into this. Where did you say you resided, madame?'

'At Clapham; 88 Prince Albert Road.'

'Bien, madame, I will wish you good morning, and you may count upon seeing me at your residence during the course of the day.'

Mrs Todd, for such was our new friend's name, then took her departure. Poirot looked at me somewhat ruefully.

'Well, well, Hastings, this is a novel affair that we have here. The Disappearance of the Clapham Cook! Never, never, must our friend Inspector Japp get to hear of this!'

He then proceeded to heat an iron and carefully removed the grease spot from his grey suit by means of a piece of blotting-paper. His moustaches he regretfully postponed to another day, and we set out for Clapham.

Prince Albert Road proved to be a street of small prim houses, all exactly alike, with neat lace curtains veiling the windows, and well polished brass knockers on the doors.

We rang the bell at No. 88, and the door was opened by a neat maid with a pretty face. Mrs Todd came out in the hall to greet us.

'Don't go, Annie,' she cried. 'This gentleman's a detective and he'll want to ask you some questions.'

Annie's face displayed a struggle between alarm and a pleasurable excitement.

'I thank you, madame,' said Poirot bowing. 'I would like to question your maid now - and to see her alone, if I may.'

We were shown into a small drawing-room, and when Mrs Todd, with obvious reluctance, had left the room, Poirot commenced his cross-examination.

'Voyons, Mademoiselle Annie, all that you shall tell us will be of the greatest importance. You alone can shed any light on the case. Without your assistance I can do nothing.'

The alarm vanished from the girl's face and the pleasurable excitement became more strongly marked.

'I'm sure, sir,' she said, 'I'll tell you anything I can.'

'That is good.' Poirot beamed approval on her. 'Now, first of all what is your own idea? You are a girl of remarkable intelligence. That can be seen at once! What is your own explanation of Eliza's disappearance?'

Thus encouraged, Annie fairly flowed into excited speech.

'White slavers, sir, I've said so all along! Cook was alway warning me against them. "Don't you sniff no scent, or eat any sweets - no matter how gentlemanly the fellow!" Those were her words to me. And now they've got her! I'm sure of it. As likely a not, she's been shipped to Turkey or one of them Eastern place, where I've heard they like them fat.'

Poirot preserved an admirable gravity.

'But in that case - and it is indeed an idea! - would she have sent for her trunk?'

'Well, I don't know, sir. She'd want her things - even in those foreign places.'

'Who came for the trunk - a man?'

'It was Carter Paterson, sir.'

'Did you pack it?'

'No, sir, it was already packed and corded.'

'Ah! That's interesting. That shows that when she left the house on Wednesday, she had already determined not to return. You see that, do you not?'

'Yes, sir.' Annie looked slightly taken aback. 'I hadn't thought of that. But it might still have been white slavers, mightn't it, sir?' she added wistfully.

'Undoubtedly!' said Poirot gravely. He went on: 'Did you both occupy the same bedroom?'

'No, sir, we had separate rooms.'

'And had Eliza expressed any dissatisfaction with her present post to you at all? Were you both happy here?'

'She'd never mentioned leaving. The place is all right -' The girl hesitated.

'Speak freely,' said Poirot kindly. 'I shall not tell your mistress.'

'Well, of course, sir, she's a caution, Missus is. But the food's good. Plenty of it, and no stinting. Something hot for supper, good outings, and as much frying-fat as you like. And anyway, if Eliza did want to make a change, she'd never have gone off this way, I'm sure. She'd have stayed her month. Why, Missus could have a month's wages out of her for doing this.'

'And the work, it is not too hard?'

'Well, she's particular - always poking round in corners and looking for dust. And then there's the lodger, or paying guest as he's always called. But that's only breakfast and dinner, same as Master. They're out all day in the City.'

'You like your master?'

'He's all right - very quiet and a bit on the stingy side.'

'You can't remember, I suppose, the last thing Eliza said before she went out?'

'Yes, I can. "If there's any stewed peaches over from the dining-room," she says, "we'll have them for supper, and a bit of bacon and some fried potatoes." Mad over stewed peaches, she was. I shouldn't wonder if they didn't get her that way.'

'Was Wednesday her regular day out?'

'Yes, she had Wednesdays and I had Thursdays.'

Poirot asked a few more questions, then declared himself satisfied. Annie departed, and Mrs Todd hurried in, her face alight with curiosity. She had, I felt certain, bitterly resented her exclusion from the room during our conversation with Annie. Poirot, however, was careful to soothe her feelings tactfully.

'It is difficult,' he explained, 'for a woman of exceptional intelligence such as yourself, madame, to bear patiently the roundabout

methods we poor detectives are forced to use. To have patience with stupidity is difficult for the quick-witted.'

Having thus charmed away any little resentment on Mrs Todd's part, he brought the conversation round to her husband and elicited the information that he worked with a firm in the City and would not be home until after six.

'Doubtless he is very disturbed and worried by this unaccountable business, eh? Is it not so?'

'He's never worried,' declared Mrs Todd. '"Well, well, get another, my dear." That's all he said! He's so calm that it drives me to distraction sometimes. "An ungrateful woman," he said. "We are well rid of her."'

'What about the other inmates of the house, madame?'

'You mean Mr Simpson, our paying guest? Well, as long as he gets his breakfast and his evening meal all right, he doesn't worry.'

'What is his profession, madame?'

'He works in a bank.' She mentioned its name, and I started slightly, remembering my perusal of the Daily Blare.

'A young man?'

'Twenty-eight, I believe. Nice quiet young fellow.'

'I should like to have a few words with him, and also with your husband, if I may. I will return for that purpose this evening. I venture to suggest that you should repose yourself a little, madame, you look fatigued.'

'I should just think I am! First the worry about Eliza, and then I was at the sales practically all yesterday, and you know what that is, M. Poirot, and what with one thing and another and a lot to do in the house, because of course Annie can't do it all - and very likely she'll give notice anyway, being unsettled in this way well, what with it all, I'm tired out!'

Poirot murmured sympathetically, and we took our leave.

'It's a curious coincidence,' I said, 'but that absconding clerk, Davis, was from the same bank as Simpson. Can there be any connection, do you think?'

Poirot smiled.

'At the one end, a defaulting clerk, at the other a vanishing cook. It is hard to see any relation between the two, unless possibly Davis visited Simpson, fell in love with the cook, and persuaded her to accompany him on his flight!'

I laughed. But Poirot remained grave.

'He might have done worse,' he said reprovingly. 'Remember, Hastings, if you are going into exile, a good cook may be of more comfort than a pretty face!' He paused for a moment and then went

on. 'It is a curious case, full of contradictory features. I am interested - yes, I am distinctly interested.'

That evening we returned to 88 Prince Albert Road and interviewed both Todd and Simpson. The former was a melancholy lantern-jawed man of forty-odd.

'Oh. Yes, yes,' he said vaguely. 'Eliza. Yes. A good cook, I believe. And economical. I make a strong point of economy.'

'Can you imagine any reason for her leaving you so suddenly?'

'Oh, well,' said Mr Todd vaguely. 'Servants, you know. My wife worries too much. Worn out from always worrying. The whole problem's quite simple really. "Get another, my dear," I say. "Get another." That's all there is to it. No good crying over spilt milk.'

Mr Simpson was equally unhelpful. He was a quiet inconspicuous young man with spectacles.

'I must have seen her, I suppose,' he said. 'Elderly woman, wasn't she? Of course, it's the other one I see always, Annie. Nice girl. Very obliging.'

'Were those two on good terms with each other?'

Mr Simpson said he couldn't say, he was sure. He supposed so.

'Well, we get nothing of interest there, mon ami,' said Poirot as we left the house. Our departure had been delayed by a burst of vociferous repetition from Mrs Todd, who repeated everything she had said that morning at rather greater length.

'Are you disappointed?' I asked. 'Did you expect to hear something?'

Poirot shook his head.

'There was a possibility, of course,' he said. 'But I hardly thought it likely.'

The next development was a letter which Poirot received on the following morning. He read it, turned purple with indignation, and handed it to me.

Mrs Todd regrets that after all she will not avail herself of Mr Poirot's services. After talking the matter over with her husband she sees that it is foolish to call in a detective about a purely domestic affair. Mrs Todd encloses a guinea for consultation fee.

'Aha!' cried Poirot angrily. 'And they think to get rid of Hercule Poirot like that! As a favour - a great favour - I consent to investigate their miserable little twopenny-halfpenny affair - and they dismiss me comme ça! Here, I mistake not, is the hand of Mr Todd. But I say no! - thirty-six times no! I will spend my own guineas,

thirty-six hundred of them if need be, but I will get to the bottom of this matter.'

'Yes,' I said. 'But how?'

Poirot calmed down a little.

'D'accord,' he said, 'we will advertise in the papers. Let me see - yes - something like this: "If Eliza Dunn will communicate with this address, she will hear of something to her advantage." Put it in all the papers you can think of, Hastings. Then I will make some little inquiries of my own. Go, go - all must be done as quickly as possible!'

I did not see him again until the evening, when he condescended to tell me what he had been doing.

'I have made inquiries at the firm of Mr Todd. He was not absent on Wednesday and he bears a good character - so much for him. Then Simpson, on Thursday he was ill and did not come to the bank, but he was there on Wednesday. He was moderately friendly with Davis. Nothing out of the common. There does not seem to be anything there. No. We must place our reliance on the advertisement.'

The advertisement duly appeared in all the principal daily papers. By Poirot's orders it was to be continued every day for a week. His eagerness over this uninteresting matter of a defaulting cook was extraordinary, but I realized that he considered it a point of honour to persevere until he finally succeeded. Several extremely

interesting cases were brought to him about this time, but he declined them all. Every morning he would rush at his letters, scrutinize them earnestly and then lay them down with a sigh. But our patience was rewarded at last. On the Wednesday following Mrs Todd's visit, our landlady informed us that a person of the name of Eliza Dunn had called.

'Enfin!' cried Poirot. 'But make her mount then! At once. Immediately.'

Thus admonished, our landlady hurried out and returned a moment or two later, ushering in Miss Dunn. Our quarry was much as described: tall, stout, and eminently respectable.

'I came in answer to the advertisement,' she explained. 'I thought there must be some muddle or other, and that perhaps you didn't know I'd already got my legacy.'

Poirot was studying her attentively. He drew forward a chair with a flourish.

'The truth of the matter is,' he explained, 'that your late mistress, Mrs Todd, was much concerned about you. She feared some accident might have befallen you.'

Eliza Dunn seemed very much surprised.

'Didn't she get my letter then?'

'She got no word of any kind.' He paused, and then said persuasively:

'Recount to me the whole story, will you not?'

Eliza Dunn needed no encouragement. She plunged at once into a lengthy narrative.

'I was just coming home on Wednesday night and had nearly got to the house, when a gentleman stopped me. A tall gentleman he was, with a beard and a big hat. "Miss Eliza Dunn?" he said. "Yes," I said. "I've been inquiring for you at No. 88," he said. "They told me I might meet you coming along here. Miss Dunn, I have come from Australia specially to find you. Do you happen to know the maiden name of your maternal grandmother?" "Jane Emmott," I said. "Exactly," he said. "Now, Miss Dunn, although you may never have heard of the fact, your grandmother had a great friend, Eliza Leech. This friend went to Australia where she married a very wealthy settler. Her two children died in infancy, and she inherited all her husband's property. She died a few months ago, and by her will you inherit a house in this country and a considerable sum of money."

'You could have knocked me down with a feather,' continued Miss Dunn. 'For a minute, I was suspicious, and he must have seen it, for he smiled. "Quite right to be on your guard, Miss Dunn," he said. "Here are my credentials." He handed me a letter from some lawyers in Melbourne, Hurst and Crotchet, and a card. He was Mr Crotchet. "There are one or two conditions," he said. "Our client was a little eccentric, you know. The bequest is conditional on your taking possession of the house (it is in Cumberland) before twelve

o'clock tomorrow. The other condition is of no importance - it is merely a stipulation that you should not be in domestic service." My face fell. "Oh, Mr Crotchet," I said. "I'm a cook. Didn't they tell you at the house?" "Dear, dear," he said. "I had no idea of such a thing. I thought you might possibly be a companion or governess there. This is very unfortunate - very unfortunate indeed."

'"Shall I have to lose all the money?" I said, anxious like. He thought for a minute or two. "There are always ways of getting round the law, Miss Dunn," he said at last. "We lawyers know that. The way out here is for you to have left your employment this afternoon." "But my month?" I said. "My dear Miss Dunn," he said with a smile. "You can leave an employer any minute by forfeiting a month's wages. Your mistress will understand in view of the circumstances. The difficulty is time! It is imperative that you should catch the 11:05 from King's Cross to the North. I can advance you ten pounds or so for the fare, and you can write a note at the station to your employer. I will take it to her myself and explain the whole circumstances." I agreed, of course, and an hour later I was in the train, so flustered that I didn't know whether I was on my head or my heels. Indeed by the time I got to Carlisle, I was half inclined to think the whole thing was one of those confidence tricks you read about. But I went to the address he had given me - solicitors they were, and it was all right. A nice little house, and an income of three hundred a year. These lawyers knew very little, they'd just got a letter from a gentleman in London instructing them to hand over the house to me and 150 for the first six months. Mr Crotchet sent up my things to me, but there was no word from Missus. I supposed she was angry and grudged me my bit of luck. She kept back my

box too, and sent my clothes in paper parcels. But there, of course if she never had my letter, she might think it a bit cool of me.'

Poirot had listened attentively to this long history. Now he nodded his head as though completely satisfied.

'Thank you, mademoiselle. There had been, as you say, a little muddle. Permit me to recompense you for your trouble.' He handed her an envelope. 'You return to Cumberland immediately? A little word in your ear. Do not forget how to cook. It is always useful to have something to fall back upon in case things go wrong.'

'Credulous,' he murmured, as our visitor departed, 'but perhaps not more than most of her class.' His face grew grave. 'Come, Hastings, there is no time to be lost. Get a taxi while I write a note to Japp.'

Poirot was waiting on the doorstep when I returned with the taxi.

'Where are we going?' I asked anxiously.

'First, to despatch this note by special messenger.'

This was done, and re-entering the taxi Poirot gave the address to the driver.

'Eighty-eight Prince Albert Road, Clapham.'

'So we are going there?'

'Mais, oui. Though frankly I fear we shall be too late. Our bird will have flown, Hastings.'

'Who is our bird?'

Poirot smiled.

'The inconspicuous Mr Simpson.'

'What?' I exclaimed.

'Oh, come now, Hastings, do not tell me that all is not clear to you now?

'The cook was got out of the way, I realize that,' I said, slightly piqued. 'But why? Why should Simpson wish to get her out of the house? Did she know something about him?'

'Nothing whatever.'

'Well, then.'

'But he wanted something that she had.'

'Money? The Australian legacy?'

'No, my friend - something quite different.' He paused a moment and then said gravely: 'A battered tin trunk...'

I looked sideways at him. His statement seemed so fantastic that I suspected him of pulling my leg, but he was perfectly grave and serious.

'Surely he could buy a trunk if he wanted one,' I cried.

'He did not want a new trunk. He wanted a trunk of pedigree. A trunk of assured respectability.'

'Look here, Poirot,' I cried, 'this really is a bit thick. You're pulling my leg.'

He looked at me.

'You lack the brains and the imagination of Mr Simpson, Hastings. See here: On Wednesday evening, Simpson decoys away the cook. A printed card and a printed sheet of notepaper are simple matters to obtain, and he is willing to pay 150 and a year's house rent to assure the success of his plan. Miss Dunn does not recognize him - the beard and the hat and the slight colonial accent completely deceive her. That is the end of Wednesday - except for the trifling fact that Simpson has helped himself to fifty thousand pounds' worth of negotiable securities.'

'Simpson - but it was Davis - '

'If you will kindly permit me to continue, Hastings! Simpson knows that the theft will be discovered on Thursday afternoon. He does not go to the bank on Thursday, but he lies in wait for Davis when he comes out to lunch. Perhaps he admits the theft and tells Davis

he will return the securities to him - anyhow he succeeds in getting Davis to come to Clapham with him. It is the maid's day out, and Mrs Todd was at the sales, so there is no one in the house. When the theft is discovered and Davis is missing, the implication will be overwhelming. Davis is the thief! Mr Simpson will be perfectly safe, and can return to work on the morrow like the honest clerk they think him.'

'And Davis?'

Poirot made an expressive gesture, and slowly shook his head.

'It seems too cold-blooded to be believed, and yet what other explanation can there be, mon ami. The one difficulty for a murderer is the disposal of the body - and Simpson had planned that out beforehand. I was struck at once by the fact that although Eliza Dunn obviously meant to return that night when she went out (witness her remark about the stewed peaches) yet her trunk was all ready packed when they came for it. It was Simpson who sent word to Carter Paterson to call on Friday and it was Simpson who corded up the box on Thursday afternoon. What suspicion could possibly arise? A maid leaves and sends for her box, it is labeled and addressed ready in her name, probably to a railway station within easy reach of London. On Saturday afternoon, Simpson, in his Australian disguise, claims it, he affixes a new label and address and redespatches it somewhere else, again "to be left till called for". When the authorities get suspicious, for excellent reasons, and open it, all that can be elicited will be that a bearded colonial despatched it from some junction near London. There will be nothing to connect it with 88 Prince Albert Road. Ah! Here we are.'

Poirot's prognostications had been correct. Simpson had left two days previously. But he was not to escape the consequences of his crime. By the aid of wireless, he was discovered on the Olympia, en route to America.

A tin trunk, addressed to Mr Henry Wintergreen, attracted the attention of railway officials at Glasgow. It was opened and found to contain the body of the unfortunate Davis.

Mrs Todd's cheque for a guinea was never cashed. Instead Poirot had it framed and hung on the wall of our sitting-room.

'It is to me a little reminder, Hastings. Never to despise the trivial - the undignified. A disappearing domestic at one end - a cold-blooded murder at the other. To me, one of the most interesting of my cases.'

THE CORNISH MYSTERY

'Mrs Pengelley,' announced our landlady, and withdrew discreetly.

Many unlikely people came to consult Poirot, but to my mind, the woman who stood nervously just inside the door, fingering her feather neck-piece, was the most unlikely of all. She was so extraordinarily commonplace - a thin, faded woman of about fifty, dressed in a braided coat and skirt, some gold jewellery at her neck, and with her grey hair surmounted by a singularly

unbecoming hat. In a country town, you pass a hundred Mrs Pengelleys in the street every day.

Poirot came forward and greeted her pleasantly, perceiving her obvious embarrassment.

'Madame! Take a chair, I beg of you. My colleague, Captain Hastings.'

The lady sat down, murmuring uncertainly: 'You are M. Poirot, the detective?'

'At your service, madame.'

But our guest was still tongue-tied. She sighed, twisted her fingers, and grew steadily redder and redder.

'There is something I can do for you, eh, madame?'

'Well, I thought - that is - you see -'

'Proceed, madame, I beg of you - proceed.'

Mrs Pengelley, thus encouraged, took a grip on herself.

'It's this way, M. Poirot - I don't want to have anything to do with the police. No, I wouldn't go to the police for anything! But all the same, I'm sorely troubled about something. And yet I don't know if I ought - '

She stopped abruptly.

'Me, I have nothing to do with the police. My investigations are strictly private.'

Mrs Pengelley caught at the word.

'Private - that's what I want. I don't want any talk or fuss, or things in the papers. Wicked it is, the way they write things, until the family could never hold up their heads again. And it isn't as though I was even sure - it's just a dreadful idea that's come to me, and put it out of my head I can't.' She paused for breath. 'And all the time I may be wickedly wronging poor Edward. It's a terrible thought for any wife to have. But you do read of such dreadful things nowadays.'

'Permit me - it is of your husband you speak?'

'Yes.'

'And you suspect him of- what?'

'I don't like even to say it, M. Poirot. But you do read of such things happening - and the poor souls suspecting nothing.'

I was beginning to despair of the lady's ever coming to the point, but Poirot's patience was equal to the demand made upon it.

'Speak without fear, madame. Think what joy will be yours if we are able to prove your suspicions unfounded.'

'That's true - anything's better than this wearing uncertainty. Oh, M. Poirot, I'm dreadfully afraid I'm being poisoned.'

'What makes you think so?'

Mrs Pengelley, her reticence leaving her, plunged into a full recital more suited to the ears of her medical attendant.

'Pain and sickness after food, eh?' said Poirot thoughtfully. 'You have a doctor attending you, madame? What does he say?'

'He says it's acute gastritis, M. Poirot. But I can see that he's puzzled and uneasy, and he's always altering the medicine, but nothing does any good.'

'You have spoken of your - fears, to him?'

'No, indeed, M. Poirot. It might get about in the town. And perhaps it's gastritis. All the same, it's very odd that whenever Edward is away for the week-end, I'm quite all right again. Even Freda noticed that - my niece, M. Poirot. And then there's that bottle of weed-killer, never used, the gardener says, and yet it's half-empty.'

She looked appealingly at Poirot. He smiled reassuringly at her, and reached for a pencil and notebook.

'Let us be businesslike, madame. Now, then, you and your husband reside - where?'

'Polgarwith, a small market town in Cornwall.'

'You have lived there long?'

'Fourteen years.'

'And your household consists of you and your husband. Any children?'

'No.'

'But a niece, I think you said?'

'Yes, Freda Stanton, the child of my husband's only sister. She has lived with us for the last eight years - that is, until a week ago.'

'Oho, and what happened a week ago?'

'Things hadn't been very pleasant for some time; I don't know what had come over Freda. She was so rude and impertinent, and her temper something shocking, and in the end she flared up one day, and out she walked and took rooms of her own in the town. I've not seen her since. Better leave her to come to her senses, so Mr Radnor says.'

'Who is Mr Radnor?'

Some of Mrs Pengelley's initial embarrassment returned.

'Oh, he's - he's just a friend. Very pleasant young fellow.'

'Anything between him and your niece?'

'Nothing whatever,' said Mrs Pengelley emphatically.

Poirot shifted his ground.

'You and your husband are, I presume, in comfortable circumstances?'

'Yes, we're very nicely off.'

'The money, is it yours or your husband's?'

'Oh, it's all Edward's. I've nothing of my own.'

'You see, madame, to be businesslike, we must be brutal. We must seek for a motive. Your husband, he would not poison you just pour passer le temps. Do you know of any reason why he should wish you out of the way?'

'There's the yellow-haired hussy who works for him,' said Mrs Pengelley, with a flash of temper. 'My husband's a dentist, M. Poirot, and nothing would do but he must have a smart girl, as he said, with bobbed hair and a white overall, to make his appointments and mix his fillings for him. It's come to my ears that there have been fine goings-on, though of course he swears it's all right.'

'This bottle of weed-killer, madame, who ordered it?'

'My husband - about a year ago.'

'Your niece, now, has she any money of her own?'

'About fifty pounds a year, I should say. She'd be glad enough to come back and keep house for Edward if I left him.'

'You have contemplated leaving him, then?'

'I don't intend to let him have it all his own way. Women aren't the downtrodden slaves they were in old days, M. Poirot.'

'I congratulate you on your independent spirit, madame; but let us be practical. You return to Polgarwith today?'

'Yes, I came up by an excursion. Six this morning the train started, and the train goes back at five this afternoon.'

'Bien! I have nothing of great moment on hand. I can devote myself to your little affair. Tomorrow I shall be in Polgarwith. Shall we say that Hastings, here, is a distant relative of yours, the son of your second cousin? Me, I am his eccentric foreign friend. In the meantime, eat only what is prepared by your own hands, or under your eye. You have a maid whom you trust?'

'Jessie is a very good girl, I am sure.'

'Till tomorrow then, madame, and be of good courage.'

Poirot bowed the lady out, and returned thoughtfully to his chair. His absorption was not so great, however, that he failed to see two minute strands of feather scarf wrenched off by the lady's agitated fingers. He collected them carefully and consigned them to the wastepaper basket.

'What do you make of the case, Hastings?'

'A nasty business, I should say.'

'Yes, if what the lady suspects be true. But is it? Woe betide any husband who orders a bottle of weed-killer nowadays. If his wife suffers from gastritis, and is inclined to be of a hysterical temperament, the fat is in the fire.'

'You think that is all there is to it?'

'Ah - voilб - I do not know, Hastings. But the case interests me - it interests me enormously. For, see you, it has positively no new features. Hence the hysterical theory, and yet Mrs Pengelley did not strike me as being a hysterical woman. Yes, if I mistake not, we have here a very poignant human drama. Tell me, Hastings, what do you consider Mrs Pengelley's feelings towards her husband to be?'

'Loyalty struggling with fear,' I suggested.

'Yet, ordinarily, a woman will accuse anyone in the world - but not her husband. She will stick to her belief in him through thick and thin.'

'The "other woman" complicates the matter.'

'Yes, affection may turn to hate, under the stimulus of jealousy. But hate would take her to the police - not to me. She would want an outcry - a scandal. No, no, let us exercise our little grey cells. Why did she come to me? To have her suspicions proved wrong? Or - to have them proved right? Ah, we have here something I do not understand - an unknown factor. Is she a superb actress, our Mrs Pengelley? No, she was genuine, I would swear that she was genuine, and therefore I am interested. Look up the train to Polgarwith, I pray you.'

The best train of the day was the one-fifty from Paddington which reached Polgarwith just after seven o'clock. The journey was uneventful, and I had to rouse myself from a pleasant nap to alight upon the platform of the bleak little station. We took our bags to the Duchy Hotel, and after a light meal, Poirot suggested our stepping round to pay an after-dinner call on my so-called cousin.

The Pengelleys' house stood a little way back from the road with an old-fashioned cottage garden in front. The smell of stocks and mignonette came sweetly wafted on the evening breeze. It seemed impossible to associate thoughts of violence with this Old World charm. Poirot rang and knocked. As the summons was not answered, he rang again. This time, after a little pause, the door

was opened by a dishevelled-looking servant. Her eyes were red, and she was sniffing violently.

'We wish to see Mrs Pengelley,' explained Poirot. 'May we enter?'

The maid stared. Then, with unusual directness, she answered:

'Haven't you heard, then? She's dead. Died this evening - about half an hour ago.'

We stood staring at her, stunned.

'What did she die of?' I asked at last.

'There's some as could tell.' She gave a quick glance over her shoulder. 'If it wasn't that somebody ought to be in the house with the missus, I'd pack my box and go tonight. But I'll not leave her dead with no one to watch by her. It's not my place to say anything, and I'm not going to say anything - but everybody knows. It's all over the town. And if Mr Radnor don't write to the 'Ome Secretary, someone else will. The doctor may say what he likes. Didn't I see the master with my own eyes a-lifting down of the weed-killer from the shelf this very evening? And didn't he jump when he turned round and saw me watching of him? And the missus' gruel there on the table, all ready to take to her? Not another bit of food passes my lips while I am in this house! Not if I dies for it.'

'Where does the doctor live who attended your mistress?'

'Dr Adams. Round the corner there in High Street. The second house.'

Poirot turned away abruptly. He was very pale.

'For a girl who was not going to say anything, that girl said a lot,' I remarked dryly.

Poirot struck his clenched hand into his palm.

'An imbecile, a criminal imbecile, that is what I have been, Hastings. I have boasted of my little grey cells, and now I have lost a human life, a life that came to me to be saved. Never did I dream that anything would happen so soon. May the good God forgive me, but I never believed anything would happen at all. Her story seemed to me artificial. Here we are at the doctor's. Let us see what he can tell us.'

Dr Adams was the typical genial red-faced country doctor of fiction. He received us politely enough, but at a hint of our errand, his red face became purple.

'Damned nonsense! Damned nonsense, every word of it! Wasn't I in attendance on the case? Gastritis - gastritis pure and simple. This town's a hotbed of gossip - a lot of scandal-mongering old women get together and invent God knows what. They read these scurrilous rags of newspapers, and nothing will suit them but that someone in their town shall get poisoned too. They see a bottle of weed-killer on a shelf - and hey presto! - away goes their

imagination with the bit between its teeth. I know Edward Pengelley - he wouldn't poison his grandmother's dog. And why should he poison his wife? Tell me that?'

'There is one thing, M. le Docteur, that perhaps you do not know.'

And, very briefly, Poirot outlined the main facts of Mrs Pengelley's visit to him. No one could have been more astonished than Dr Adams. His eyes almost started out of his head.

'God bless my soul!' he ejaculated. 'The poor woman must have been mad. Why didn't she speak to me? That was the proper thing to do.'

'And have her fears ridiculed?'

'Not at all, not at all. I hope I've got an open mind.'

Poirot looked at him and smiled. The physician was evidently more perturbed than he cared to admit. As we left the house, Poirot broke into a laugh.

'He is as obstinate as a pig, that one. He has said it is gastritis; therefore it is gastritis! All the same, he has the mind uneasy.'

'What's our next step?'

'A return to the inn, and a night of horror upon one of your English provincial beds, mon ami. It is a thing to make pity, the cheap English bed!'

'And tomorrow?'

'Rien à faire. We must return to town and await developments.'

'That's very tame,' I said, disappointed. 'Suppose there are none?'

'There will be! I can promise you that. Our old doctor may give as many certificates as he pleases. He cannot stop several hundred tongues from wagging. And they will wag to some purpose, I can tell you that.'

Our train for town left at eleven the following morning. Before we started for the station, Poirot expressed a wish to see Miss Freda Stanton, the niece mentioned to us by the dead woman. We found the house where she was lodging easily enough. With her was a tall, dark young man whom she introduced in some confusion as Mr Jacob Radnor.

Miss Freda Stanton was an extremely pretty girl of the Cornish type - dark hair and eyes and rosy cheeks. There was a flash in those same dark eyes which told of a temper that it would not be wise to provoke.

'Poor Auntie,' she said, when Poirot had introduced himself, and explained his business. 'It's terribly sad. I've been wishing all the morning that I'd been kinder and more patient.'

'You stood a great deal, Freda,' interrupted Radnor.

'Yes, Jacob, but I've got a sharp temper, I know. After all, it was only silliness on Auntie's part. I ought to have just laughed and not minded. Of course, it's all nonsense her thinking that Uncle was poisoning her. She was worse after any food he gave her - but I'm sure it was only from thinking about it. She made up her mind she would be, and then she was.'

'What was the actual cause of your disagreement, mademoiselle?'

Miss Stanton hesitated, looking at Radnor. That young gentleman was quick to take the hint.

'I must be getting along, Freda. See you this evening. Goodbye, gentlemen; you're on your way to the station, I suppose?'

Poirot replied that we were, and Radnor departed.

'You are affianced, is it not so?' demanded Poirot, with a sly smile.

Freda Stanton blushed and admitted that such was the case.

'And that was really the whole trouble with Auntie,' she added.

'She did not approve of the match for you?'

'Oh, it wasn't that so much. But you see, she -' The girl came to a stop.

'Yes?' encouraged Poirot gently.

'It seems rather a horrid thing to say about her - now she's dead. But you'll never understand unless I tell you. Auntie was absolutely infatuated with Jacob.'

'Indeed?'

'Yes, wasn't it absurd? She was over fifty, and he's not quite thirty! But there it was. She was silly about him! I had to tell her at last that it was me he was after - and she carried on dreadfully. She wouldn't believe a word of it, and was so rude and insulting that it's no wonder I lost my temper. I talked it over with Jacob, and we agreed that the best thing to do was for me to clear out for a bit till she came to her senses. Poor Auntie - I suppose she was in a queer state altogether.'

'It would certainly seem so. Thank you, mademoiselle, for making things so clear to me.'

A little to my surprise, Radnor was waiting for us in the street below.

'I can guess pretty well what Freda has been telling you,' he remarked. 'It was a most unfortunate thing to happen, and very awkward for me, as you can imagine. I need hardly say that it was none of my doing. I was pleased at first, because I imagined the old woman was helping on things with Freda. The whole thing was absurd - but extremely unpleasant.'

'When are you and Miss Stanton going to be married?'

'Soon, I hope. Now, M. Poirot, I'm going to be candid with you. I know a bit more than Freda does. She believes her uncle to be innocent. I'm not so sure. But I can tell you one thing: I'm going to keep my mouth shut about what I do know. Let sleeping dogs lie. I don't want my wife's uncle tried and hanged for murder.'

'Why do you tell me all this?'

'Because I've heard of you, and I know you're a clever man. It's quite possible that you might ferret out a case against him. But I put it to you - what good is that? The poor woman is past help, and she'd have been the last person to want a scandal - why, she'd turn in her grave at the mere thought of it.'

'You are probably right there. You want me to - hush it up, then?'

'That's my idea. I'll admit frankly that I'm selfish about it. I've got my way to make - and I'm building up a good little business as a tailor and outfitter.'

'Most of us are selfish, Mr Radnor. Not all of us admit it so freely. I will do what you ask - but I tell you frankly you will not succeed in hushing it up.'

'Why not?'

Poirot held up a finger. It was market day, and we were passing the market - a busy hum came from within.

'The voice of the people - that is why, Mr Radnor. Ah, we must run, or we shall miss our train.'

'Very interesting, is it not, Hastings?' said Poirot, as the train steamed out of the station.

He had taken out a small comb from his pocket, also a microscopic mirror, and was carefully arranging his moustache, the symmetry of which had become slightly impaired during our brisk run.

'You seem to find it so,' I replied. 'To me, it is all rather sordid and unpleasant. There's hardly any mystery about it.'

'I agree with you; there is no mystery whatever.'

'I suppose we can accept the girl's rather extraordinary story of her aunt's infatuation? That seemed the only fishy part to me. She was such a nice, respectable woman.'

'There is nothing extraordinary about that - it is completely ordinary. If you read the papers carefully, you will find that often a nice respectable woman of that age leaves a husband she has lived with for twenty years, and sometimes a whole family of children as well, in order to link her life with that of a young man considerably her junior. You admire les femmes, Hastings; you prostrate yourself before all of them who are good-looking and have the good taste to smile upon you; but psychologically you know nothing whatever about them. In the autumn of a woman's life, there comes always one mad moment when she longs for romance, for adventure -

before it is too late. It comes none the less surely to a woman because she is the wife of a respectable dentist in a country town?.'

'And you think -'

'That a clever man might take advantage of such a moment.'

'I shouldn't call Pengelley so clever,' I mused. 'He's got the whole town by the ears. And yet I suppose you're right. The only two men who know anything, Radnor and the doctor, both want to hush it up. He's managed that somehow. I wish we'd seen the fellow.'

'You can indulge your wish. Return by the next train and invent an aching molar.'

I looked at him keenly.

'I wish I knew what you considered so interesting about the case.'

'My interest is very aptly summed up by a remark of yours, Hastings. After interviewing the maid, you observed that for someone who was not going to say a word, she had said a good to say.'

'Ah!' I said doubtfully; then I harped back to my original criticism: 'I wonder why you made no attempt to see Pengelley?'

'Mon ami, I give him just three months. Then I shall see him for as long as I please - in the dock.'

For once I thought Poirot's prognostications were going to be proved wrong. The time went by, and nothing transpired as to our Cornish case. Other matters occupied us, and I had nearly forgotten the Pengelley tragedy when it was suddenly recalled to me by a short paragraph in the paper which stated that an order to exhume the body of Mrs Pengelley had been obtained from the Home Secretary.

A few days later, and 'The Cornish Mystery' was the topic of every paper. It seemed that gossip had never entirely died down, and when the engagement of the widower to Miss Marks, his secretary, was announced, the tongues burst out again louder than ever. Finally a petition was sent to the Home Secretary; the body was exhumed; large quantities of arsenic were discovered; and Mr Pengelley was arrested and charged with the murder of his wife.

Poirot and I attended the preliminary proceedings. The evidence was much as might have been expected. Dr Adams admitted that the symptoms of arsenical poisoning might easily be mistaken for those of gastritis. The Home Office expert gave his evidence; the maid Jessie poured out a flood of voluble information, most of which was rejected, but which certainly strengthened the case against the prisoner. Freda Stanton gave evidence as to her aunt's being worse whenever she ate food prepared by her husband. Jacob Radnor told how he had dropped in unexpectedly on the day of Mrs Pengelley's death, and found Pengelley replacing the bottle of weed-killer on the pantry shelf, Mrs Pengelley's gruel being on the table close by. Then Miss Marks, the fair-haired secretary, was called, and wept and went into hysterics and admitted that there had been 'passages' between her and her employer, and that he

had promised to marry her in the event of anything happening to his wife. Pengelley reserved his defence and was sent for trial.

Jacob Radnor walked back with us to our lodgings.

'You see, M. Radnor,' said Poirot, 'I was right. The voice of the people spoke - and with no uncertain voice. There was to be no hushing up of this case.'

'You were quite right,' sighed Radnor. 'Do you see any chance of his getting off?'

'Well, he has reserved his defence. He may have something up the sleeve, as you English say. Come in with us, will you not?'

Radnor accepted the invitation. I ordered two whiskies and sodas and a cup of chocolate. The last order caused consternation, and I much doubted whether it would ever put in an appearance.

'Of course,' continued Poirot, 'I have a good deal of experience in matters of this kind. And I see only one loophole of escape for our friend.'

'What is that?'

'That you should sign this paper.'

With the suddenness of a conjuror, he produced a sheet of paper covered with writing.

'What is it?'

'A confession that you murdered Mrs Pengelley.'

There was a moment's pause; then Radnor laughed.

'You must be mad!'

'No, no, my friend, I am not mad. You came here; you started a little business; you were short of money. Mr Pengelley was a man very well-to-do. You met his niece; she was inclined to smile upon you. But the small allowance that Pengelley might have given her upon her marriage was not enough for you. You must get rid of both the uncle and the aunt; then the money would come to her, since she was the only relative. How cleverly you set about it! You made love to that plain middle-aged woman until she was your slave. You implanted in her doubts of her husband. She discovered first that he was deceiving her - then, under your guidance, that he was trying to poison her. You were often at the house; you had opportunities to introduce the arsenic into her food. But you were careful never to do so when her husband was away. Being a woman, she did not keep her suspicions to herself. She talked to her niece; doubtless she talked to other women friends. Your only difficulty was keeping up separate relations with the two women, and even that was not so difficult as it looked. You explained to the aunt that, to allay the suspicions of her husband, you had to pretend to pay court to the niece. And the younger lady needed little convincing - she would never seriously consider her aunt as a rival.

'But then Mrs Pengelley made up her mind, without saying anything to you, to consult me. If she could be really assured, beyond any possible doubt, that her husband was trying to poison her, she would feel justified in leaving him, and linking her life with yours - which is what she imagined you wanted her to do. But that did not suit your book at all. You did not want a detective prying around. A favourable minute occurs. You are in the house when Mr Pengelley is getting some gruel for his wife, and you introduce the fatal dose. The rest is easy. Apparently anxious to hush matters up, you secretly foment them. But you reckoned without Hercule Poirot, my intelligent young friend.'

Radnor was deadly pale, but he still endeavoured to carry off matters with a high hand.

'Very interesting and ingenious, but why tell me all this?'

'Because, monsieur, I represent - not the law, but Mrs Pengelley. For her sake, I give you a chance of escape. Sign this paper, and you shall have twenty-four hours' start - twenty-four hours before I place it in the hands of the police.'

Radnor hesitated.

'You can't prove anything.'

'Can't I? I am Hercule Poirot. Look out of the window, monsieur. There are two men in the street. They have orders not to lose sight of you.'

Radnor strode across to the window and pulled aside the blind, then shrank back with an oath.

'You see, monsieur? Sign - it is your best chance.'

'What guarantee have I -'

'That I shall keep faith? The word of Hercule Poirot. You will sign? Good. Hastings, be so kind as to pull that left-hand blind half-way up. That is the signal that Mr Radnor may leave unmolested.'

White, muttering oaths. Radnor hurried from the room. Poirot nodded gently.

'A coward! I always knew it.'

'It seems to me, Poirot, that you've acted in a criminal manner,' I cried angrily. 'You always preach against sentiment. And here you are letting a dangerous criminal escape out of sheer sentimentality.'

'That was not sentiment - that was business,' replied Poirot. 'Do you not see, my friend, that we have no shadow of proof against him? Shall I get up and say to twelve stolid Cornishmen that I, Hercule Poirot, know? They would laugh at me. The only chance was to

frighten him and get a confession that way. Those two loafers that I noticed outside came in very useful. Pull down the blind again, will you, Hastings? Not that there was any reason for raising it. It was part of the mise en scé ne.

'Well, well, we must keep our word. Twenty-four hours, did I say? So much longer for poor Mr Pengelley - and it is not more than he deserves; for mark you, he deceived his wife. I am very strong on the family life, as you know. Ah, well, twenty-four hours - and then? I have great faith in Scotland Yard. They will get him, mon ami; they will get him.'

THE ADVENTURE OF JOHNNIE WAVERLY

'You can understand the feelings of a mother,' said Mrs Waverly for perhaps the sixth time.

She looked appealingly at Poirot. My little friend, always sympathetic to motherhood in distress, gesticulated reassuringly.

'But yes, but yes, I comprehend perfectly. Have faith in Papa Poirot.'

'The police -' began Mr Waverly.

His wife waved the interruption aside. 'I won't have anything more to do with the police. We trusted to them and look what happened! But I'd heard so much of M. Poirot and the wonderful things he'd

done, that I felt he might possibly be able to help us. A mother's feelings -'

Poirot hastily stemmed the reiteration with an eloquent gesture. Mrs Waverly's emotion was obviously genuine, but it assorted strangely with her shrewd, rather hard type of countenance. When I heard later that she was the daughter of a prominent steel manufacturer of Birmingham who had worked his way up in the world from an office boy to his present eminence, I realized that she had inherited many of the paternal qualities.

Mr Waverly was a big, florid, jovial-looking man. He stood with his legs straddled wide apart and looked the type of the country squire.

'I suppose you know all about this business, M. Poirot?'

The question was almost superfluous. For some days past the paper had been full of the sensational kidnapping of little Johnnie Waverly, the three-year-old son and heir of Marcus Waverly, Esq., of Waverly Court, Surrey, one of the oldest families in England.

'The main facts I know, of course, but recount to me the whole story, monsieur, I beg of you. And in detail if you please.'

'Well, I suppose the beginning of the whole thing was about ten days ago when I got an anonymous letter - beastly things, anyway - that I couldn't make head or tail of. The writer had the impudence to demand that I should pay him twenty-five thousand pounds - twenty-five thousand pounds, M. Poirot! Failing my agreement, he threatened to kidnap Johnnie. Of course I threw the thing into the

wastepaper basket without more ado. Thought it was some silly joke. Five days later I got another letter. "Unless you pay, your son will be kidnapped on the twenty-ninth." That was on the twenty-seventh. Ada was worried, but I couldn't bring myself to treat the matter seriously. Damn it all, we're in England. Nobody goes about kidnapping children and holding them up to ransom.'

'It is not a common practice, certainly,' said Poirot. 'Proceed, monsieur.'

'Well, Ada gave me no peace, so - feeling a bit of a fool - I laid the matter before Scotland Yard. They didn't seem to take the thing very seriously - inclined to my view that it was some silly joke. On the twenty-eighth I got a third letter. "You have not paid. Your son will be taken from you at twelve o'clock noon tomorrow, the twenty-ninth. It will cost you fifty thousand pounds to recover him." Up I drove to Scotland Yard again. This time they were more impressed. They inclined to the view that the letters were written by a lunatic, and that in all probability an attempt of some kind would be made at the hour stated. They assured me that they would take all due precautions. Inspector McNeil and a sufficient force would come down to Waverly on the morrow and take charge.

'I went home much relieved in my mind. Yet we already had the feeling of being in a state of siege. I gave orders that no stranger was to be admitted, and that no one was to leave the house. The evening passed off without any untoward incident, but on the following morning my wife was seriously unwell. Alarmed by her condition, I sent for Doctor Dakers. Her symptoms appeared to puzzle him. While hesitating to suggest that she had been poisoned,

I could see that that was what was in his mind. There was no danger, he assured me, but it would be a day or two before she would be able to get about again. Returning to my own room, I was startled and amazed to find a note pinned to my pillow. It was in the same handwriting as the others and contained just three words: "At twelve o'clock".

'I admit, M. Poirot, that then I saw red! Someone in the house was in this - one of the servants. I had them all up, blackguarded them right and left. They never split on each other; it was Miss Collins, my wife's companion, who informed me that she had seen Johnnie's nurse slip down the drive early that morning. I taxed her with it, and she broke down. She had left the child with the nursery maid and stolen out to meet a friend of hers - a man! Pretty goings on! She denied having pinned the note to my pillow - she may have been speaking the truth, I don't know. I felt I couldn't take the risk of the child's own nurse being in the plot. One of the servants was implicated - of that I was sure. Finally I lost my temper and sacked the whole bunch, nurse and all. I gave them an hour to pack their boxes and get out of the house.'

Mr Waverly's red face was quite two shades redder as he remembered his just wrath.

'Was not that a little injudicious, monsieur?' suggested Poirot. 'For all you know, you might have been playing into the enemy's hands.'

Mr Waverly stared at him. 'I don't see that. Send the whole lot packing, that was my idea. I wired to London for a fresh lot to be sent down that evening. In the meantime, there'd be only people I

could trust in the house: my wife's secretary, Miss Collins, and Tredwell, the butler, who has been with me since I was a boy.'

'And this Miss Collins, how long has she been with you?'

'Just a year,' said Mrs Waverly. 'She has been invaluable to me as a secretary-companion, and is also a very efficient housekeeper.'

'The nurse?'

'She has been with me six months. She came to me with excellent references. All the same, I never really liked her, although Johnnie was quite devoted to her.'

'Still, I gather she had already left when the catastrophe occurred. Perhaps, Monsieur Waverly, you will be so kind as to continue.'

Mr Waverly resumed his narrative.

'Inspector McNeil arrived about ten-thirty. The servants had all left by then. He declared himself quite satisfied with the internal arrangements. He had various men posted in the park outside, guarding all the approaches to the house, and he assured me that if the whole thing were not a hoax, we should undoubtedly catch my mysterious correspondent.

'I had Johnnie with me, and he and I and the inspector went together into a room we call the council chamber. The inspector locked the door. There is a big grandfather clock there, and as the hands drew near to twelve I don't mind confessing that I was as

nervous as a cat. There was a whirring sound, and the clock began to strike. I clutched Johnnie. I had a feeling a man might drop from the skies. The last stroke sounded, and as it did so, there was a great commotion outside - shouting and running. The inspector flung up the window, and a constable came running up.

'"We've got him, sir," he panted. "He was sneaking up through the bushes. He's got a whole dope outfit on him."

'We hurried out on the terrace where two constables were holding a ruffianly-looking fellow in shabby clothes, who was twisting and turning in a vain endeavour to escape. One of the policemen held out an unrolled parcel which they had wrested from their captive. It contained a pad of cotton wool and a bottle of chloroform. It made my blood boil to see it. There was a note, too, addressed to me. I tore it open. It bore the following words: "You should have paid up. To ransom your son will now cost you fifty thousand. In spite of all your precautions he has been abducted at twelve o'clock on the twenty-ninth as I said."

'I gave a great laugh, the laugh of relief, but as I did so I heard the hum of a motor and a shout. I turned my head. Racing down the drive towards the south lodge at a furious speed was a low, long grey car. It was the man who drove it who had shouted, but that was not what gave me a shock of horror. It was the sight of Johnnie's flaxen curls. The child was in the car beside him.

'The inspector ripped out an oath. "The child was here not a minute ago," he cried. His eyes swept over us. We were all there: myself, Tredwell, Miss Collins. "When did you see him last, Mr Waverly?"

'I cast my mind back, trying to remember. When the constable had called us, I had run out with the inspector, forgetting all about Johnnie.

'And then there came a sound that startled us, the chiming of a church clock from the village. With an exclamation the inspector pulled out his watch. It was exactly twelve o'clock. With one common accord we ran to the council chamber; the clock there marked the hour as ten minutes past. Someone must have deliberately tampered with it, for I have never known it gain or lose before. It is a perfect time-keeper.'

Mr Waverly paused. Poirot smiled to himself and straightened a little mat which the anxious father had pushed askew.

'A pleasing little problem, obscure and charming,' murmured Poirot. 'I will investigate it for you with pleasure. Truly it was planned à merveille.'

Mrs Waverly looked at him reproachfully. 'But my boy,' she wailed.

Poirot hastily composed his face and looked the picture of earnest sympathy again. 'He is safe, madame, he is unharmed. Rest assured, these miscreants will take the greatest care of him. Is he not to them the turkey - no, the goose - that lays the golden egg?'

'M. Poirot, I'm sure there's only one thing to be done - pay up. I was all against it at first - but now! A mother's feelings -'

'But we have interrupted monsieur in his history,' cried Poirot hastily.

'I expect you know the rest pretty well from the papers,' said Mr Waverly. 'Of course, Inspector McNeil got on to the telephone immediately. A description of the car and the man was circulated all round, and it looked at first as though everything was going to turn out all right. A car, answering to the description, with a man and a small boy, had passed through various villages, apparently making for London. At one place they had stopped, and it was noticed that the child was crying and obviously afraid of his companion. When Inspector McNeil announced that the car had been stopped and the man and boy detained, I was almost ill with relief. You know the sequel. The boy was not Johnnie, and the man was an ardent motorist, fond of children, who had picked up a small child playing in the streets of Edenswell, a village about fifteen miles from us, and was kindly giving him a ride. Thanks to the cocksure blundering of the police, all traces have disappeared. Had they not persistently followed the wrong car, they might by now have found the boy.'

'Calm yourself, monsieur. The police are a brave and intelligent force of men. Their mistake was a very natural one. And altogether it was a clever scheme. As to the man they caught in the grounds, I understand that his defence has consisted all along of a persistent denial. He declares that the note and parcel were given to him to deliver at Waverly Court. The man who gave them to him handed him a ten-shilling note and promised him another if it were delivered at exactly ten minutes to twelve. He was to approach the house through the grounds and knock at the side door.'

'I don't believe a word of it,' declared Mrs Waverly hotly. 'It's all a parcel of lies.'

'En verité , it is a thin story,' said Poirot reflectively. 'But so far they have not shaken it. I understand, also, that he made a certain accusation?'

His glance interrogated Mr Waverly. The latter got rather red again.

'The fellow had the impertinence to pretend that he recognized in Tredwell the man who gave him the parcel. "Only the bloke has shaved off his moustache." Tredwell, who was born on the estate!'

Poirot smiled a little at the country gentleman's indignation.

'Yet you yourself suspect an inmate of the house to have been accessory to the abduction.'

'Yes, but not Tredwell.'

'And you, madame?' asked Poirot, suddenly turning to her.

'It could not have been Tredwell who gave this tramp the letter and parcel - if anybody ever did, which I don't believe. It was given him at ten o'clock, he says. At ten o'clock Tredwell was with my husband in the smoking-room.'

'Were you able to see the face of the man in the car, monsieur? Did it resemble that of Tredwell in any way?'

'It was too far away for me to see his face.'

'Has Tredwell a brother, do you know?'

'He had several, but they are all dead. The last one was killed in the war.'

'I am not yet clear as to the grounds of Waverly Court. The car was heading for the south lodge. Is there another entrance?'

'Yes, what we call the east lodge. It can be seen from the other side of the house.'

'It seems to me strange that nobody saw the car entering the grounds.'

'There is a right of way through, and access to a small chapel. A good many cars pass through. The man must have stopped the car in a convenient place and run up to the house just as the alarm was given and attention attracted elsewhere.'

'Unless he was already inside the house,' mused Poirot. 'Is there any place where he could have hidden?'

'Well, we certainly didn't make a thorough search of the house beforehand. There seemed no need. I suppose he might have hidden himself somewhere, but who would have let him in?'

'We shall come to that later. One thing at a time - let us be methodical. There is no special hiding-place in the house? Waverly Court is an old place, and there are sometimes "priests' holes", as they call them.'

'By gad, there's a priest's hole. It opens from one of the panels in the hall.'

'Near the council chamber?'

'Just outside the door.'

'Voilà!'

'But nobody knows of its existence except my wife and myself.'

'Tredwell?'

'Well - he might have heard of it.'

'Miss Collins?'

'I have never mentioned it to her.'

Poirot reflected for a minute.

'Well, monsieur, the next thing is for me to come down to Waverly Court. If I arrive this afternoon, will it suit you?'

'Oh, as soon as possible, please, Monsieur Poirot!' cried Mrs Waverly. 'Read this once more.'

She thrust into his hands the last missive from the enemy which had reached the Waverlys that morning and which had sent her post-haste to Poirot. It gave clever and explicit directions for the paying over of the money, and ended with a threat that the boy's life would pay for any treachery. It was clear that a love of money warred with the essential mother love of Mrs Waverly, and that the latter was at last gaining the day.

Poirot detained Mrs Waverly for a minute behind her husband.

'Madame, the truth, if you please. Do you share your husband's faith in the butler, Tredwell?'

'I have nothing against him, Monsieur Poirot, I cannot see how he can have been concerned in this, but - well, I have never liked him - never.'

'One other thing, madame, can you give me the address of the child's nurse?'

'149 Netherall Road, Hammersmith. You don't imagine -'

'Never do I imagine. Only - I employ the little grey cells. And sometimes, just sometimes, I have a little idea.'

Poirot came back to me as the door closed.

'So madame has never liked the butler. It is interesting, that, eh, Hastings?'

I refused to be drawn. Poirot has deceived me so often that I now go warily. There is always a catch somewhere.

After completing an elaborate outdoor toilet, we set off for Netherall Road. We were fortunate enough to find Miss Jessie Withers at home. She was a pleasant-faced woman of thirty-five, capable and superior. I could not believe that she could be mixed up in the affair. She was bitterly resentful of the way she had been dismissed, but admitted that she had been in the wrong. She was engaged to be married to a painter and decorator who happened to be in the neighbourhood, and she had run out to meet him. The thing seemed natural enough. I could not quite understand Poirot. All his questions seemed to me quite irrelevant. They were concerned mainly with the daily routine of her life at Waverly Court. I was frankly bored and glad when Poirot took his departure.

'Kidnapping is an easy job, mon ami,' he observed, as he hailed a taxi in the Hammersmith Road and ordered it to drive to Waterloo.

'That child could have been abducted with the greatest ease any day for the last three years.'

'I don't see that that advances us much,' I remarked coldly.

'Au contraire, it advances us enormously, but enormously! If you must wear a tie pin, Hastings, at least let it be in the exact centre of

your tie. At present it is at least a sixteenth of an inch too much to the right.'

Waverly Court was a fine old place and had recently been restored with taste and care. Mr Waverly showed us the council chamber, the terrace, and all the various spots connected with the case. Finally, at Poirot's request, he pressed a spring in the wall, a panel slid aside, and a short passage led us into the priest's hole.

'You see,' said Waverly. 'There is nothing here.'

The tiny room was bare enough, there was not even the mark of a footstep on the floor. I joined Poirot where he was bending attentively over a mark in the corner.

'What do you make of this, my friend?'

There were four imprints close together.

'A dog,' I cried.

'A very small dog, Hastings.'

'A Pom.'

'Smaller than a Pom.'

'A griffon?' I suggested doubtfully.

'Smaller even than a griffon. A species unknown to the Kennel Club.'

I looked at him. His face was alight with excitement and satisfaction.

'I was right,' he murmured. 'I knew I was right. Come, Hastings.'

As we stepped out into the hall and the panel closed behind us, a young lady came out of a door farther down the passage. Mr Waverly presented her to us.

'Miss Collins.'

Miss Collins was about thirty years of age, brisk and alert in manner. She had fair, rather dull hair, and wore pince-nez.

At Poirot's request, we passed into a small morning-room, and he questioned her closely as to the servants and particularly as to Tredwell. She admitted that she did not like the butler.

'He gives himself airs,' she explained.

They then went into the question of the food eaten by Mrs Waverly on the night of the 28th. Miss Collins declared that she had partaken of the same dishes upstairs in her sitting-room and had felt no ill effects. As she was departing I nudged Poirot.

'The dog,' I whispered.

'Ah, yes, the dog!' He smiled broadly. 'Is there a dog kept here by any chance, mademoiselle?'

'There are two retrievers in the kennels outside.'

'No, I mean a small dog, a toy dog.'

'No - nothing of the kind.'

Poirot permitted her to depart. Then, pressing the bell, he remarked to me,

'She lies, that Mademoiselle Collins. Possibly I should, also, in her place. Now for the butler.'

Tredwell was a dignified individual. He told his story with perfect aplomb, and it was essentially the same as that of Mr Waverly. He admitted that he knew the secret of the priest's hole. When he finally withdrew, pontifical to the last, I met Poirot's quizzical eyes.

'What do you make of it all, Hastings?'

'What do you?' I parried.

'How cautious you become. Never, never will the grey cells function unless you stimulate them. Ah, but I will not tease you! Let us make our deductions together. What points strike us specially as being difficult?'

'There is one thing that strikes me,' I said. 'Why did the man who kidnapped the child go out by the south lodge instead of by the east lodge where no one would see him?'

'That is a very good point, Hastings, an excellent one. I will match it with another. Why warn the Waverlys beforehand? Why not simply kidnap the child and hold him to ransom?'

'Because they hoped to get the money without being forced to action.'

'Surely it was very unlikely that the money would be paid on a mere threat?'

'Also they wanted to focus attention on twelve o'clock, so that when the tramp man was seized, the other could emerge from his hiding-place and get away with the child unnoticed.'

'That does not alter the fact that they were making a thing difficult that was perfectly easy. If they do not specify a time or date, nothing would be easier than to wait their chance, and carry off the child in a motor one day when he is out with his nurse.'

'Ye-es,' I admitted doubtfully.

'In fact, there is a deliberate playing of the farce! Now let us approach the question from another side. Everything goes to show that there was an accomplice inside the house. Point number one, the mysterious poisoning of Mrs Waverly. Point number two, the letter pinned to the pillow. Point number three, the putting on of the

clock ten minutes - all inside jobs. And an additional fact that you may not have noticed. There was no dust in the priest's hole. It had been swept out with a broom.

'Now then, we have four people in the house. We can exclude the nurse, since she could not have swept out the priest's hole, though she could have attended to the other three points. Four people, Mr and Mrs Waverly, Tredwell, the butler, and Miss Collins. We will take Miss Collins first. We have nothing much against her, except that we know very little about her, that she is obviously an intelligent young woman, and that she has only been here a year.'

'She lied about the dog, you said,' I reminded him.

'Ah, yes, the dog.' Poirot gave a peculiar smile. 'Now let us pass to Tredwell. There are several suspicious facts against him. For one thing, the tramp declares that it was Tredwell who gave him the parcel in the village.'

'But Tredwell can prove an alibi on that point.'

'Even then, he could have poisoned Mrs Waverly, pinned the note to the pillow, put on the clock, and swept out the priest's hole. On the other hand, he has been born and bred in the service of the Waverlys. It seems unlikely in the last degree that he should connive at the abduction of the son of the house. It is not in the picture!'

'Well, then?'

'We must proceed logically - however absurd it may seem. We will briefly consider Mrs Waverly. But she is rich, the money is hers. It is her money which has restored this impoverished estate. There would be no reason for her to kidnap her son and pay over her money to herself. Her husband, now, is in a different position. He has a rich wife. It is not the same thing as being rich himself - in fact I have a little idea that the lady is not very fond of parting with her money, except on a very good pretext. But Mr Waverly, you can see at once, he is bon viveur.'

'Impossible,' I spluttered.

'Not at all. Who sends away the servants? Mr Waverly. He can write the notes, drug his wife, put on the hands of the clock, and establish an excellent alibi for his faithful retainer Tredwell. Tredwell has never liked Mrs Waverly. He is devoted to his master and is willing to obey his orders implicitly. There were three of them in it. Waverly, Tredwell, and some friend of Waverly. That is the mistake the police made, they made no further inquiries about the man who drove the grey car with the wrong child in it. He was the third man. He picks up a child in a village near by, a boy with flaxen curls. He drives in through the east lodge and passes out through the south lodge just at the right moment, waving his hand and shouting. They cannot see his face or the number of the car, so obviously they cannot see the child's face, either. Then he lays a false trail to London. In the meantime, Tredwell has done his part in arranging for the parcel and note to be delivered by a rough-looking gentleman. His master can provide an alibi in the unlikely case of the man recognizing him, in spite of the false moustache he wore. As for Mr Waverly, as soon as the hullabaloo occurs outside,

and the inspector rushes out, he quickly hides the child in the priest's hole, and follows him out. Later in the day, when the inspector is gone and Miss Collins is out of the way, it will be easy enough to drive him off to some safe place in his own car.'

'But what about the dog?' I asked. 'And Miss Collins lying?'

'That was my little joke. I asked her if there were any toy dog in the house, and she said no - but doubtless there are some - in the nursery! You see, Mr Waverly placed some toys in the priest's hole to keep Johnnie amused and quiet.'

'M. Poirot -' Mr Waverly entered the room - 'have you discovered anything? Have you any clue to where the boy has been taken?'

Poirot handed him a piece of paper. 'Here is the address.'

'But this is a blank sheet.'

'Because I am waiting for you to write it down for me.'

'What the -' Mr Waverly's face turned purple.

'I know everything, monsieur. I give you twenty-four hours to return the boy. Your ingenuity will be equal to the task of explaining his reappearance. Otherwise, Mrs Waverly will be informed of the exact sequence of events.'

Mr Waverly sank down in a chair and buried his face in his hands. 'He is with my old nurse, ten miles away. He is happy and well cared for.'

'I have no doubt of that. If I did not believe you to be a good father at heart, I should not be willing to give you another chance.'

'The scandal -'

'Exactly. Your name is an old and honoured one. Do not jeopardize it again. Good evening, Mr Waverly. Ah, by the way, one word of advice. Always sweep in the corners!'

THE DOUBLE CLUE

'But above everything - no publicity,' said Mr Marcus Hardman for perhaps the fourteenth time.

The word publicity occurred throughout his conversation with the regularity of a leitmotif. Mr Hardman was a small man, delicately plump, with exquisitely manicured hands and a plaintive tenor voice. In his way, he was somewhat of a celebrity and the fashionable life was his profession. He was rich, but not remarkably so, and he spent his money zealously in the pursuit of social pleasure. His hobby was collecting. He had the collector's soul. Old lace, old fans, antique jewellery - nothing crude or modern for Marcus Hardman.

Poirot and I, obeying an urgent summons, had arrived to find the little man writhing in an agony of indecision. Under the circumstances, to call in the police was abhorrent to him. On the other hand, not to call them in was to acquiesce in the loss of some of the gems of his collection. He hit upon Poirot as a compromise.

'My rubies, Monsieur Poirot, and the emerald necklace - said to have belonged to Catherine de Medici. Oh, the emerald necklace.'

'If you will recount to me the circumstances of their disappearance?' suggested Poirot gently.

'I am endeavouring to do so. Yesterday afternoon I had a little tea party - quite an informal affair, some half a dozen people or so. I have given one or two of them during the season, and though perhaps I should not say so, they have been quite a success. Some good music - Nacora, the pianist, and Katherine Bird, the Australian contralto - in the big studio. Well, early in the afternoon, I was showing my guests my collection of medieval jewels. I keep them in the small wall safe over there. It is arranged like a cabinet inside, with coloured velvet background, to display the stone. Afterwards we inspected the fans - in that case on the wall. Then we all went to the studio for music. It was not until after everyone had gone that I discovered the safe rifled! I must have failed to shut it properly, and someone had seized the opportunity to denude it of its contents. The rubies, Monsieur Poirot, the emerald necklace - the collection of a lifetime! What would I not give to recover them! But there must be no publicity! You fully understand that, do you not, Monsieur Poirot? My own guests, my personal friends! It would be a horrible scandal!'

'Who was the last person to leave this room when you went to the studio?'

'Mr Johnston. You may know him? The South African millionaire. He has just rented the Abbotburys' house in Park Lane. He lingered behind a few moments, I remember. But surely, oh, surely it could not be he!'

'Did any of your guests return to this room during the afternoon on any pretext?'

'I was prepared for that question, Monsieur Poirot. Three of them did so. Countess Vera Rossakoff, Mr Bernard Parker, and Lady Runcorn.'

'Let us hear about them.'

'The Countess Rossakoff is a very charming Russian lady, a member of the old ré gime. She has recently come to this country. She had bade me goodbye, and I was therefore somewhat surprised to find her in this room apparently gazing in rapture at my cabinet of fans. You know, Monsieur Poirot, the more I think of it, the more suspicious it seems to me. Don't you agree?'

'Extremely suspicious; but let us hear about the others.'

'Well, Parker simply came here to fetch a case of miniatures that I was anxious to show to Lady Runcorn.'

'And Lady Runcorn herself?'

'As I dare say you know, Lady Runcorn is a middle-aged woman of considerable force of character who devotes most of her time to various charitable committees. She simply returned to fetch a handbag she had laid down somewhere.'

'Bien, monsieur. So we have four possible suspects. The Russian countess, the English grande dame, the South African millionaire, and Mr Bernard Parker. Who is Mr Parker, by the way?'

The question appeared to embarrass Mr Hardman considerably.

'He is - er - he is a young fellow. Well, in fact, a young fellow I know.'

'I had already deduced as much,' replied Poirot gravely. 'What does he do, this Mr Parker?'

'He is a young man about town - not, perhaps, quite in the swim, if I may so express myself.'

'How did he come to be a friend of yours, may I ask?'

'Well - er - on one or two occasions he has - performed certain little commissions for me.'

'Continue, monsieur,' said Poirot.

Hardman looked piteously at him. Evidently the last thing he wanted to do was to continue. But as Poirot maintained an inexorable silence, he capitulated.

'You see, Monsieur Poirot - it is well known that I am interested in antique jewels. Sometimes there is a family heirloom to be disposed of - which, mind you, would never be sold in the open market or to a dealer. But a private sale to me is a very different matter. Parker arranges the details of such things, he is in touch with both sides, and thus any little embarrassment is avoided. He brings anything of that kind to my notice. For instance, the Countess Rossakoff has brought some family jewels with her from Russia. She is anxious to sell them. Bernard Parker was to have arranged the transaction.'

'I see,' said Poirot thoughtfully. 'And you trust him implicitly?'

'I have had no reason to do otherwise.'

'Mr Hardman, of these four people, which do you yourself suspect?'

'Oh, Monsieur Poirot, what a question! They are my friends, as I told you. I suspect none of them - or all of them, whichever way you like to put it.'

'I do not agree. You suspect one of those four. It is not Countess Rossakoff. It is not Mr Parker. Is it Lady Runcorn or Mr Johnston?'

'You drive me into a corner, Monsieur Poirot, you do indeed. I am most anxious to have no scandal. Lady Runcorn belongs to one of the oldest families in England; but it is true, it is most unfortunately

true, that her aunt, Lady Caroline, suffered from a most melancholy affliction. It was understood, of course, by all her friends, and her maid returned the teaspoons, or whatever it was, as promptly as possible. You see my predicament!'

'So Lady Runcorn had an aunt who was a kleptomaniac? Very interesting. You permit that I examine the safe?'

Mr Hardman assenting, Poirot pushed back the door of the safe and examined the interior. The empty velvet-lined shelves gaped at us.

'Even now the door does not shut properly,' murmured Poirot, as he swung it to and fro. 'I wonder why? Ah, what have we here? A glove, caught in the hinge. A man's glove.'

He held it out to Mr Hardman.

'That's not one of my gloves,' the latter declared.

'Aha! Something more!' Poirot bent deftly and picked up a small object from the floor of the safe. It was a flat cigarette case made of black moiré .

'My cigarette case!' cried Mr Hardman.

'Yours? Surely not, monsieur. Those are not your initials.'

He pointed to an entwined monogram of two letters executed in platinum.

Hardman took it in his hand.

'You are right,' he declared. 'It is very like mine, but the initials are different. A 'B' and a 'P'. Good heavens - Parker!'

'It would seem so,' said Poirot. 'A somewhat careless young man - especially if the glove is his also. That would be a double clue, would it not?'

'Bernard Parker!' murmured Hardman. 'What a relief! Well, Monsieur Poirot, I leave it to you to recover the jewels. Place the matter in the hands of the police if you think fit - that is, if you are quite sure that it is he who is guilty.'

'See you, my friend,' said Poirot to me, as we left the house together, 'he has one law for the titled, and another law for the plain, this Mr Hardman. Me, I have not yet been ennobled, so I am on the side of the plain. I have sympathy for this young man. The whole thing was a little curious, was it not? There was Hardman suspecting Lady Runcorn; there was I, suspecting the Countess and Johnston; and all the time, the obscure Mr Parker was our man.'

'Why did you suspect the other two?'

'Parbleu! It is such a simple thing to be a Russian refugee or a South African millionaire. Any woman can call herself a Russian countess; anyone can buy a house in Park Lane and call himself a South African millionaire. Who is going to contradict them? But I

observe that we are passing through Bury Street. Our careless young friend lives here. Let us, as you say, strike while the iron is in the fire.'

Mr Bernard Parker was at home. We found him reclining on some cushions, clad in an amazing dressing-gown of purple and orange. I have seldom taken a greater dislike to anyone than I did to this particular young man with his white, effeminate face and affected lisping speech.

'Good morning, monsieur,' said Poirot briskly. 'I come from Mr Hardman. Yesterday, at the party, somebody has stolen all his jewels. Permit me to ask you, monsieur - is this your glove?'

Mr Parker's mental processes did not seem very rapid. He stared at the glove, as though gathering his wits together.

'Where did you find it?' he asked at last.

'Is it your glove, monsieur?'

Mr Parker appeared to make up his mind.

'No, it isn't,' he declared.

'And this cigarette case, is that yours?'

'Certainly not. I always carry a silver one.'

'Very well, monsieur. I go to put matters in the hands of the police.'

'Oh, I say, I wouldn't do that if I were you,' cried Mr Parker in some concern. 'Beastly unsympathetic people, the police. Wait a bit. I'll go round and see old Hardman. Look here - oh, stop a minute.'

But Poirot beat a determined retreat.

'We have given him something to think about, have we not?' he chuckled. 'Tomorrow we will observe what has occurred.'

But we were destined to have a reminder of the Hardman case that afternoon. Without the least warning the door flew open, and a whirlwind in human form invaded our privacy, bringing with her a swirl of sables (it was as cold as only an English June day can be) and a hat rampant with slaughtered ospreys. Countess Vera Rossakoff was a somewhat disturbing personality.

'You are Monsieur Poirot? What is this that you have done? You accuse that poor boy! It is infamous. It is scandalous. I know him. He is a chicken, a lamb - never would he steal. He has done everything for me. Will I stand by and see him martyred and butchered?'

'Tell me, madame, is this his cigarette case?' Poirot held out the black moiré case.

The Countess paused for a moment while she inspected it.

'Yes, it is his. I know it well. What of it? Did you find it in the room? We were all there; he dropped it then, I suppose. Ah, you policemen, you are worse than the Red Guards -'

'And is this his glove?'

'How should I know? One glove is like another. Do not try to stop me - he must be set free. His character must be cleared. You shall do it. I will sell my jewels and give you much money.'

'Madame -'

'It is agreed, then? No, no, do not argue. The poor boy! He came to me, the tears in his eyes. "I will save you," I said. "I will go to this man - this ogre, this monster! Leave it to Vera." Now it is settled, I go.'

With as little ceremony as she had come, she swept from the room, leaving an overpowering perfume of an exotic nature behind her.

'What a woman,' I exclaimed. 'And what furs!'

'Ah, yes, they were genuine enough! Could a spurious countess have real furs? My little joke, Hastings... No, she is truly Russian, I fancy. Well, well, so Master Bernard went bleating to her.'

'The cigarette case is his. I wonder if the glove is also -'

With a smile Poirot drew from his pocket a second glove and placed it by the first. There was no doubt of their being a pair.

'Where did you get the second one, Poirot?'

'It was thrown down with a stick on the table in the hall in Bury Street. Truly, a very careless young man, Monsieur Parker. Well, well, mon ami - we must be thorough. Just for the form of the thing, I will make a little visit to Park Lane.'

Needless to say, I accompanied my friend. Johnston was out, but we saw his private secretary. It transpired that Johnston had only recently arrived from South Africa. He had never been in England before.

'He is interested in precious stones, is he not?' hazarded Poirot.

'Gold mining is nearer the mark,' laughed the secretary.

Poirot came away from the interview thoughtful. Late that evening, to my utter surprise, I found him earnestly studying a Russian grammar.

'Good heavens, Poirot!' I cried. 'Are you learning Russian in order to converse with the Countess in her own language?'

'She certainly would not listen to my English, my friend!'

'But surely, Poirot, well-born Russians invariably speak French!'

'You are a mine of information, Hastings! I will cease puzzling over the intricacies of the Russian alphabet.'

He threw the book from him with a dramatic gesture. I was not entirely satisfied. There was a twinkle in his eye which I knew of old. It was an invariable sign that Hercule Poirot was pleased with himself.

'Perhaps,' I said sapiently, 'you doubt her being really a Russian. You are going to test her?'

'Ah, no, no, she is Russian all right.'

'Well, then -'

'If you really want to distinguish yourself over this case, Hastings, I recommend First Steps in Russian as an invaluable aid.'

Then he laughed and would say no more. I picked up the book from the floor and dipped into it curiously, but could make neither head nor tail of Poirot's remarks.

The following morning brought us no news of any kind, but that did not seem to worry my little friend. At breakfast, he announced his intention of calling upon Mr Hardman early in the day. We found the elderly society butterfly at home, and seemingly a little calmer than on the previous day.

'Well, Monsieur Poirot, any news?' he demanded eagerly. Poirot handed him a slip of paper.

'That is the person who took the jewels, monsieur. Shall I put matters in the hands of the police? Or would you prefer me to recover the jewels without bringing the police into the matter?'

Mr Hardman was staring at the paper. At last he found his voice.

'Most astonishing. I should infinitely prefer to have no scandal in the matter. I give you carte blanche, Monsieur Poirot. I am sure you will be discreet.'

Our next procedure was to hail a taxi, which Poirot ordered to drive to the Carlton. There he inquired for Countess Rossakoff. In a few minutes we were ushered up into the lady's suite. She came to meet us with outstretched hands, arrayed in a marvelous negligé e of barbaric design.

'Monsieur Poirot,' she cried. 'You have succeeded? You have cleared that poor infant?'

'Madame la Comtesse, your friend Mr Parker is perfectly safe from arrest.'

'Ah, but you are the clever little man! Superb! And so quickly too.'

'On the other hand, I have promised Mr Hardman that the jewels shall be returned to him today.'

'So?'

'Therefore, madame, I should be extremely obliged if you would place them in my hands without delay. I am sorry to hurry you, but I am keeping a taxi - in case it should be necessary for me to go on to Scotland Yard; and we Belgians, madame, we practise the thrift.'

The Countess had lighted a cigarette. For some seconds she sat perfectly still, blowing smoke rings, and gazing steadily at Poirot. Then she burst into a laugh, and rose. She went across to the bureau, opened a drawer, and took out a black silk handbag. She tossed it lightly to Poirot. Her tone, when she spoke, was perfectly light and unmoved.

'We Russians, on the contrary, practise prodigality,' she said. 'And to do that, unfortunately, one must have money. You need not look inside. They are all there.'

Poirot arose.

'I congratulate you, madame, on your quick intelligence and your promptitude.'

'Ah! But since you were keeping your taxi waiting, what else could I do?'

'You are too amiable, madame. You are remaining long in London?'

'I am afraid not - owing to you.'

'Accept my apologies.'

'We shall meet again elsewhere, perhaps.'

'I hope so.'

'And I - do not,' exclaimed the Countess with a laugh. 'It is a great compliment that I pay you there - there are very few men in the world whom I fear. Goodbye, Monsieur Poirot.'

'Goodbye, Madame la Comtesse. Ah - pardon me, I forgot! Allow me to return you your cigarette case.'

And with a bow he handed to her the little black moiré case we had found in the safe. She accepted it without any change of expression - just a lifted eyebrow and a murmured: 'I see!'

'What a woman!' cried Poirot enthusiastically as we descended the stairs. 'Mon Dieu, quelle femme! Not a word of argument - of protestation, of bluff! One quick glance, and she had sized up the position correctly. I tell you, Hastings, a woman who can accept defeat like that - with a careless smile - will go far! She is dangerous, she has the nerves of steel; she -' He tripped heavily.

'If you can manage to moderate your transports and look where you're going, it might be as well,' I suggested. 'When did you first suspect the Countess?'

'Mon ami, it was the glove and the cigarette case - the double clue, shall we say? - that worried me. Bernard Parker might easily have dropped one or the other - but hardly both. Ah, no, that would have

been too careless! In the same way, if someone else had placed them there to incriminate Parker, one would have been sufficient - the cigarette case or the glove - again not both.

I was forced to the conclusion that one of the two things did not belong to Parker. I imagined at first that the case was his, and that the glove was not. But when I discovered the fellow to the glove, I saw that it was the other way about. Whose, then, was the cigarette case? Clearly, it could not belong to Lady Runcorn. The initials were wrong. Mr Johnston? Only if he were here under a false name. I interviewed his secretary, and it was apparent at once that everything was clear and aboveboard. There was no reticence about Mr Johnston's past. The Countess, then? She was supposed to have brought jewels with her from Russia; she had only to take the stones from their settings, and it was extremely doubtful if they could ever be identified. What could be easier for her than to pick up one of Parker's gloves from the hall that day and thrust it into the safe? But, bien sыr, she did not intend to drop her own cigarette case.'

'But if the case was hers, why did it have "B.P." on it? The Countess's initials are V.R.'

Poirot smiled gently upon me.

'Exactly, mon ami; but in the Russian alphabet, B is V and P is R.'

'Well, you couldn't expect me to guess that. I don't know Russian.'

'Neither do I, Hastings. That is why I bought my little book and urged it on your attention.'

He sighed.

'A remarkable woman. I have a feeling, my friend - a very decided feeling - I shall meet her again. Where, I wonder?'

THE KING OF CLUBS

'Truth,' I observed, laying aside the Daily Newsmonger, 'is stranger than fiction.'

The remark was not, perhaps, an original one. It appeared to incense my friend. Tilting his egg-shaped head on one side, the little man carefully flicked an imaginary fleck of dust from his carefully creased trousers, and observed:

'How profound! What a thinker is my friend Hastings!'

Without displaying any annoyance at this quite uncalled-for gibe, I tapped the sheet I had laid aside.

'You've read this morning's paper?'

'I have. And after reading it, I folded it anew symmetrically. I did not cast it on the floor as you have done, with your so lamentable absence of order and method.'

(That is the worst of Poirot. Order and Method are his gods. He goes so far as to attribute all his success to them.)

'Then you saw the account of the murder of Henry Reedburn, the impresario? It was that which prompted my remark. Not only is truth stranger than fiction - it is more dramatic. Think of that solid middle-class English family, the Oglanders. Father and mother, son and daughter, typical of thousands of families all over this country. The men of the family go to the city every day; the women look after the house. Their lives are perfectly peaceful, and utterly monotonous. Last night they were sitting in their neat suburban drawing-room at Daisymead, Streatham, playing bridge. Suddenly, without any warning, the french window bursts open, and a woman staggers into the room. Her grey satin frock is marked with a crimson stain. She utters one word, "Murder!" before she sinks to the ground insensible. It is possible that they recognize her from her pictures as Valerie Saintclair, the famous dancer who has lately taken London by storm!'

'Is this your eloquence, or that of the Daily Newsmonger?' inquired Poirot.

'The Daily Newsmonger was in a hurry to go to press, and contented itself with bare facts. But the dramatic possibilities of the story struck me at once.'

Poirot nodded thoughtfully. 'Wherever there is human nature, there is drama. But - it is not always just where you think it is. Remember that. Still, I too am interested in the case, since it is likely that I shall be connected with it.'

'Indeed?'

'Yes. A gentleman rang me up this morning, and made an appointment with me on behalf of Prince Paul of Maurania.'

'But what has that to do with it?'

'You do not read your pretty little English scandal-papers. The ones with the funny stories, and "a little mouse has heard -" or "a little bird would like to know -" See here.'

I followed his short stubby finger along the paragraph: '- whether the foreign prince and the famous dancer are really affinities! And if the lady likes her new diamond ring!'

'And now to resume your so dramatic narrative,' said Poirot. 'Mademoiselle Saintclair had just fainted on the drawing-room carpet at Daisymead, you remember.'

I shrugged. 'As a result of Mademoiselle's first murmured words when she came round, the two male Oglanders stepped out, one to fetch a doctor to attend to the lady, who was evidently suffering terribly from shock, and the other to the police-station whence after telling his story, he accompanied the police to Mon Dé sir, Mr Reedburn's magnificent villa, which is situated at no great distance from Daisymead. There they found the great man, who by the way suffers from a somewhat unsavoury reputation, lying in the library with the back of his head cracked open like an eggshell.'

'I have cramped your style,' said Poirot kindly. 'Forgive me, I pray... Ah, here is M. le Prince.'

Our distinguished visitor was announced under the title of Count Feodor. He was a strange-looking youth, tall, eager, with a weak chin, the famous Mauranberg mouth, and the dark fiery eyes of a fanatic.

'M. Poirot?'

My friend bowed.

'Monsieur, I am in terrible trouble, greater than I can well express -'

Poirot waved his hand. 'I comprehend your anxiety. Mademoiselle Saintclair is a very dear friend, is it not so?'

The Prince replied simply: 'I hope to make her my wife.'

Poirot sat up in his chair, and his eyes opened.

The Prince continued: 'I should not be the first of my family to make a morganatic marriage. My brother Alexander has also defied the Emperor. We are living now in more enlightened days, free from the old caste-prejudice. Besides, Mademoiselle Saintclair, in actual fact, is quite my equal in rank. You have heard hints as to her history?'

'There are many romantic stories of her origin - not an uncommon thing with famous dancers. I have heard that she is the daughter of

an Irish charwoman, also the story which makes her mother a Russian grand duchess.'

'The first story is, of course, nonsense,' said the young man. 'But the second is true. Valerie, though bound to secrecy, has let me guess as much. Besides, she proves it unconsciously in a thousand ways. I believe in heredity, M. Poirot.'

'I too believe in heredity,' said Poirot thoughtfully. 'I have seen some strange things in connection with it - moi qui vous parle... But to business, M. le Prince. What do you want of me? What do you fear? I may speak freely, may I not? Is there anything to connect Mademoiselle Saintclair with the crime? She knew Reedburn of course?'

'Yes. He professed to be in love with her.'

'And she?'

'She would have nothing to say to him.'

Poirot looked at him keenly. 'Had she any reason to fear him?'

The young man hesitated. 'There was an incident. You know Zara, the clairvoyant?'

'No.'

'She is wonderful. You should consult her some time. Valerie and I went to see her last week. She read the cards for us. She spoke to

Valerie of trouble - of gathering clouds; then she turned up the last card - the covering card, they call it. It was the king of clubs. She said to Valerie: "Beware. There is a man who holds you in his power. You fear him - you are in great danger through him. You know whom I mean?" Valerie was white to the lips. She nodded and said: "Yes, yes, I know." Shortly afterwards we left. Zara's last words to Valerie were: "Beware of the king of clubs. Danger threatens you!" I questioned Valerie. She would tell me nothing - assured me that all was well. But now, after last night, I am more sure than ever that in the king of clubs Valerie saw Reedburn, and that he was the man she feared.'

The Prince paused abruptly. 'Now you understand my agitation when I opened the paper this morning. Supposing Valerie, in a fit of madness - oh, it is impossible.'

Poirot rose from his seat, and patted the young man kindly on the shoulder. 'Do not distress yourself, I beg of you. Leave it in my hands.'

'You will go to Streatham? I gather she is still there, at Daisy mead - prostrated by the shock.'

'I will go at once.'

'I have arranged matters - through the embassy. You will be allowed access everywhere.'

'Then we will depart - Hastings, you will accompany me? Au revoir, M. le Prince.'

Mon Dé sir was an exceptionally fine villa, thoroughly modern and comfortable. A short carriage-drive led up to it from the road, and beautiful gardens extended behind the house for some acres.

On mentioning Prince Paul's name, the butler who answered the door at once took us to the scene of the tragedy. The library was a magnificent room, running from back to front of the whole building, with a window at either end, one giving on the front carriage-drive, and the other on the garden. It was in the recess of the latter that the body had lain. It had been removed not long before, the police having concluded their examination.

'That is annoying,' I murmured to Poirot. 'Who knows what clues they may have destroyed?'

My little friend smiled.

'Eh - eh! How often must I tell you that dues come from within? In the little grey cells of the brain lies the solution of every mystery.'

He turned to the butler. 'I suppose, except for the removal of the body, the room has not been touched?'

'No, sir. It's just as it was when the police came up last night.'

'These curtains, now. I see they pull right across the window-recess. They are the same in the other window. Were they drawn last night?'

'Yes, sir. I draw them every night.'

'Then Reedburn must have drawn them back himself?'

'I suppose so, sir.'

'Did you know your master expected a visitor last night?'

'He did not say so, sir. But he gave orders he was not to be disturbed after dinner. You see, sir, there is a door leading out of the library on to the terrace at the side of the house. He could have admitted anyone that way.'

'Was he in the habit of doing that?'

The butler coughed discreetly. 'I believe so, sir.'

Poirot strode to the door in question. It was unlocked. He stepped through it on to the terrace which joined the drive on the right; on the left it led up to a red brick wall.

'The fruit garden, sir. There is a door leading into it farther along, but it was always locked at six o'clock.'

Poirot nodded, and re-entered the library, the butler following. 'Did you hear nothing of last night's events?'

'Well, sir, we heard voices in the library, a little before nine. But that wasn't unusual, especially being a lady's voice. But of course, once we were all in the servants' hall, right the other side, we didn't hear anything at all. And then, about eleven o'clock, the police came.'

'How many voices did you hear?'

'I couldn't say, sir. I only noticed the lady's.'

'Ah!'

'I beg pardon, sir, but Dr Ryan is still in the house, if you would care to see him.'

We jumped at the suggestion, and in a few minutes the doctor, a cheery, middle-aged man, joined us, and gave Poirot all the information he required. Reedburn had been lying near the window, his head by the marble window-seat. There were two wounds, one between the eyes, and the other, the fatal one, on the back of the head.

'He was lying on his back?'

'Yes. There is the mark.' He pointed to a small dark stain on the floor.

'Could not the blow on the back of the head have been caused by his striking the floor?'

'Impossible. Whatever the weapon was, it penetrated some distance into the skull.'

Poirot looked thoughtfully in front of him. In the embrasure of each window was a carved marble seat, the arms being fashioned in the form of a lion's head. A light came into Poirot's eyes. 'Supposing he had fallen backward on this projecting lion's head, and slipped from there to the ground. Would not that cause a wound such as you describe?'

'Yes, it would. But the angle at which he was lying makes that theory impossible. And besides, there could not fail to be traces of blood on the marble of the seat.'

'Unless they were washed away?'

The doctor shrugged his shoulders. 'That is hardly likely. It would be to no one's advantage to give an accident the appearance of murder.'

'Quite so,' acquiesced Poirot. 'Could either of the blows have been struck by a woman, do you think?'

'Oh, quite out of the question, I should say. You are thinking of Mademoiselle Saintclair, I suppose?'

'I think of no one in particular until I am sure,' said Poirot gently.

He turned his attention to the open french window, and the doctor continued:

'It is through here that Mademoiselle Saintclair fled. You can just catch a glimpse of Daisymead between the trees. Of course, there are many houses nearer to the front of the house on the road, but as it happens, Daisymead, though some distance away, is the only house visible this side.'

'Thank you for your amiability, Doctor,' said Poirot. 'Come, Hastings, we will follow the footsteps of Mademoiselle.'

Poirot led the way down through the garden, out through an iron gate, across a short stretch of green and in through the garden gate of Daisymead, which was an unpretentious little house in about half an acre of ground. There was a small flight of steps leading up to a french window. Poirot nodded in their direction.

'That is the way Mademoiselle Saintclair went. For us, who have not her urgency to plead, it will be better to go round to the front door.'

A maid admitted us and took us into the drawing-room, then went in search of Mrs Oglander. The room had evidently not been touched since the night before. The ashes were still in the grate, and the bridge-table was still in the centre of the room, with a dummy exposed, and the hands thrown down. The place was somewhat overloaded with gimcrack ornaments, and a good many family portraits of surpassing ugliness adorned the walls. Poirot gazed at them more leniently than I did, and straightened one or two that were hanging a shade askew.

'La famille, it is a strong tie, is it not? Sentiment, it takes the place of beauty.'

I agreed, my eyes being fixed on a family group comprising a gentleman with whiskers, a lady with a high 'front' of hair, a stolid, thick-set boy, and two little girls tied up with a good many unnecessary bows of ribbon. I took this to be the Oglander family in earlier days, and studied it with interest.

The door opened, and a young woman came in. Her dark hair was neatly arranged, and she wore a drab-coloured sportscoat and a tweed skirt.

She looked at us inquiringly. Poirot stepped forward. 'Miss Oglander? I regret to derange you - especially after all you have been through. The whole affair must have been most disturbing.'

'It has been rather upsetting,' admitted the young lady cautiously. I began to think that the elements of drama were wasted on Miss Oglander, that her lack of imagination rose superior to any tragedy. I was confirmed in this belief as she continued:

'I must apologize for the state this room is in. Servants get so foolishly excited.'

'It was here that you were sitting last night, n'est-ce-pas?'

'Yes, we were playing bridge after supper, when -'

'Excuse me - how long had you been playing?'

'Well -' Miss Oglander considered. 'I really can't say. I suppose it must have been about ten o'clock. We had had several rubbers, I know.'

'And you yourself were sitting - where?'

'Facing the window. I was playing with my mother and had gone one no trump. Suddenly, without any warning, the window burst open, and Miss Saintclair staggered into the room.'

'You recognized her?'

'I had a vague idea her face was familiar.'

'She is still here, is she not?'

'Yes, but she refuses to see anyone. She is still quite prostrated.'

'I think she will see me. Will you tell her that I am here at the express request of Prince Paul of Maurania?'

I fancied that the mention of a royal prince rather shook Miss Oglander's imperturbable calm. But she left the room on her errand without any further remark, and returned almost immediately to say that Mademoiselle Saintclair would see us in her room.

We followed her upstairs, and into a fair-sized light bedroom. On a couch by the window a woman was lying who turned her head as

we entered. The contrast between the two women struck me at once, the more so as in actual features and colouring they were not unalike - but oh, the difference! Not a look, not a gesture of Valerie Saintclair's but expressed drama. She seemed to exhale an atmosphere of romance. A scarlet flannel dressing-gown covered her feet - a homely garment in all conscience; but the charm of her personality invested it with an exotic flavour, and it seemed an Eastern robe of glowing colour.

Her large dark eyes fastened themselves on Poirot.

'You come from Paul?' Her voice matched her appearance - it was full and languid.

'Yes, mademoiselle. I am here to serve him - and you.'

'What do you want to know?'

'Everything that happened last night. But everything!'

She smiled rather wearily.

'Do you think I should lie? I am not stupid. I see well enough that there can be no concealment. He held a secret of mine, that man who is dead. He threatened me with it. For Paul's sake, I endeavoured to make terms with him. I could not risk losing Paul... Now that he is dead, I am safe. But for all that, I did not kill him.'

Poirot shook his head with a smile. 'It is not necessary to tell me that, mademoiselle. Now recount to me what happened last night.'

'I offered him money. He appeared to be willing to treat with me. He appointed last night at nine o'clock. I was to go to Mon Dé sir. I knew the place; I had been there before. I was to go round to the side door into the library, so that the servants should not see me.'

'Excuse me, mademoiselle, but were you not afraid to trust yourself alone there at night?'

Was it my fancy, or was there a momentary pause before she answered?

'Perhaps I was. But you see, there was no one I could ask to go with me. And I was desperate. Reedburn admitted me to the library. Oh, that man! I am glad he is dead! He played with me, as a cat does with a mouse. He taunted me. I begged and implored him on my knees. I offered him every jewel I have. All in vain! Then he named his own terms. Perhaps you can guess what they were. I refused. I told him what I thought of him. I raved at him. He remained calmly smiling. And then, as I fell to silence at last, there was a sound - from behind the curtain in the window... He heard it too. He strode to the curtains and flung them wide apart. There was a man there, hiding - a dreadful-looking man, a sort of tramp. He struck at Mr Reedburn - then he struck again, and he went down. The tramp clutched at me with his bloodstained hand. I tore myself free, slipped through the window, and ran for my life. Then I perceived the lights in this house, and made for them. The blinds were up, and I saw some people playing bridge. I almost fell into the room. I just managed to gasp out "Murder!" and then everything went black -'

'Thank you, mademoiselle. It must have been a great shock to your nervous system. As to this tramp, could you describe him? Do you remember what he was wearing?'

'No - it was all so quick. But I should know the man anywhere. His face is burnt in on my brain.'

'Just one more question, mademoiselle. The curtains of the other window, the one giving on the drive, were they drawn?'

For the first time a puzzled expression crept over the dancer's face. She seemed to be trying to remember.

'Eh bien, mademoiselle?'

'I think - I am almost sure - yes, quite sure! They were not drawn.'

'That is curious, since the other ones were. No matter. It is, I dare say, of no great importance. You are remaining here long, mademoiselle?'

'The doctor thinks I shall be fit to return to town tomorrow.' She looked round the room. Miss Oglander had gone out. 'These people, they are very kind - but they are not of my world. I shock them! And to me - well, I am not fond of the bourgeoisie!'

A faint note of bitterness underlay her words.

Poirot nodded. 'I understand. I hope I have not fatigued you unduly with my questions?'

'Not at all, monsieur. I am only too anxious Paul should know all as soon as possible.'

'Then I will wish you good day, mademoiselle.'

As Poirot was leaving the room, he paused, and pounced on a pair of patent-leather slippers. 'Yours, mademoiselle?'

'Yes, monsieur. They have just been cleaned and brought up.'

'Ah!' said Poirot, as we descended the stairs. 'It seems that the domestics are not too excited to clean shoes, though they forget a grate. Well, mon ami, at first there appeared to be one or two points of interest, but I fear, I very much fear, that we must regard the case as finished. It all seems straightforward enough.'

'And the murderer?'

'Hercule Poirot does not hunt down tramps,' replied my fried grandiloquently.

Miss Oglander met us in the hall. 'If you will wait in the drawing-room a minute, Mamma would like to speak to you.'

The room was still untouched, and Poirot idly gathered up the cards, shuffling them with his tiny, fastidiously groomed hand.

'Do you know what I think, my friend?'

'No?' I said eagerly.

'I think that Miss Oglander made a mistake in going one no trump. She should have gone three spades.'

'Poirot! You are the limit.'

'Mon Dieu, I cannot always be talking blood and thunder!'

Suddenly he stiffened: 'Hastings - Hastings. See! The king of clubs is missing from the pack!'

'Zara!' I cried.

'Eh?' He did not seem to understand my allusion. Mechanically he stacked the cards and put them away in their cases. His face was very grave.

'Hastings,' he said at last, 'I, Hercule Poirot, have come near to making a big mistake - a very big mistake.'

I gazed at him, impressed, but utterly uncomprehending.

'We must begin again, Hastings. Yes, we must begin again. But this time we shall not err.'

He was interrupted by the entrance of a handsome middle-aged lady. She carried some household books in her hand. Poirot bowed to her.

'Do I understand, sir, that you are a friend of - er - Saintclair's?'

'I come from a friend of hers, madame.'

'Oh, I see. I thought perhaps -'

Poirot suddenly waved brusquely at the window.

'Your blinds were not pulled down last night?'

'No - I suppose that is why Miss Saintclair saw the light plainly.'

'There was moonlight last night. I wonder that you did not see Mademoiselle Saintclair from your seat here facing the windows?'

'I suppose we were engrossed with our game. Nothing like this has ever happened before to us.'

'I can quite believe that, madame. And I will put your mind at rest. Mademoiselle Saintclair is leaving tomorrow.'

'Oh!' The good lady's face cleared.

'And I will wish you good morning, madame.'

A servant was cleaning the steps as we went out of the front door. Poirot addressed her.

'Was it you who cleaned the shoes of the young lady upstairs?'

The maid shook her head. 'No, sir. I don't think they've been cleaned.'

'Who cleaned them, then?' I inquired of Poirot, as we walked down the road.

'Nobody. They did not need cleaning.'

'I grant that walking on the road or path on a fine night would not soil them. But surely after going through the long grass of the garden, they would have been soiled and stained.'

'Yes,' said Poirot with a curious smile. 'In that case, I agree, they would have been stained.'

'But -'

'Have patience a little half-hour, my friend. We are going back to Mon Dé sir.'

The butler looked surprised at our reappearance, but offered no objection to our returning to the library.

'Hi, that's the wrong window, Poirot,' I cried as he made for the one overlooking the carriage-drive.

'I think not, my friend. See here.' He pointed to the marble lion's head. On it was a faint discoloured smear. He shifted his finger and pointed to a similar stain on the polished floor.

'Some one struck Reedburn a blow with his clenched fist between the eyes. He fell backward on this projecting bit of marble, then slipped to the floor. Afterwards, he was dragged across the floor to the other window, and laid there instead, but not quite at the same angle, as the Doctor's evidence told us.'

'But why? It seems utterly unnecessary.'

'On the contrary, it was essential. Also, it is the key to the murderer's identity - though, by the way, he had no intention of killing Reedburn, and so it is hardly permissible to call him a murderer. He must be a very strong man!'

'Because of having dragged the body across the floor?'

'Not altogether. It has been an interesting case. I nearly made an imbecile of myself, though.'

'Do you mean to say it is over, that you know everything?'

'Yes.'

A remembrance smote me.

'No,' I cried. 'There is one thing you do not know!'

'And that?'

'You do not know where the missing king of clubs is!'

'Eh? Oh, that is droll! That is very droll, my friend.'

'Why?'

'Because it is in my pocket!' He drew it forth with a flourish.

'Oh!' I said, rather crestfallen. 'Where did you find it? Here?'

'There was nothing sensational about it. It had simply not been taken out with the other cards. It was in the box.'

'H'm. All the same, it gave you an idea, didn't it?'

'Yes, my friend. I present my respects to His Majesty.'

'And to Madame Zara!'

'Ah, yes - to the lady also.'

'Well, what are we going to do now?'

'We are going to return to town. But I must have a few words with a certain lady at Daisymead first.'

The same little maid opened the door to us.

'They're all at lunch now, sir - unless it's Miss Saintclair you want to see, and she's resting.'

'It will do if I can see Mrs Oglander for a few minutes. Will you tell her?'

We were led into the drawing-room to wait. I had a glimpse of the family in the dining-room as we passed, now reinforced by the presence of two heavy, solid-looking men, one with a moustache, the other with a beard also.

In a few minutes Mrs Oglander came into the room, looking inquiringly at Poirot, who bowed.

'Madame, we, in our country, have a great tenderness, a great respect for the mother. The mère de famille, she is everything!'

Mrs Oglander looked rather astonished at this opening.

'It is for that reason that I have come - to allay a mother's anxiety. The murderer of Mr Reedburn will not be discovered. Have no fear. I, Hercule Poirot, tell you so. I am right, am I not? Or is it a wife that I must reassure?'

There was a moment's pause. Mrs Oglander seemed searching Poirot with her eyes. At last she said quietly: 'I don't know how you know - but yes, you are right.'

Poirot nodded gravely. 'That is all, madame. But do not be uneasy. Your English policemen have not the eyes of Hercule Poirot.' He tapped the family portrait on the wall with his finger-nail.

'You had another daughter once. She is dead, madame?'

Again there was a pause, as she searched him with her eyes. Then she answered:

'Yes, she is dead.'

'Ah!' said Poirot briskly. 'Well, we must return to town. You permit that I return the king of clubs to the pack? It was your only slip. You understand, to have played bridge for an hour or so, with only fifty-one cards - well, no one who knows anything of the game would credit it for a minute! Bonjour!'

'And now, my friend,' said Poirot as we stepped towards the station, 'you see it all?

'I see nothing! Who killed Reedburn?'

'John Oglander, Junior. I was not quite sure if it was the father or the son, but I fixed on the son as being the stronger and younger of the two. It had to be one of them, because of the window.'

'Why?'

'There were four exits from the library - two doors, two windows; but evidently only one would do. Three exits gave on the front,

directly or indirectly. The tragedy had to occur in the back window in order to make it appear that Valerie Saintclair came to Daisymead by chance. Really, of course, she fainted, and John Oglander carried her across over his shoulders. That is why I said he must be a strong man.'

'Did they go there together, then?'

'Yes. You remember Valerie's hesitation when I asked her if she was not afraid to go alone? John Oglander went with her which didn't improve Reedburn's temper, I fancy. They quarrelled, and it was probably some insult levelled at Valerie that made Oglander hit him. The rest, you know.'

'But why the bridge?'

'Bridge presupposes four players. A simple thing like that carries a lot of conviction. Who would have supposed that there had been only three people in that room all the evening?'

I was still puzzled.

'There's one thing I don't understand. What have the Oglanders to do with the dancer Valerie Saintclair?'

'Ah, that I wonder you did not see. And yet you looked long enough at that picture on the wall - longer than I did. Mrs Oglander's other daughter may be dead to her family, but the world knows her as Valerie Saintclair!'

'What?'

'Did you not see the resemblance the moment you saw the two sisters together?'

'No,' I confessed. 'I only thought how extraordinarily dissimilar they were.'

'That is because your mind is so open to external romantic impressions, my dear Hastings. The features are almost identical. So is the colouring. The interesting thing is that Valerie is ashamed of her family, and her family is ashamed of her. Nevertheless, in a moment of peril, she turned to her brother for help, and when things went wrong, they all hung together in a remarkable way. Family strength is a marvelous thing. They can all act, that family. That is where Valerie gets her histrionic talent from. I, like Prince Paul, believe in heredity! They deceived me! But for a lucky accident, and test question to Mrs Oglander by which I got her to contradict her daughter's account of how they were sitting, the Oglander family would have put a defeat on Hercule Poirot.'

'What shall you tell the Prince?'

'That Valerie could not possibly have committed the crime, and that I doubt if that tramp will ever be found. Also, to convey my compliments to Zara. A curious coincidence, that! I think I shall call this little affair the Adventure of the King of Clubs. What do you think, my friend?'

THE LEMESURIER INHERITANCE

In company with Poirot, I have investigated many strange eases, but none, I think, to compare with that extraordinary series of events which held our interest over a period of many years, and which culminated in the ultimate problem brought to Poirot to solve. Our attention was first drawn to the family history of the Lemesuriers one evening during the war. Poirot and I had but recently come together again, renewing the old days of our acquaintanceship in Belgium. He had been handling some little matter for the War Office - disposing of it to their entire satisfaction; and we had been dining at the Carlton with a Brass Hat who paid Poirot heavy compliments in the intervals of the meal. The Brass Hat had to rush away to keep an appointment with someone, and we finished our coffee in a leisurely fashion before following his example.

As we were leaving the room, I was hailed by a voice which struck a familiar note, and turned to see Captain Vincent Lemesurier, a young fellow whom I had known in France. He was with an older man whose likeness to him proclaimed him to be of the same family. Such proved to be the case, and he was introduced to us as Mr Hugo Lemesurier, uncle of my young friend.

I did not really know Captain Lemesurier at all intimately, but he was a pleasant young fellow, somewhat dreamy in manner, and I remembered hearing that he belonged to an old and exclusive family with a property in Northumberland which dated from before the Reformation. Poirot and I were not in a hurry, and at the younger man's invitation, we sat down at the table with our two

new-found friends, and chattered pleasantly enough on various matters. The elder Lemesurier was a man of about forty, with a touch of the scholar in his stooping shoulders; he was engaged at the moment upon some chemical research work for the Government, it appeared.

Our conversation was interrupted by a tall dark young man who strode up to the table, evidently labouring under some agitation of mind.

'Thank goodness I've found you both!' he exclaimed.

'What's the matter, Roger?'

'Your guv'nor, Vincent. Bad fall. Young horse.' The rest trailed off, as he drew the other aside.

In a few minutes our two friends had hurriedly taken leave of us. Vincent Lemesurier's father had had a serious accident while trying a young horse, and was not expected to live until morning. Vincent had gone deadly white, and appeared almost stunned by the news. In a way, I was surprised - for from the few words he had let fall on the subject while in France, I had gathered that he and his father were not on particularly friendly terms, and so his display of filial feeling now rather astonished me.

The dark young man, who had been introduced to us as a cousin, Mr Roger Lemesurier, remained behind, and we three strolled out together.

'Rather a curious business, this,' observed the young man. 'It would interest M. Poirot, perhaps. I've heard of you, you know, M. Poirot - from Higginson.' (Higginson was our Brass Hat friend.) 'He says you're a whale on psychology.'

'I study the psychology, yes,' admitted my friend cautiously.

'Did you see my cousin's face? He was absolutely bowled over, wasn't he? Do you know why? A good old-fashioned family curse! Would you care to hear about it?'

'It would be most kind of you to recount it to me.'

Roger Lemesurier looked at his watch.

'Lots of time. I'm meeting them at King's Cross. Well, M. Poirot, the Lemesuriers are an old family. Way back in medieval times, a Lemesurier became suspicious of his wife. He found the lady in a compromising situation. She swore that she was innocent, but old Baron Hugo didn't listen. She had one child, a son - and he swore that the boy was no child of his and should never inherit. I forget what he did - some pleasing medieval fancy like walling up the mother and son alive; anyway, he killed them both, and she died protesting her innocence and solemnly cursing the Lemesuriers forever. No first-born son of a Lemesurier should ever inherit - so the curse ran. Well, time passed, and the lady's innocence was established beyond doubt. I believe that Hugo wore a hair shirt and ended up his days on his knees in a monk's cell. But the curious thing is that from that day to this, no first-born son ever has succeeded to the estate. It's gone to brothers, to nephews, to

second sons - never to the eldest born. Vincent's father was the second of five sons, the eldest of whom died in infancy. Of course, all through the war, Vincent has been convinced that whoever else was doomed, he certainly was. But strangely enough, his two younger brothers have been killed, and he himself has remained unscathed.'

'An interesting family history,' said Poirot thoughtfully. 'But now his father is dying, and he, as the eldest son, succeeds?'

'Exactly. A curse has gone rusty - unable to stand the strain of modern life.'

Poirot shook his head, as though deprecating the other's jesting tone. Roger Lemesurier looked at his watch again, and declared that he must be off.

The sequel to the story came on the morrow, when we learned of the tragic death of Captain Vincent Lemesurier. He had been travelling north by the Scotch mail-train, and during the night must have opened the door of the compartment and jumped out on the line. The shock of his father's accident coming on top of shell-shock was deemed to have caused temporary mental aberration. The curious superstition prevalent in the Lemesurier family was mentioned, in connection with the new heir, his father's brother, Ronald Lemesurier, whose only son had died on the Somme.

I suppose our accidental meeting with young Vincent on the last evening of his life quickened our interest in anything that pertained

to the Lemesurier family, for we noted with some interest two years later the death of Ronald Lemesurier, who had been a confirmed invalid at the time of his succession to the family estates. His brother John succeeded him, a hale, hearty man with a boy at Eton.

Certainly an evil destiny overshadowed the Lemesuriers. On his very next holiday the boy managed to to shoot himself fatally. His father's death, which occurred quite suddenly after being stung by a wasp, gave the estate over to the youngest brother of the five - Hugo, whom we remembered meeting on the fatal night at the Carlton.

Beyond commenting on the extraordinary series of misfortunes which befell the Lemesuriers, we had taken no personal interest in the matter, but the time was now close at hand when we were to take a more active part.

One morning 'Mrs Lemesurier' was announced. She was a tall, active woman, possibly about thirty years of age, who conveyed by her demeanour a great deal of determination and strong common sense. She spoke with a faint transatlantic accent.

'M. Poirot? I am pleased to meet you. My husband, Hugo Lemesurier, met you once many years age, ago, but you will hardly remember the fact.'

'I recollect it perfectly, madame. It was at the Carlton.'

'That's quite wonderful of you. M. Poirot, I'm very worried.'

'What about, madame?'

'My elder boy - I've two boys, you know, Ronald's eight, and Gerald's six.'

'Proceed, madame: why should you be worried about little Ronald?'

'M. Poirot, within the last six months he has had three narrow escapes from death: once from drowning - when we were all down at Cornwall this summer; once when he fell from the nursery window; and once from ptomaine poisoning.'

Perhaps Poirot's face expressed rather too eloquently what he thought, for Mrs Lemesurier hurried on with hardly a moment's pause: 'Of course I know you think I'm just a silly fool of a woman, making mountains out of molehills.'

'No, indeed, madame. Any mother might be excused for being upset at such occurrences, but I hardly see where I can be of any assistance to you. I am not le bon Dieu to control the waves; for the nursery window I should suggest some iron bars; and for the food - what can equal a mother's care?'

'But why should these things happen to Ronald and not to Gerald?'

'The chance, madame - le hasard!'

'You think so?'

'What do you think, madame - you and your husband?'

A shadow crossed Mrs Lemesurier's face.

'It's no good going to Hugo - he won't listen. As perhaps you may have heard, there's supposed to be a curse on the family no eldest son can succeed. Hugo believes in it. He's wrapped up in the family history, and he's superstitious to the last degree. When I go to him with my fears, he just says it's the curse, and we can't escape it. But I'm from the States, M. Poirot, and over there we don't believe much in curses. We like them as belonging to a real high-toned old family - it gives a sort of cachet, don't you know. I was just a musical comedy actress in a small part when Hugo met me - and I thought his family curse was just too lovely for words. That kind of thing's all right for telling round the fire on a winter's evening, but when it comes to one's own children - I just adore my children, M. Poirot. I'd do anything for them.'

'So you decline to believe in the family legend, madame?'

'Can a legend saw through an ivy stem?'

'What is that you are saying, madame?' cried Poirot, an expression of great astonishment on his face.

'I said, can a legend - or a ghost, if you like to call it that - saw through an ivy stem? I'm not saying anything about Cornwall. Any boy might go out too far and get into difficulties - though Ronald could swim when he was four years old. But the ivy's different. Both the boys were very naughty. They'd discovered they could climb up

and down by the ivy. They were always doing it. One day - Gerald was away at the time - Ronald did it once too often, and the ivy gave way and he fell. Fortunately he didn't damage himself seriously. But I went out and examined the ivy: it was cut through, M. Poirot - deliberately cut through.'

'It is very serious what you are telling me there, madame. You say your younger boy was away from home at the moment?'

'Yes.'

'And at the time of the ptomaine poisoning, was he still away?'

'No, they were both there.'

'Curious,' murmured Poirot. 'Now, madame, who are the inmates of your establishment?'

'Miss Saunders, the children's governess, and John Gardiner, my husband's secretary -'

Mrs Lemesurier paused, as though slightly embarrassed.

'And who else, madame?'

'Major Roger Lemesurier, whom you also met on that night, I believe, stays with us a good deal.'

'Ah, yes - he is a cousin, is he not?'

'A distant cousin. He does not belong to our branch of the family. Still, I suppose now he is my husband's nearest relative. He is a dear fellow, and we are all very fond of him. The boys are devoted to him.'

'It was not he who taught them to climb up the ivy?'

'It might have been. He incites them to mischief often enough.'

'Madame, I apologize for what I said to you earlier. The danger is real, and I believe that I can be of assistance. I propose that you should invite us both to stay with you. Your husband will not object?'

'Oh no. But he will believe it to be all of no use. It makes me furious the way he just sits around and expects the boy to die.'

'Calm yourself, madame. Let us make our arrangements methodically.'

Our arrangements were duly made, and the following day saw us flying northward. Poirot was sunk in a reverie. He came out of it, to remark abruptly:

'It was from a train such as this that Vincent Lemesurier fell?'

He put a slight accent on the 'fell'.

'You don't suspect foul play there, surely?' I asked.

'Has it struck you, Hastings, that some of the Lemesurier deaths were, shall we say, capable of being arranged? Take that of Vincent, for instance. Then the Eton boy - an accident with a gun is always ambiguous. Supposing this child had fallen from the nursery window and been dashed to death - what more natural and unsuspicious? But why only the one child, Hastings? Who profits by the death of the elder child? His younger brother, a child of seven! Absurd!'

'They mean to do away with the other later,' I suggested, though with the vaguest ideas as to who 'they' were.

Poirot shook his head as though dissatisfied.

'Ptomaine poisoning,' he mused. 'Atropine will produce much the same symptoms. Yes, there is need for our presence.'

Mrs Lemesurier welcomed us enthusiastically. Then she took us to her husband's study and left us with him. He had changed a good deal since I saw him last. His shoulders stooped more than ever, and his face had a curious pale grey tinge. He listened while Poirot explained our presence in the house.

'How exactly like Sadie's practical common sense!' he said at last. 'Remain by all means, M. Poirot, and I thank you for coming; but - what is written, is written. The way of the transgressor is hard. We Lemesuriers know - none of us can escape the doom.'

Poirot mentioned the sawn-through ivy, but Hugo seemed very little impressed.

'Doubtless some careless gardener - yes, yes, there may be an instrument, but the purpose behind is plain; and I will tell you this, M. Poirot, it cannot be long delayed.'

Poirot looked at him attentively.

'Why do you say that?'

'Because I myself am doomed. I went to a doctor last year. I am suffering from an incurable disease - the end cannot be much longer delayed; but before I die, Ronald will be taken. Gerald will inherit.'

'And if anything were to happen to your second son also?'

'Nothing will happen to him; he is not threatened.'

'But if it did?' persisted Poirot.

'My cousin Roger is the next heir.'

We were interrupted. A tall man with a good figure and crisply curling auburn hair entered with a sheaf of paper.

'Never mind about those now, Gardiner,' said Hugo Lemesurier; then he added: 'My secretary, Mr Gardiner.'

The secretary bowed, uttered a few pleasant words and then went out. In spite of his good looks, there was something repellent about the man. I said so to Poirot shortly afterwards when we were walking round the beautiful old grounds together, and rather to my surprise, he agreed.

'Yes, yes, Hastings, you are right. I do not like him. He is too good-looking. He would be one for the soft job always. Ah, here are the children.'

Mrs Lemesurier was advancing towards us, her two children beside her. They were fine-looking boys, the younger dark like his mother, the elder with auburn curls. They shook hands prettily enough, and were soon absolutely devoted to Poirot. We were next introduced to Miss Saunders, a nondescript female, who completed the party.

For some days we had a pleasant, easy existence - ever vigilant, but without result. The boys led a happy normal life and nothing seemed to be amiss. On the fourth day after our arrival Major Roger Lemesurier came down to stay. He was little changed, still care-free and debonair as of old, with the same habit of treating all things lightly. He was evidently a great favourite with the boys, who greeted his arrival with shrieks of delight and immediately dragged him off to play wild Indians in the garden. I noticed that Poirot followed them unobtrusively.

On the following day we were all invited to tea, boys included, with Lady Claygate, whose place adjoined that of the Lemesuriers. Mrs Lemesurier suggested that we also should come, but seemed

rather relieved when Poirot refused and declared he would much prefer to remain at home.

Once everyone had started, Poirot got to work. He reminded me of an intelligent terrier. I believe that there was no corner of the house that he left unsearched; yet it was all done so quietly and methodically that no attention was directed to his movements. Clearly, at the end, he remained unsatisfied. We had tea on the terrace with Miss Sanders, who had not been included in the party.

'The boys will enjoy it,' she murmured in her faded way, 'though I hope they will behave nicely, and not damage the flower-beds, or go near the bees -'

Poirot paused in the very act of drinking. He looked like a man who has seen a ghost.

'Bees?' he demanded in a voice of thunder.

'Yes, M. Poirot, bees. Three hives. Lady Claygate is very proud of her bees -'

'Bees?' cried Poirot again. Then he sprang from the table and walked up and down the terrace with his hands to his head. I could not imagine why the little man should be so agitated at the mere mention of bees.

At that moment we heard the car returning. Poirot was on the doorstep a the party alighted.

'Ronald's been stung,' cried Gerald excitedly.

'It's nothing,' said Mrs Lemesurier. 'It hasn't even swollen. We put ammonia on it.'

'Let me see, my little man,' said Poirot. 'Where was it?'

'Here, on the side of my neck,' said Ronald importantly. 'But it doesn't hurt. Father said: "Keep still - there's a bee on you." And I kept still, and he took it off, but it stung me first, though it didn't really hurt, only like a pin, and I didn't cry, because I'm so big and going to school next year.'

Poirot examined the child's neck, then drew away again. He took me by the arm and murmured:

'Tonight, mon ami, tonight we have a little affair on! Say nothing - to anyone.'

He refused to be more communicative, and I went through the evening devoured by curiosity. He retired early and I followed his example. As we went upstairs, he caught me by the arm and delivered his instructions:

'Do not undress. Wait a sufficient time, extinguish your light and join me here.'

I obeyed, and found him waiting for me when the time came. He enjoined silence on me with a gesture, and we crept quietly along the nursery wing. Ronald occupied a small room of his own. We

entered it and took up our position in the darkest corner. The child's breathing sounded heavy and undisturbed.

'Surely he is sleeping very heavily?' I whispered.

Poirot nodded.

'Drugged,' he murmured.

'Why?'

'So that he should not cry out at -'

'At what?' I asked, as Poirot paused.

'At the prick of the hypodermic needle, mon ami! Hush, let us speak no more - not that I expect anything to happen for some time.'

But in this Poirot was wrong. Hardly ten minutes had elapsed before the door opened softly, and someone entered the room. I heard a sound of quick hurried breathing. Footsteps moved to the bed, and then there was a sudden click. The light of a little electric lantern fell on the sleeping child - the holder of it was still invisible in the shadow. The figure laid down the lantern. With the right hand it brought forth a syringe; with the left it touched the boy's neck -

Poirot and I sprang at the same minute. The lantern rolled to the floor, and we struggled with the intruder in the dark. His strength was extraordinary. At last we overcame him.

'The light, Hastings, I must see his face - though I fear I know only too well whose face it will be.'

So did I, I thought as I groped for the lantern. For a moment I had suspected the secretary, egged on by my secret dislike of the man, but I felt assured by now that the man who stood to gain by the death of his two childish cousins was the monster we were tracking.

My foot struck against the lantern. I picked it up and switched on the light. It shone full on the face of - Hugo Lemesurier, the boy's father!

The lantern almost dropped from my hand.

'Impossible,' I murmured hoarsely. 'Impossible!'

Lemesurier was unconscious. Poirot and I between us carried him to his room and laid him on the bed. Poirot bent and gently extricated something from his right hand. He showed it to me. It was a hypodermic syringe. I shuddered.

'What is in it? Poison?'

'Formic acid, I fancy.'

'Formic acid?'

'Yes. Probably obtained by distilling ants. He was a chemist, you remember. Death would have been attributed to the bee sting.'

'My God,' I muttered. 'His own son! And you expected this?'

Poirot nodded gravely.

'Yes. He is insane, of course. I imagine that the family history has become a mania with him. His intense longing to succeed the estate led him to commit the long series of crimes. Possibly the idea occurred to him first when travelling north that night with Vincent. He couldn't bear the prediction to be falsified. Ronald's son was already dead, and Ronald himself was a dying man - they are a weakly lot. He arranged the accident to the gun and - which I did not suspect until now - contrived the death of his brother John by this same method of injecting formic acid into the jugular vein. His ambition was realized then, and he became the master of the family acres. But his triumph was short lived - he found that he was suffering from an incurable disease. And he had the madman's fixed idea - the eldest son of a Lemesurier could not inherit. I suspect that the bathing accident was due to him - he encouraged the child to go out too far. That failing - he sawed through the ivy, and afterwards poisoned the child's food.'

'Diabolical!' I murmured with shiver. 'And so cleverly planned!'

'Yes, mon ami, there is nothing more amazing than the extraordinary sanity of the insane! Unless it is the extraordinary eccentricity of the sane! I imagine that it is only lately that he had

completely gone over the borderline, there was method in his madness to begin with.'

'And to think that I suspected Roger - that splendid fellow.'

'It was the natural assumption, mon ami. We knew that he also travelled north with Vincent that night. We knew, too, that he was the next heir after Hugo and Hugo's children. But our assumption was not borne out by the facts. The ivy was sawn through when only little Ronald was at home - but it would be to Roger's interest that both children should perish. In the same way, it was only Ronald's food that was poisoned. And today when they came home and I found that there was only his father's word for it that Ronald had been stung, I remembered the other death from a wasp sting - and I knew!'

Hugo Lemesurier died a few months later in the private asylum to which he was removed. His widow was remarried a year later to Mr John Gardiner, the auburn-haired secretary. Ronald inherited the broad acres of his father, and continues to flourish.

'Well, well,' I remarked to Poirot. 'Another illusion gone. You have disposed very successfully of the curse of the Lemesuriers.'

'I wonder,' said Poirot very thoughtfully. 'I wonder very much indeed.'

'What do you mean?'

'Mon ami, I will answer you with one significant word - red!'

'Blood?' I queried, dropping my voice to an awe-stricken whisper.

'Always you have the imagination melodramatic, Hastings! I refer to something much more prosaic - the colour of little Ronald Lemesurier's hair.'

THE LOST MINE

I laid down my bank book with a sigh.

'It is a curious thing,' I observed, 'but my overdraft never seems to grow any less.'

'And it perturbs you not? Me, if I had an overdraft, never should I close my eyes all night,' declared Poirot.

'You deal in comfortable balances, I suppose!' I retorted.

'Four hundred and forty-four pounds, four and fourpence,' said Poirot with some complacency. 'A neat figure, is it not?'

'It must be tact on the part of your bank manager. He is evidently acquainted with your passion for symmetrical details. What about investing, say three hundred of it, in the Porcupine oil-fields? Their prospectus, which is advertised in the papers today, says that they will pay one hundred per cent in dividends next year.'

'Not for me,' said Poirot, shaking his head. 'I like not the sensational. For me the safe, the prudent investment - les rentes, the consols, the - how do you call it? - the conversion.'

'Have you never made a speculative investment?'

'No, mon ami,' replied Poirot severely. 'I have not. And the only shares I own which have not what you call the gilded edge are fourteen thousand shares in the Burma Mines, Ltd.'

Poirot paused with an air of waiting to be encouraged to go on.

'Yes?' I prompted.

'And for them I paid no cash - no, they were the reward of the exercise of my little grey cells. You would like to hear the story? Yes?'

'Of course I would.'

'These mines are situated in the interior, of Burma about two hundred miles inland from Rangoon. They were discovered by the Chinese in the fifteenth century and worked down to the time of the Mohammedan Rebellion, being finally abandoned in the year 1868. The Chinese extracted the rich lead-silver ore from the upper part of the ore body, smelting it for the silver alone, and leaving large quantities of rich lead-bearing slag. This, of course, was soon discovered when prospecting work was carried out in Burma, but owing to the fact that the old workings had become full of loose filling and water, all attempts to find the source of the ore proved

fruitless. Many parties were sent out by syndicates, and they dug over a large area, but this rich prize still eluded them. But a representative of one of the syndicates got on the track of a Chinese family who were supposed to have still kept a record of the situation of the mine. The present head of the family was one Wu Ling.'

'What a fascinating page of commercial romance,' I exclaimed.

'Is it not? Ah, mon ami, one can have romance without golden-haired girls of matchless beauty - no, I am wrong; it is auburn hair that so excites you always. You remember -'

'Go on with the story,' I said hastily.

'Eh bien, my friend, this Wu Ling was approached. He was an estimable merchant, much respected in the province where he lived. He admitted at once that he owned the documents in question, and was perfectly prepared to negotiate for this sale, but he objected to dealing with anyone other than principals. Finally it was arranged that he should journey to England and meet the directors of an important company.

'Wu Ling made the journey to England in the S.S. Assunta, and the Assunta docked at Southampton on a cold, foggy morning in November. One of the directors, Mr Pearson, went down to Southampton to meet the boat, but owing to the fog, the train down was very much delayed, and by the time he arrived, Wu Ling had disembarked and left by special train for London. Mr Pearson returned to town somewhat annoyed, as he had no idea where the

Chinaman proposed to stay. Later in the day, however, the offices of the company were rung up on the telephone. Wu Ling was staying at the Russell Square Hotel. He was feeling somewhat unwell after the voyage, but declared himself perfectly able to attend the board meeting on the following day.

'The meeting of the board took place at eleven o'clock. When half past eleven came, and Wu Ling had not put in an appearance, the secretary rang up the Russell Hotel. In answer to his inquiries, he was told that the Chinaman had gone out with a friend about half past ten. It seemed clear that he had started out with the intention of coming to the meeting, but the morning wore away, and he did not appear. It was, of course, possible that he had lost his way, being unacquainted with London, but at a late hour that night he had not returned to the hotel. Thoroughly alarmed now, Mr Pearson put matters in the hands of the police. On the following day, there was still no trace of the missing man, but towards evening of the day after that again, a body was found in the Thames which proved to be that of the ill-fated Chinaman. Neither on the body, nor in the luggage at the hotel, was there any trace of the papers relating to the mine.

'At this juncture, mon ami, I was brought into the affair. Mr Pearson called upon me. While profoundly shocked by the death of Wu Ling, his chief anxiety was to recover the papers which were the object of the Chinaman's visit to England. The main anxiety of the police, of course, would be to track down the murderer - the recovery of the papers would be a secondary consideration. What he wanted me to do was to co-operate with the police while acting in the interests of the company.

'I consented readily enough. It was clear that there were two fields of search open to me. On the one hand, I might look among the employees of the company who knew of the Chinaman's coming; on the other, among the passengers on the boat who might have been acquainted with his mission. I started with the second, as being a narrower field of search. In this I coincided with Inspector Miller, who was in charge of the case - a man altogether different from our friend Japp, conceited, ill-mannered and quite insufferable. Together we interviewed the officers of the ship. They had little to tell us. Wu Ling had kept much to himself on the voyage. He had been intimate with but two of the other passengers - one a broken-down European named Dyer who appeared to bear a somewhat unsavoury reputation, the other a young bank clerk named Charles Lester, who was returning from Hong Kong. We were lucky enough to obtain snapshots of both these men. At the moment there seemed little doubt that if either of the two was implicated, Dyer was the man. He was known to be mixed up with a gang of Chinese crooks, and was altogether a most likely suspect.

'Our next step was to visit the Russell Square Hotel. Shown a snapshot of Wu Ling, they recognized him at once. We then showed them the snapshot of Dyer, but to our disappointment, the hall porter declared positively that that was not the man who had come to the hotel on the fatal morning. Almost as an afterthought, I produced the photograph, of Lester, and to my surprise the man at once recognized it.

'"Yes, sir," he asserted, "that's the gentleman who came in at half past ten and asked for Mr Wu Ling, and afterwards went out with him."

'The affair was progressing. Our next move was to interview Mr Charles Lester. He met us with the utmost frankness, was desolated to hear of the Chinaman's untimely death, and put himself at our disposal in every way. His story was as follows: By arrangement with Wu Ling, he called for him at the hotel at ten-thirty. Wu Ling, however, did not appear. Instead, his servant came, explained that his master had had to go out, and offered to conduct the young man to where his master now was. Suspecting nothing, Lester agreed, and the Chinaman procured a taxi. They drove for some time in the direction of the docks. Suddenly becoming mistrustful, Lester stopped the taxi and got out, disregarding the servant's protests. That, he assured us, was all he knew.

'Apparently satisfied, we thanked him and took our leave. His story was soon proved to be a somewhat inaccurate one. To begin with, Wu Ling had had no servant with him, either on the boat or at the hotel. In the second place, the taxi-driver who had driven the two men on that morning came forward. Far from Lester's having left the taxi en route, he and the Chinese gentleman had driven to a certain unsavoury dwelling-place in Limehouse, right in the heart of Chinatown. The place in question was more or less well known as an opium-den of the lowest description. The two gentlemen had gone in - about an hour later the English gentleman, whom he identified from the photograph, came out alone. He looked very pale and ill, and directed the taxi-man to take him to the nearest underground station.

'Inquiries were made about Charles Lester's standing, and it was found that, though bearing an excellent character, he was heavily in debt, and had a secret passion for gambling. Dyer, of course, was not lost sight of. It seemed just faintly possible that he might have impersonated the other man, but that idea was proved utterly groundless. His alibi for the whole of the day in question was absolutely unimpeachable. Of course, the proprietor of the opium-den denied everything with Oriental stolidity. He had never seen Wu Ling; he had never seen Charles Lester. No two gentlemen had been to the place that morning. In any case, the police were wrong: no opium was ever smoked there.

'His denials, however well meant, did little to help Charles Lester. He was arrested for the murder of Wu Ling. A search of his effects was made, but no papers relating to the mine were discovered. The proprietor of the opium-den was also taken into custody, but a cursory raid of his premises yielded nothing. Not even a stick of opium rewarded the zeal of the police.

'In the meantime my friend Mr Pearson was in a great state of agitation. He strode up and down my room, uttering great lamentations.

'"But you must have some ideas, M. Poirot!" he kept urging. "Surely you must have some ideas?"

'"Certainly I have ideas," I replied cautiously. "That is the trouble - one has too many; therefore they all lead in different directions."

'"For instance?" he suggested.

'"For instance - the taxi-driver. We have only his word for it that he drove the two men to that house. That is one idea. Then was it really that house they went to? Supposing that they left the taxi there, passed through the house and out by another entrance and went elsewhere?"

'Mr Pearson seemed struck by that.

'"But you do nothing but sit and think? Can't we do something?"

'He was of an impatient temperament, you comprehend.

'"Monsieur," I said with dignity, "it is not for Hercule Poirot to run up and down the evil-smelling streets of Limehouse like a little dog of no breeding. Be calm. My agents are at work."

'On the following day I had news for him. The two men had indeed passed through the house in question, but their real objective was a small eating-house close to the river. They were seen to pass in there, and Lester came out alone.

'And then, figure to yourself, Hastings, an idea of the most unreasonable seized this Mr Pearson! Nothing would suit him but that we should go ourselves to this eating-house and make investigations. I argued and prayed, but he would not listen. He talked of disguising himself - he even suggested that I - I should - I hesitate to say it - should shave off my moustache! Yes, rien que ça! I pointed out to him that that was an idea ridiculous and absurd.

One destroys not a thing of beauty wantonly. Besides, shall not a Belgian gentleman with a moustache desire to see life and smoke the opium just as readily as one without a moustache?

'Eh bien, he gave in on that, but he still insisted on his project. He turned up that evening - Mon Dieu, what a figure! He wore what he called the "pea-jacket", his chin, it was dirty and unshaved; he had a scarf of the vilest that offended the nose. And figure to yourself, he was enjoying himself! Truly, the English are mad! He made some changes in my own appearance. I permitted it. Can one argue with a maniac? We started out - after all, could I let him go alone, a child dressed up to act the charades?'

'Of course you couldn't,' I replied.

'To continue - we arrived. Mr Pearson talked English of the strangest. He represented himself to be a man of the sea. He talked of "lubbers" and "focselles" and I know not what. It was a low little room with many Chinese in it. We ate of peculiar dishes. Ah, Dieu, mon estomac!' Poirot clasped that portion of his anatomy tenderly before continuing. 'Then there came to us the proprietor, a Chinaman with a face of evil smiles.

'"You gentlemen no likee food here," he said. "You come for what you likee better. Piecee pipe, eh?"

'Mr Pearson, he gave me the great kick under the table. (He had on the boots of the sea, too!) And he said: "I don't mind if I do, John. Lead ahead."

'The Chinaman smiled, and he took us through a door and to a cellar and through a trapdoor, and down some steps and up again into a room all full of divans and cushions of the most comfortable. We lay down and a Chinese boy took off our boots. It was the best moment of the evening. Then they brought us the opium-pipes and cooked the opium-pills, and we pretended to smoke and then to sleep and dream. But when we were alone, Mr Pearson called softly to me, and immediately he began crawling along the floor. We went into another room where other people were asleep, and so on, until we heard two men talking. We stayed behind a curtain and listened. They were speaking of Wu Ling.

'"What about the papers?" said one.

'"Mr Lester, he takee those," answered the other, who was a Chinaman. "He say, puttee them all in safee place - where pleeceman no lookee."

'"Ah, but he's nabbed," said the first one.

'"He gettee free. Pleeceman not sure he done it."

'There was more of the same kind of thing, then apparently the two men were coming our way, and we scuttled back to our beds.

'"We'd better get out of here," said Pearson, after a few minutes had elapsed. "This place isn't healthy."

'"You are right, monsieur," I agreed. "We have played the farce long enough."

'We succeeded in getting away, all right, paying handsomely for our smoke. Once clear of Limehouse, Pearson drew a long breath.

'"I'm glad to get out of that," he said. "But it's something to be sure."

'"It is indeed," I agreed. "And I fancy that we shall not have much difficulty in finding what we want - after this evening's masquerade."

'And there was no difficulty whatsoever,' finished Poirot suddenly.

This abrupt ending seemed so extraordinary that I stared at him.

'But - but where were they?' I asked.

'In his pocket - tout simplement.'

'But in whose pocket?'

'Mr Pearson's, parbleu!'

Then, observing my look of bewilderment, he continued gently:

'You do not yet see it? Mr Pearson, like Charles Lester, was in debt. Mr Pearson, like Charles Lester, was fond of gambling. And he conceived the idea of stealing the papers from the Chinaman. He met him all right at Southampton, came up to London with him, and took him straight to Limehouse. It was foggy that day; the Chinaman

would not notice where he was going. I fancy Mr Pearson smoked the opium fairly often down there and had some peculiar friends in consequence. I do not think he meant murder. His idea was that one of the Chinamen should impersonate Wu Ling and receive the money for the sale of the document. So far, so good! But, to the Oriental mind, it was infinitely simpler to kill Wu Ling and throw his body into the river, and Pearson's Chinese accomplices followed their own methods without consulting him. Imagine, then, what you would call the "funk bleu" of M. Pearson. Someone may have seen him in the train with Wu Ling - murder is a very different thing from simple abduction.

'His salvation lies with the Chinaman who is impersonating Wu Ling at the Russell Square Hotel. If only the body is not discovered too soon! Probably Wu Ling had told him of the arrangement between him and Charles Lester whereby the latter was to call for him at the hotel. Pearson sees there an excellent way of diverting suspicion from himself. Charles Lester shall be the last person to be seen in company with Wu Ling. The impersonator has orders to represent himself to Lester as the servant of Wu Ling, and to bring him as speedily as possible to Limehouse. There, very likely, he was offered a drink. The drink would be suitably drugged, and when Lester emerged an hour later, he would have a very hazy impression of what had happened. So much was this the case, that as soon as Lester learned of Wu Ling's death, he loses his nerve, and denies that he ever reached Limehouse.

'By that, of course, he plays right into Pearson's hands. But is Pearson content? No - my manner disquiets him, and he determines to complete the case against Lester. So he arranges an elaborate

masquerade. Me, I am to be gulled completely. Did I not say just now that he was as a child acting the charades? Eh bien, I play my part. He goes home rejoicing. But in the morning, Inspector Miller arrives on his doorstep. The papers are found on him; the game is up. Bitterly he regrets permitting himself to play the farce with Hercule Poirot! There was only one real difficulty in the affair.'

'What was that?' I demanded curiously.

'Convincing Inspector Miller! What an animal, that! Both obstinate and imbecile. And in the end he took all the credit.'

'Too bad,' I cried.

'Ah, well, I had my compensations. The other director of the Burma Mines Ltd awarded me fourteen thousand shares as a small recompense for my services. Not so bad, eh? But when investing money, keep, I beg of you, Hastings, strictly to the conservative. The things you read in the paper, they may not be true. The directors of the Porcupine - they may be so many Mr Pearsons!'

THE PLYMOUTH EXPRESS

Alec Simpson, R.N., stepped from the platform at Newton Abbot into a first-class compartment of the Plymouth Express. A porter followed him with a heavy suitcase. He was about to swing it up to the rack, but the young sailor stopped him.

'No - leave it on the seat. I'll put it up later. Here you are.'

'Thank you, sir.' The porter, generously tipped, withdrew.

Doors banged; a stentorian voice shouted: 'Plymouth only. Change for Torquay. Plymouth next stop.' Then a whistle blew, and the train drew slowly out of the station.

Lieutenant Simpson had the carriage to himself. The December air was chilly, and he pulled up the window. Then he sniffed vaguely, and frowned. What a smell there was! Reminded him of that time in hospital, and the operation on his leg. Yes, chloroform; that was it!

He let the window down again, changing his seat to one with its back to the engine. He pulled a pipe out of his pocket and lit it. For a little time he sat inactive, looking out into the night and smoking.

At last he roused himself, and opening the suitcase, took out some papers and magazines, then closed the suitcase again and endeavoured to shove it under the opposite seat - without success. Some hidden obstacle resisted it. He shoved harder with rising impatience, but it still stuck out half-way into the carriage.

'Why the devil won't it go in?' he muttered, and hauling it out completely, he stooped down and peered under the seat...

A moment later a cry rang out into the night, and the great train came to an unwilling halt in obedience to the imperative jerking of the communication-cord.

'Mon ami,' said Poirot, 'you have, I know, been deeply interested in this mystery of the Plymouth Express. Read this.'

I picked up the note he flicked across the table to me. It was brief and to the point.

Dear Sir,

I shall be obliged if you will call upon me at your earliest convenience.

Yours faithfully,

Ebenezer Halliday

The connection was not clear to my mind, and I looked inquiringly at Poirot.

For answer he took up the newspaper and read aloud:

'"A sensational discovery was made last night. A young naval officer returning to Plymouth found under the seat of his compartment the body of a woman, stabbed through the heart. The officer at once pulled the communication cord, and the train was brought to a standstill. The woman, who was about thirty years of age, and richly dressed, has not yet been identified."

'And later we have this: "The woman found dead in the Plymouth Express has been identified as the Honourable Mrs Rupert Carrington." You see now, my friend? Or if you do not, I will add this - Mrs Rupert Carrington was, before her marriage, Flossie Halliday, daughter of old man Halliday, the steel king of America.'

'And he has sent for you? Splendid!'

'I did him a little service in the past - an affair of bearer bonds. And once, when I was in Paris for a royal visit, I had Mademoiselle Flossie pointed out to me. La jolie petite pensionnaire! She had the jolie dot too! It caused trouble. She nearly made a bad affair.'

'How was that?'

'A certain Count de la Rochefour. Un bien mauvais sujet! A bad hat, as you would say. An adventurer pure and simple, who knew how to appeal to a romantic young girl. Luckily her father got wind of it in time. He took her back to America in haste. I heard of her marriage some years later, but I know nothing of her husband.'

'H'm,' I said. 'The Honourable Rupert Carrington is no beauty, by all accounts. He'd pretty well run through his own money on the turf, and I should imagine old man Halliday's dollars came along in the nick of time. I should say that for a good-looking, well-mannered, utterly unscrupulous young scoundrel, it would be hard to find his match!'

'Ah, the poor little lady! Elle n'est pas bien tombé e!'

'I fancy he made it pretty obvious at once that it was her money, and not she, that had attracted him. I believe they drifted apart almost at once. I have heard turnouts lately that there was to be a definite legal separation.'

'Old man Halliday is no fool. He would tie up her money pretty tight.'

'I dare say. Anyway, I know as a fact that the Honourable Rupert is said to be extremely hard-up.'

'Aha! I wonder -'

'You wonder what?'

'My good friend, do not jump down my throat like that. You are interested, I see. Supposing you accompany me to see Mr Halliday. There is a taxi-stand at the corner.'

A few minutes sufficed to whirl us to the superb house in Park Lane rented by the American magnate. We were shown into the library, and almost immediately we were joined by a large, stout man, with piercing eyes and an aggressive chin.

'M. Poirot?' said Mr Halliday. 'I guess I don't need to tell you what I want you for. You've read the papers, and I'm never one to let the grass grow under my feet. I happened to hear you were in London, and I remembered the good work you did over those bonds. Never forget a name. I've got the pick of Scotland Yard, but I'll have my

own man as well. Money no object. All the dollars were made for my little girl - and now she's gone, I'll spend my last cent to catch the damned scoundrel that did it! See? So it's up to you to deliver the goods.'

Poirot bowed.

'I accept, monsieur, all the more willingly that I saw your daughter in Paris several times. And now I will ask you to tell me the circumstances of her journey to Plymouth and any other details that seem to you to bear upon the case.'

'Well, to begin with,' responded Halliday, 'she wasn't going to Plymouth. She was going to join a house-party at Avonmead Court, the Duchess of Swansea's place. She left London by the twelve-fourteen from Paddington, arriving at Bristol (where she had to change) at two-fifty. The principal Plymouth expresses, of course, run via Westbury, and do not go near Bristol at all. The twelve-fourteen does a non-stop run to Bristol, afterwards stopping at Weston, Taunton, Exeter and Newton Abbot. My daughter travelled alone in her carriage, which was reserved as far as Bristol, her maid being in a third-class carriage in the next coach.'

Poirot nodded, and Mr Halliday went on: 'The party at Avonmead Court was to be a very gay one, with several balls, and in consequence my daughter had with her nearly all her jewels amounting in value, perhaps, to about a hundred thousand dollars.'

'Un moment,' interrupted Poirot. 'Who had charge of the jewels? Your daughter, or the maid?'

'My daughter always took charge of them herself, carrying them in a small blue morocco case.'

'Continue, monsieur.'

'At Bristol the maid, Jane Mason, collected her mistress's dressing-bag and wraps, which were with her, and came to the door of Flossie's compartment. To her intense surprise, my daughter told her that she was not getting out at Bristol, but was going on farther. She directed Mason to get out the luggage and put it in the cloakroom. She could have tea in the refreshment-room, but she was to wait at the station for her mistress, who would return to Bristol by an up-train in the course of the afternoon. The maid, although very much astonished, did as she was told. She put the luggage in the cloakroom and had some tea. But up-train after up-train came in, and her mistress did not appear. After the arrival of the last train, she left the luggage where it was, and went to a hotel near the station for the night. This morning she read of the tragedy, and returned to town by the first available train.'

'Is there nothing to account for your daughter's sudden change of plan?'

'Well, there is this: According to Jane Mason, at Bristol, Flossie was no longer alone in her carriage. There was a man in it who stood looking out of the farther window so that she could not see his face.'

'The train was a corridor one, of course?'

'Yes.'

'Which side was the corridor?'

'On the platform side. My daughter was standing in the corridor as she talked to Mason.'

'And there is no doubt in your mind - excuse me!' He got up, and carefully straightened the inkstand which was a little askew. 'Je vous demande pardon,' he continued, re-seating himself. 'It affects my nerves to see anything crooked. Strange, is it not? I was saying, monsieur, that there is no doubt in your mind as to this probably unexpected meeting being the cause of your daughter's sudden change of plan?'

'It seems the only reasonable supposition.'

'You have no idea as to who the gentleman in question might be?'

The millionaire hesitated for a moment, and then replied:

'No - I do not know at all.'

'Now - as to the discovery of the body?'

'It was discovered by a young naval officer who at once gave the alarm. There was a doctor on the train. He examined the body. She had been first chloroformed, and then stabbed. He gave it as his opinion that she had been dead about four hours, so it must have

been done not long after leaving Bristol - probably between there and Weston, possibly between Weston and Taunton.'

'And the jewel-case?'

'The jewel-case, M. Poirot, was missing.'

'One thing more, monsieur. Your daughter's fortune - to whom does it pass at her death?'

'Flossie made a will soon after her marriage, leaving everything to her husband.' He hesitated for a minute, and then went on: 'I may as well tell you, Monsieur Poirot, that I regard my son-in-law as an unprincipled scoundrel, and that, by my advice, my daughter was on the eve of freeing herself from him by legal means - no difficult matter. I settled her money upon her in such a way that he could not touch it during her lifetime, but although they have lived entirely apart for some years, she had frequently acceded to his demands for money, rather than face an open scandal. However, I was determined to put an end to this. At last Flossie agreed, and my lawyers were instructed to take proceedings.'

'And where is Monsieur Carrington?'

'In town. I believe he was away in the country yesterday, but he returned last night.'

Poirot considered a little while. Then he said: 'I think that is all, monsieur.'

'You would like to see the maid, Jane Mason?'

'If you please.'

Halliday rang the bell, and gave a short order to the footman.

A few minutes later Jane Mason entered the room, a respectable, hard-featured woman, as emotionless in the face of tragedy as only a good servant can be.

'You will permit me to put a few questions? Your mistress, she was quite as usual before starting yesterday morning? Not excited or flurried?'

'Oh no, sir!'

'But at Bristol she was quite different?'

'Yes, sir, regular upset - so nervous she didn't seem to know what she was saying.'

'What did she say exactly?'

'Well, sir, as near as I can remember, she said: "Mason, I've got to alter my plans. Something has happened - I mean, I'm not getting out here after all. I must go on. Get out the luggage and put it in the cloakroom; then have some tea, and wait for me in the station."

'"Wait for you here, ma'am?" I asked.

'"Yes, yes. Don't leave the station. I shall return by a later train. I don't know when. It mayn't be until quite late."

'"Very well, ma'am," I says. It wasn't my place to ask questions, but I thought it very strange.'

'It was unlike your mistress, eh?'

'Very unlike her, sir.'

'What did you think?'

'Well, sir, I thought it was to do with the gentleman in the carriage. She didn't speak to him, but she turned round once or twice as though to ask him if she was doing right.'

'But you didn't see the gentleman's face?'

'No, sir; he stood with his back to me all the time.'

'Can you describe him at all?'

'He had on a light fawn overcoat, and a travelling-cap. He was tall and slender, like, and the back of his head was dark.'

'You didn't know him?'

'Oh no, I don't think so, sir.'

'It was not your master, Mr Carrington, by any chance?'

Mason looked rather startled.

'Oh, I don't think so, sir!'

'But you are not sure?'

'It was about the master's build, sir - but I never thought of it being him. We so seldom saw him... I couldn't say it wasn't him!'

Poirot picked up a pin from the carpet, and frowned at it severely; then he continued: 'Would it be possible for the man to have entered the train at Bristol before you reached the carriage?'

Mason considered.

'Yes, sir, I think it would. My compartment was very crowded, and it was some minutes before I could get out - and then there was a very large crowd on the platform, and that delayed me too. But he'd only have had a minute or two to speak to the mistress, that way. I took it for granted that he'd come along the corridor.'

'That is more probable, certainly.'

He paused, still frowning.

'You know how the mistress was dressed, sir?'

'The papers give a few details, but I would like you to confirm them.'

'She was wearing a white fox fur toque, sir, with a white spotted veil, and a blue frieze coat and skirt - the shade of blue they call electric.'

'H'm, rather striking.'

'Yes,' remarked Mr Halliday. 'Inspector Japp is in hopes that that may help us to fix the spot where the crime took place. Anyone who saw her would remember her.'

'Pré cisé ment! - Thank you, mademoiselle.'

The maid left the room.

'Well!' Poirot got up briskly. 'That is all I can do here - except, monsieur, that I would ask you to tell me everything - but everything!'

'I have done so.'

'You are sure?'

'Absolutely.'

'Then there is nothing more to be said. I must decline the case.'

'Why?'

'Because you have not been frank with me.'

'I assure you -'

'No, you are keeping something back.'

There was a moment's pause, and then Halliday drew a paper from his pocket and handed it to my friend.

'I guess that'a what you're after, Monsieur Poirot - though how you know about it fairly gets my goat!'

Poirot smiled, and unfolded the paper. It was a letter written in thin sloping handwriting. Poirot read it aloud.

'Chère Madame,

It is with infinite pleasure that I look forward to the felicity of meeting you again. After your so amiable reply to my letter, I can hardly restrain my impatience. I have never forgotten those days in Paris. It is most cruel that you should be leaving London tomorrow. However, before very long, and perhaps sooner than you think, I shall have the joy of beholding once more the lady whose image has ever reigned supreme in my heart.

Believe, chère madame, all the assurance of my most devoted and unaltered sentiments -

Armand de la Rochefour.'

Poirot handed the letter back to Halliday with a bow.

'I fancy, monsieur, that you did not know that your daughter intended renewing her acquaintance with the Count de la Rochefour?'

'It came as a thunderbolt to me! I found this letter in my daughter's handbag. As you probably know, Monsieur Poirot, this so-called count is an adventurer of the worst type.'

Poirot nodded.

'But I want to know how you knew of the existence of this letter?'

My friend smiled. 'Monsieur, I did not. But to track footmarks and recognize cigarette-ash is not sufficient for a detective. He must also be a good psychologist! I knew that you disliked and mistrusted your son-in-law. He benefits by your daughter's death; the maid's description of the mysterious man bears a sufficient resemblance to him. Yet you are not keen on his track! Why? Surely because your suspicions lie in another direction. Therefore you were keeping something back.'

'You're right, Monsieur Poirot. I was sure of Rupert's guilt until I found this letter. It unsettled me horribly.'

'Yes. The Count says: "Before very long, and perhaps sooner than you think." Obviously he would not want to wait until you should get wind of his reappearance. Was it he who travelled down from London by the twelve-fourteen, and came along the corridor to your daughter's compartment? The Count de la Rochefour is also, if I remember rightly, tall and dark!'

The millionaire nodded.

'Well, monsieur, I will wish you good day. Scotland Yard has, I presume, a list of the jewels?'

'Yes. I believe Inspector Japp is here now if you would like to see him.'

Japp was an old friend of ours, and greeted Poirot with a sort of affectionate contempt.

'And how are you, monsieur? No bad feeling between us, though we have got our different ways of looking at things. How are the "little grey cells", eh? Going strong?'

Poirot beamed upon him. 'They function, my good Japp; assuredly they do!'

'Then that's all right. Think it was the Honourable Rupert, or a crook? We're keeping an eye on all the regular places, of course. We shall know if the shiners are disposed of, and of course whoever did it isn't going to keep them to admire their sparkle. Not

likely! I'm trying to find out where Rupert Carrington was yesterday. Seems a bit of a mystery about it. I've got a man watching him.'

'A great precaution, but perhaps a day late,' suggested Poirot gently.

'You always will have your joke, Monsieur Poirot. Well, I'm off to Paddington. Bristol, Weston, Taunton, that's my beat. So long.'

'You will come round and see me this evening, and tell me the result?'

'Sure thing, if I'm back.'

'That good inspector believes in matter in motion,' murmured Poirot as our friend departed. 'He travels; he measures footprints; he collects mud and cigarette-ash! He is extremely busy! He is zealous beyond words! And if I mentioned psychology to him, do you know what he would do, my friend? He would smile! He would say to himself: "Poor old Poirot! He ages! He grows senile!" Japp is the "younger generation knocking on the door". And ma foi! They are so busy knocking that they do not notice that the door is open!'

'And what are you going to do?'

'As we have carte blanche, I shall expend threepence in ringing up the Ritz - where you may have noticed our Count is staying. After that, as my feet are a little damp, and I have sneezed twice, I shall return to my rooms and make myself a tisane over the spirit lamp!'

I did not see Poirot again until the following morning. I found him placidly finishing his breakfast.

'Well?' I inquired eagerly. 'What has happened?'

'Nothing.'

'But Japp?'

'I have not seen him.'

'The Count?'

'He left the Ritz the day before yesterday.'

'The day of the murder?'

'Yes.'

'Then that settles it! Rupert Carrington is cleared.'

'Because the Count de la Rochefour has left the Ritz? You go too fast, my friend.'

'Anyway, he must be followed, arrested! But what could be his motive?'

'One hundred thousand dollars' worth of jewellery is a very good motive for anyone. No, the question to my mind is: why kill her? Why not simply steal the jewels? She would not prosecute.'

'Why not?'

'Because she is a woman, mon ami. She once loved this man. Therefore she would suffer her loss in silence. And the Count, who is an extremely good psychologist where women are concerned - hence his successes - would know that perfectly well! On the other hand, if Rupert Carrington killed her, why take the jewels, which would incriminate him fatally?'

'As a blind.'

'Perhaps you are right, my friend. Ah, here is Japp! I recognize his knock.'

The inspector was beaming good-humouredly.

'Morning, Poirot. Only just got back. I've done some good work! And you?'

'Me, I have arranged my ideas,' replied Poirot placidly.

Japp laughed heartily.

'Old chap's getting on in years,' he observed beneath his breath to me. 'That won't do for us young folk,' he said aloud.

'Quel dommage?' Poirot inquired.

'Well, do you want to hear what I've done?'

'You permit me to make a guess? You have found the knife with which the crime was committed, by the side of the line between Weston and Taunton, and you have interviewed the paperboy who spoke to Mrs Carrington at Weston!'

Japp's jaw fell. 'How on earth did you know? Don't tell me it was those almighty "little grey cells" of yours!'

'I am glad you admit for once that they are all mighty! Tell me, did she give the paper-boy a shilling for himself?'

'No, it was half a crown!' Japp had recovered his temper, and grinned. 'Pretty extravagant, these rich Americans!'

'And in consequence the boy did not forget her?'

'Not he. Half-crowns don't come his way every day. She hailed him and bought two magazines. One had a picture of a girl in blue on the cover. "That'll match me," she said. Oh, he remembered her perfectly. Well, that was enough for me. By the doctor's evidence, the crime must have been committed before Taunton. I guessed they'd throw the knife away at once, and I walked down the line looking for it; and sure enough, there it was. I made inquiries at Taunton about our man, but of course it's a big station, and it wasn't likely they'd notice him. He probably got back to London by a later train.'

Poirot nodded. 'Very likely.'

'But I found another bit of news when I got back. They're passing the jewels, all right! That large emerald was pawned last night - by one of the regular lot. Who do you think it was?'

'I don't know - except that he was a short man.'

Japp stared. 'Well, you're right there. He's short enough. It was Red Narky.'

'Who is Red Narky?' I asked.

'A particularly sharp jewel-thief, sir. And not one to stick at murder. Usually works with a woman - Gracie Kidd; but she doesn't seem to be in it this time - unless she's got off to Holland with the rest of the swag.'

'You've arrested Narky?'

'Sure thing. But mind you, it's the other man we want - the man who went down with Mrs Carrington in the train. He was the one who planned the job, right enough. But Narky won't squeal on a pal.'

I noticed that Poirot's eyes had become very green.

'I think,' he said gently, 'that I can find Narky's pal for you, all right.'

'One of your little ideas, eh?' Japp eyed Poirot sharply. 'Wonderful how you manage to deliver the goods sometimes, at your age and all. Devil's own luck, of course.'

'Perhaps, perhaps,' murmured my friend. 'Hastings, my hat. And the brush. So! My galoshes, if it still rains! We must not undo the good work of that tisane. Au revoir, Japp!'

'Good luck to you, Poirot.'

Poirot hailed the first taxi we met, and directed the driver to Park Lane.

When we drew up before Halliday's house, he skipped out nimbly, paid the driver and rang the bell. To the footman who opened the door he made a request in a low voice, and we were immediately taken upstairs. We went up to the top of the house, and were shown into a small neat bedroom.

Poirot's eyes roved round the room and fastened themselves on a small black trunk. He knelt in front of it, scrutinized the labels on it, and took a small twist of wire from his pocket.

'Ask Mr Halliday if he will be so kind as to mount to me here,' he said over his shoulder to the footman.

The man departed, and Poirot gently coaxed the lock of the trunk with a practised hand. In a few minutes the lock gave, and he raised the lid of the trunk. Swiftly he began rummaging among the clothes it contained, flinging them out on the floor.

There was a heavy step on the stairs, and Halliday entered the room.

'What in hell are you doing here?' he demanded, staring.

'I was looking, monsieur, for this.' Poirot withdrew from the trunk a coat and skirt of bright blue frieze, and a small toque of white fox fur.

'What are you doing with my trunk?' I turned to see that the maid, Jane Mason, had entered the room.

'If you will just shut the door, Hastings. Thank you. Yes, and stand with your back against it. Now, Mr Halliday, let me introduce you to Gracie Kidd, otherwise Jane Mason, who will shortly rejoin her accomplice, Red Narky, under the kind escort of Inspector Japp.'

Poirot waved a deprecating hand. 'It was of the most simple!' He helped himself to more caviar.

'It was the maid's insistence on the clothes that her mistress was wearing that first struck me. Why was she so anxious that our attention should be directed to them? I reflected that we had only the maid's word for the mysterious man in the carriage at Bristol.

As far as the doctor's evidence went, Mrs Carrington might easily have been murdered before reaching Bristol. But if so, then the maid must be an accomplice. And if she were an accomplice, she

would not wish this point to rest on her evidence alone. The clothes Mrs Carrington was wearing were of a striking nature. A maid usually has a good deal of choice as to what her mistress shall wear. Now if, after Bristol, anyone saw a lady in a bright blue coat and skirt, and a fur toque, he will be quite ready to swear he had seen Mrs Carrington.

'I began to reconstruct. The maid would provide herself with duplicate clothes. She and her accomplice, chloroform and stab Mrs Carrington between London and Bristol, probably taking advantage of a tunnel. Her body is rolled under the seat; and the maid takes her place. At Weston she must make herself noticed. How? In all probability, a nevspaper-boy will be selected. She will insure his remembering her by giving him a large tip. She also drew his attention to the colour of her dress by a remark about one of the magazines. After leaving Weston, she throws the knife out of the window to mark the place where the crime presumably occurred, and changes her clothes, or buttons a long mackintosh over them. At Taunton she leaves the train and returns to Bristol as soon as possible, where her accomplice has duly left the luggage in the cloakroom. He hands over the ticket and himself returns to London. She waits on the platform, carrying out her rφle, goes to a hotel for the night and returns to town in the morning, exactly as she said.

'When Japp returned from this expedition, he confirmed all my deductions. He also told me that a well-known crook was passing the jewels. I knew that whoever it was would be the exact opposite of the man Jane Mason described. When I heard that it was Red Narky, who always worked with Gracie Kidd - well, I knew just where to find her.'

'And the Count?'

'The more I thought of it, the more I was convinced that he had nothing to do with it. That gentleman is much too careful of his own skin to risk murder. It would be out of keeping with his character.'

'Well, Monsieur Poirot,' said Halliday, 'I owe you a big debt. And the check I write after lunch won't go near to settling it.'

Poirot smiled modestly, and murmured to me: 'The good Japp, he shall get the official credit, all right, but though he has got his Gracie Kidd, I think that I, as the Americans say, have got his goat!'

THE CHOCOLATE BOX

It was a wild night. Outside, the wind howled malevolently, and the rain beat against the windows in great gusts.

Poirot and I sat facing the hearth, our legs stretched out to the cheerful blaze. Between us was a small table. On my side of it stood some carefully brewed hot toddy; on Poirot's was a cup of thick, rich chocolate which I would not have drunk for a hundred pounds! Poirot sipped the thick brown mess in the pink china cup, and sighed with contentment.

'Quelle belle vie!' he murmured.

'Yes, it's a good old world,' I agreed. 'Here am I with a job, and a good job too! And here are you, famous -'

'Oh, mon ami!' protested Poirot.

'But you are. And rightly so! When I think back on your long line of successes, I am positively amazed. I don't believe you know what failure is!'

'He would be a droll kind of original who could say that!'

'No, but seriously, have you ever failed?'

'Innumerable times, my friend. What would you? La bonne chance, it cannot always be on your side. I have been called in too late. Very often another, working towards the same goal, has arrived there first. Twice have I been stricken down with illness just as I was on the point of success. One must take the downs with the ups, my friend.'

'I didn't quite mean that,' I said. 'I meant, had you ever been completely down and out over a case through your own fault?'

'Ah, I comprehend! You ask if I have ever made the complete prize ass of myself, as you say over here? Once, my friend -' A slow, reflective smile hovered over his face. 'Yes, once I made a fool of myself.'

He sat up suddenly in his chair.

'See here, my friend, you have, I know, kept a record of my little successes. You shall add one more story to the collection, the story of a failure!'

He leaned forward and placed a log on the fire. Then, after carefully wiping his hands on a little duster that hung on a nail by the fireplace, he leaned back and commenced his story.

That of which I tell you (said M. Poirot) took place in Belgium many years ago. It was at the time of the terrible struggle in France between church and state. M. Paul Dé roulard was a French deputy of note. It was an open secret that the portfolio of a Minister awaited him. He was among the bitterest of the anti-Catholic party, and it was certain that on his accession to power, he would have to face violent enmity. He was in many ways a peculiar man. Though he neither drank nor smoked, he was nevertheless not so scrupulous in other ways. You comprehend, Hastings, c'é tait des femmes - toujours des femmes!

He had married some years earlier a young lady from Brussels who had brought him a substantial dot. Undoubtedly the money was useful to him in his career, as his family was not rich, though on the other hand he was entitled to call himself M. le Baron if he chose. There were no children of the marriage, and his wife died after two years - the result of a fall downstairs. Among the property which she bequeathed to him was a house on the Avenue Louise in Brussels.

It was in this house that his sudden death took place, the event coinciding with the resignation of the Minister whose portfolio he

was to inherit. All the papers printed long notices of his career. His death, which had taken place quite suddenly in the evening after dinner, was attributed to heart-failure.

At that time, mon ami, I was, as you know, a member of the Belgian detective force. The death of M. Paul Dé roulard was not particularly interesting to me. I am, as you also know, bon catholique, and his demise seemed to me fortunate.

It was some three days afterwards, when my vacation had just begun, that I received a visitor at my own apartments - a lady, heavily veiled, but evidently quite young; and I perceived at once that she was a jeune fille tout à fait comme il faut.

'You are Monsieur Hercule Poirot?' she asked in a low sweet voice.

I bowed.

'Of the detective service?'

Again I bowed. 'Be seated, I pray of you, mademoiselle,' I said.

She accepted a chair and drew aside her veil. Her face was charming, though marred with tears, and haunted as though with some poignant anxiety.

'Monsieur,' she said, 'I understand that you are now taking a vacation. Therefore you will be free to take up a private case. You understand that I do not wish to call in the police.'

I shook my head. 'I fear what you ask is impossible, mademoiselle. Even though on vacation, I am still of the police.'

She leaned forward. 'Ecoutez, monsieur. All that I ask of you is to investigate. The result of your investigations you are at perfect liberty to report to the police. If what I believe to be true is true, we shall need all the machinery of the law.'

That placed a somewhat different complexion on the matter, and I placed myself at her service without more ado.

A slight colour rose in her cheeks. 'I thank you, monsieur. It is the death of M. Paul Dé roulard that I ask you to investigate.'

'Comment?' I exclaimed, surprised.

'Monsieur, I have nothing to go upon - nothing but my woman's instinct, but I am convinced - convinced, I tell you - that M. Dé roulard did not die a natural death!'

'But surely the doctors -'

'Doctors may be mistaken. He was so robust, so strong. Ah, Monsieur Poirot, I beseech of you to help me -'

The poor child was almost beside herself. She would have knelt to me. I soothed her as best I could.

'I will help you, mademoiselle. I feel almost sure that your fears are unfounded, but we will see. First, I will ask you to describe to me the inmates of the house.'

'There are the domestics, of course, Jeanette, Fé licie, and Denise the cook. She has been there many years; the others are simple country girls. Also there is François, but he too is an old servant. Then there is Monsieur Dé roulard's mother who lived with him, and myself. My name is Virginie Mesnard. I am a poor cousin of the late Madame Dé roulard, M. Paul's wife, and I have been a member of their mé nage for over three years. I have now described to you the household. There were also two guests staying in the house.'

'And they were?'

'M. de Saint Alard, a neighbour of M. Dé roulard's in France. Also an English friend, Mr John Wilson.'

'Are they still with you?'

'Mr Wilson, yes, but M. de Saint Alard departed yesterday.'

'And what is your plan, Mademoiselle Mesnard?'

'If you will present yourself at the house in half an hour's time, I will have arranged some story to account for your presence. I had better represent you to be connected with journalism in some way. I shall say you have come from Paris, and that you have brought a card of introduction from M. de Saint Alard. Madame Dé roulard is very feeble in health, and will pay little attention to details.'

On mademoiselle's ingenious pretext I was admitted to the house, and after a brief interview with the dead deputy's mother, who was a wonderfully imposing and aristocratic figure though obviously in failing health, I was made free of the premises.

I wonder, my friend (continued Poirot), whether you can possibly figure to yourself the difficulties of my task? Here was a man whose death had taken place three days previously. If there had been foul play, only one possibility was admittable - poison! And I had had no chance of seeing the body, and there was no possibility of examining, or analysing, any medium in which the poison could have been administered. There were no clues, false or otherwise, to consider. Had the man been poisoned? Had he died a natural death? I, Hercule Poirot, with nothing to help me, had to decide.

First, I interviewed the domestics, and with their aid, I recapitulated the evening. I paid especial notice to the food at dinner, and the method of serving it. The soup had been served by M. Dé roulard himself from a tureen. Next a dish of cutlets, then a chicken. Finally a compote of fruits. And all placed on the table, and served by Monsieur himself. The coffee was brought in a big pot to the dinner-table. Nothing there, mon ami - impossible to poison one without poisoning all!

After dinner Madame Dé roulard had retired to her own apartments and Mademoiselle Virginie had accompanied her. The three men had adjourned to M. Dé roulard's study. Here they had chatted amicably for some time, when suddenly, without any warning, the deputy had fallen heavily to the ground. M. de Saint Alard had

rushed out and told François to fetch a doctor immediately. He said it was without doubt an apoplexy, explained the man. But when the doctor arrived, the patient was past help.

Mr John Wilson, to whom I was presented by Mademoiselle Virginie, was what was known in those days as a regular John Bull Englishman, middle-aged and burly. His account, delivered in very British French, was substantially the same.

'Dé roulard went very red in the face, and down he fell.'

There was nothing further to be found out there. Next I went to the scene of the tragedy, the study, and was left alone there at my own request. So far there was nothing to support Mademoiselle Mesnard's theory. I could not but believe that it was a delusion on her part. Evidently she had entertained a romantic passion for the dead man which had not permitted her to take a normal view of the case. Nevertheless, I searched the study with meticulous care. It was just possible that a hypodermic needle might have been introduced into the dead man's chair in such a way as to allow of a fatal injection. The minute puncture it would cause was likely to remain unnoticed. But I could discover no sign to support that theory. I flung myself down in the chair with a gesture of despair.

'Enfin, I abandon it!' I said aloud. 'There is not a clue anywhere! Everything is perfectly normal.'

As I said the words, my eyes fell on a large box of chocolates standing on a table near by, and my heart gave a leap. It might not be a clue to M. Dé roulard's death, but here at least was something

that was not normal. I lifted the lid. The box was full, untouched; not a chocolate was missing - but that only made the peculiarity that had caught my eye more striking. For, see you, Hastings, while the box itself was pink, the lid was blue. Now, one often sees a blue ribbon on a pink box, and vice versa, but a box of one colour, and a lid of another - no; decidedly - ça ne se voit jamais!

I did not as yet see that this little incident was of any use to me, yet I determined to investigate it as being out of the ordinary. I rang the bell for François, and asked him if his late master had been fond of sweets. A faint melancholy smile came to his lips.

'Passionately fond of them, monsieur. He would always have a box of chocolates in the house. He did not drink wine of any kind, you see.'

'Yet this box has not been touched?' I lifted the lid to show him.

'Pardon, monsieur, but that was a new box purchased on the day of his death, the other being nearly finished.'

'Then the other box was finished on the day of his death,' I said slowly.

'Yes, monsieur, I found it empty in the morning and threw it away.'

'Did M. Dé roulard eat sweets at all hours of the day?'

'Usually after dinner, monsieur.'

I began to see light.

'François,' I said, 'you can be discreet?'

'If there is need, monsieur.'

'Bon! Know, then, that I am of the police. Can you find me that other box?'

'Without doubt, monsieur. It will be in the dustbin.'

He departed, and returned in a few minutes with a dust-covered object. It was the duplicate of the box I held, save for the fact that this time the box was blue and the lid was pink. I thanked François, recommended him once more to be discreet, and left the house in the Avenue Louise without more ado.

Next day I called upon the doctor who had attended M. Dé roulard. With him I had a difficult task. He entrenched himself prettily behind a wall of learned phraseology, but I fancied that he was not quite as sure about the case as he would like to be.

'There have been many curious occurrences of the kind,' he observed, when I had managed to disarm him somewhat. 'A sudden fit of anger, a violent emotion - after a heavy dinner, c'est entendu - then, with an access of rage, the blood flies to the head, and pst! - there you are!'

'But M. Dé roulard had had no violent emotion.'

'No? I made sure that he had been having a stormy altercation with M. de Saint Alard.'

'Why should he?'

'C'est é vident!' The doctor shrugged his shoulders. 'Was not M. de Saint Alard a Catholic of the most fanatical? Their friendship was being ruined by this question of church and state. Not a day passed without discussions. To M. de Saint Alard, Dé roulard appeared almost as Antichrist.'

This was unexpected, and gave me food for thought.

'One more question, Doctor: would it be possible to introduce a fatal dose of poison into a chocolate?'

'It would be possible, I suppose,' said the doctor slowly. 'Pure prussic acid would meet the case if there were no chance of evaporation, and a tiny globule of anything might be swallowed unnoticed - but it does not seem a very likely supposition. A chocolate full of morphine or strychnine -' He made a wry face. 'You comprehend, M. Poirot - one bite would be enough! The unwary one would not stand upon ceremony.'

'Thank you, M. le Docteur.'

I withdrew. Next I made inquiries of the chemists, especially those in the neighbourhood of the Avenue Louise. It is good to be of the police. I got the information I wanted without any trouble. Only in one case could I hear of any poison having been supplied to the

house in question. This was some eye drops of atropine sulphate for Madame Dé roulard. Atropine is a potent poison, and for the moment I was elated, but the symptoms of atropine poisoning are closely allied to those of ptomaine, and bear no resemblance to those I was studying. Besides, the prescription was an old one. Madame Dé roulard had suffered from cataract in both eyes for many years.

I was turning away discouraged when the chemist's voice called me back.

'Un moment, M. Poirot. I remember, the girl who brought that prescription, she said something about having to go on to the English chemist. You might try there.'

I did. Once more enforcing my official status, I got the information I wanted. On the day before M. Dé roulard's death they had made up a prescription for Mr John Wilson. Not that there was any making up about it. They were simply little tablets of trinitrine. I asked if I might see some. He showed me them, and my heart beat faster - for the tiny tablets were of chocolate.

'It is a poison?' I asked.

'No, monsieur.'

'Can you describe to me its effect?'

'It lowers the blood-pressure. It is given for some forms of heart trouble - angina pectoris for instance. It relieves the arterial tension. In arteriosclerosis -'

I interrupted him. 'Ma foi! This rigmarole says nothing to me. Does it cause the face to flush?'

'Certainly it does.'

'And supposing I ate ten - twenty of your little tablets, what then?'

'I should not advise you to attempt it,' he replied drily.

'And yet you say it is not poison?'

'There are many things not called poison which can kill a man,' he replied as before.

I left the shop elated. At last, things had begun to march!

I now knew that John Wilson held the means for the crime - but what about the motive? He had come to Belgium on business, and had asked M. Dé roulard, whom he knew slightly, to put him up. There was apparently no way in which Dé roulard's death could benefit him. Moreover, I discovered by inquiries in England that he had suffered for some years from that painful form of heart disease known as angina. Therefore he had a genuine right to have those tablets in his possession. Nevertheless, I was convinced that someone had gone to the chocolate box, opening the full one first by mistake, and had abstracted the contents of the last chocolate,

cramming in instead as many little trinitrin tablets as it would hold. The chocolates were large ones. Between twenty or thirty tablets, I felt sure, could have been inserted. But who had done this?

There were two guests in the house. John Wilson had the means. Saint Alard had the motive. Remember, he was a fanatic, and there is no fanatic like a religious fanatic. Could he, by any means, have got hold of John Wilson's trinitrine?

Another little idea came to me. Ah! You smile at my little ideas! Why had Wilson run out of trinitrine? Surely he would bring an adequate supply from England. I called once more at the house in the Avenue Louise. Wilson was out, but I saw the girl who did his room, Fé licie. I demanded of her immediately whether it was not true that M. Wilson had lost a bottle from his washstand some little time ago. The girl responded eagerly. It was quite true. She, Fé licie, had been blamed for it. The English gentleman had evidently thought that she had broken it, and did not like to say so. Whereas she had never even touched it. Without doubt it was Jeannette - always nosing round where she had no business to be -

I calmed the flow of words, and took my leave. I knew now all that I wanted to know. It remained for me to prove my case. That, I felt, would not be easy. I might be sure that Saint Alard had removed the bottle of trinitrine from John Wilson's washstand, but to convince others, I would have to produce evidence. And I had none to produce!

Never mind. I knew - that was the great thing. You remember our difficulty in the Styles case, Hastings? There again, I knew but it

took me a long time to find the last link which made my chain of evidence against the murderer complete.

I asked for an interview with Mademoiselle Mesnard. She came at once. I demanded of her the address of M. de Saint Alard. A look of trouble came over her face.

'Why do you want it, monsieur?'

'Mademoiselle, it is necessary.'

She seemed doubtful - troubled.

'He can tell you nothing. He is a man whose thoughts are not in this world. He hardly notices what goes on around him.'

'Possibly, mademoiselle. Nevertheless, he was an old friend of M. Dé roulard's. There may be things he can tell me - things of the past - old grudges - old love-affairs.'

The girl flushed and bit her lip. 'As you please - but - but - I feel sure now that I have been mistaken. It was good of you to accede to my demand, but I was upset - almost distraught at the time. I see now that there is no mystery to solve. Leave it, I beg of you, monsieur.'

I eyed her closely.

'Mademoiselle,' I said, 'it is sometimes difficult for a dog to find a scent, but once he has found it, nothing on earth will make him

leave it! That is if he is a good dog! And I, mademoiselle, I, Hercule Poirot, am a very good dog.'

Without a word she turned away. A few minutes later she returned with the address written on a sheet of paper. I left the house. François was waiting for me outside. He looked at me anxiously.

'There is no news, monsieur?'

'None as yet, my friend.'

'Ah! Pauvre Monsieur Dé roulard!' he sighed. 'I too was of his way of thinking. I do not care for priests. Not that I would say so in the house. The women are all devout - a good thing perhaps. Madame est très pieuse - et Mademoiselle Virginie aussi.'

Mademoiselle Virginie? Was she 'très pieuse?' Thinking of the tear-stained passionate face I had seen that first day, I wondered.

Having obtained the address of M. de Saint Alard, I wasted no time. I arrived in the neighbourhood of his chвteau in the Ardennes but it was some days before I could find a pretext for gaining admission to the house. In the end I did - how do you think - as a plumber, mon ami! It was the affair of a moment to arrange a neat little gas leak in his bedroom. I departed for my tools, and took care to return with them at an hour when I knew I should have the field pretty well to myself. What I was searching for, I hardly knew. The one thing needful, I could not believe there was any chance of finding. He would never have run the risk of keeping it.

Still when I found a little cupboard above the washstand locked, I could not resist the temptation of seeing what was inside it. The lock was quite a simple one to pick. The door swung open. It was full of old bottles. I took them up one by one with a trembling hand. Suddenly, I uttered a cry. Figure to yourself, my friend, I held in my hand a little phial with an English chemist's label. On it were the words: 'Trinitrine Tablets. One to be taken when required. Mr John Wilson.'

I controlled my emotion, closed the little cupboard, slipped the bottle into my pocket, and continued to repair the gas leak! One must be methodical. Then I left the chвteau, and took train for my own country as soon as possible. I arrived in Brussels late that night. I was writing out a report for the pré fet in the morning, when a note was brought to me. It was from old Madame Dé roulard, and it summoned me to the house in the Avenue Louise without delay.

François opened the door to me.

'Madame la Baronne is awaiting you.'

He conducted me to her apartments. She sat in state in a large armchair. There was no sign of Mademoiselle Virginie.

'M. Poirot,' said the old lady. 'I have just learned that you are not what you pretend to be. You are a police officer.'

'That is so, madame.'

'You came here to inquire into the circumstances of my son's death?'

Again I replied: 'That is so, madame.'

'I should be glad if you would tell me what progress you have made.'

I hesitated.

'First I would like to know how you have learned all this, madame.'

'From one who is no longer of this world.'

Her words, and the brooding way she uttered them, sent a chill to my heart. I was incapable of speech.

'Wherefore, monsieur, I would beg of you most urgently to tell me exactly what progress you have made in your investigation.'

'Madame, my investigation is finished.'

'My son?'

'Was killed deliberately.'

'You know by whom?'

'Yes, madame.'

'Who, then?'

'M. de Saint Alard.'

The old lady shook her head.

'You are wrong. M. de Saint Alard is incapable of such a crime.'

'The proofs are in my hands.'

'I beg of you once more to tell me all.'

This time I obeyed, going over each step that had led me to the discovery of the truth. She listened attentively. At the end she nodded her head.

'Yes, yes, it is all as you say, all but one thing. It was not M. de Saint Alard who killed my son. It was I, his mother.'

I stared at her. She continued to nod her head gently.

'It is well that I sent for you. It is the providence of the good God that Virginie told me before she departed for the convent, what she had done. Listen, M. Poirot! My son was an evil man. He persecuted the church. He led a life of mortal sin. He dragged down other souls beside his own. But there was worse than that. As I came out of my room in this house one morning, I saw my daughter-in-law standing at the head of the stairs. She was reading a letter. I saw my son steal up behind her. One swift push, and she fell, striking her head on the marble steps. When they picked her up she was dead. My son was a murderer, and only I, his mother, knew it.'

She closed her eyes for a moment. 'You cannot conceive, monsieur, of my agony, my despair. What was I to do? Denounce him to the police? I could not bring myself to do it. It was my duty, but my flesh was weak. Besides, would they believe me? My eyesight had been failing for some time - they would say I was mistaken. I kept silence. But my conscience gave me no peace. By keeping silence I too was a murderer. My son inherited his wife's money. He flourished as the green bay tree. And now he was to have a Minister's portfolio. His persecution of the church would be redoubled. And there was Virginie. She, poor child, beautiful, naturally pious, was fascinated by him. He had a strange and terrible power over women. I saw it coming. I was powerless to prevent it. He had no intention of marrying her. The time came when she was ready to yield everything to him.

'Then I saw my path clear. He was my son. I had given him life. I was responsible for him. He had killed one woman's body, now he would kill another's soul! I went to Mr Wilson's room, and took the bottle of tablets. He had once said laughingly that there were enough in it to kill a man! I went into the study and opened the big box of chocolates that always stood on the table. I opened a new box by mistake. The other was on the table also. There was just one chocolate left in it. That simplified things. No one ate chocolates except my son and Virginie. I would keep her with me that night. All went as I had planned -'

She paused, closing her eyes a minute then opened them again.

'M. Poirot, I am in your hands. They tell me I have not many days to live. I am willing to answer for my action before the good God. Must I answer for it on earth also?'

I hesitated. 'But the empty bottle, madame,' I said to gain time. 'How came that into M. de Saint Alard's possession?'

'When he came to say goodbye to me, monsieur, I slipped it into his pocket. I did not know how to get rid of it. I am so infirm that I cannot move about much without help, and finding it empty in my rooms might have caused suspicion. You understand, monsieur -' she drew herself up to her full height - 'it was with no idea of casting suspicion on M. de Saint Alard! I never dreamed of such a thing. I thought his valet would find an empty bottle and throw it away without question.'

I bowed my head. 'I comprehend, madame,' I said.

'And your decision, monsieur?'

Her voice was firm and unfaltering, her head held as high as ever. I rose to my feet.

'Madame,' I said, 'I have the honour to wish you good day. I have made my investigations - and failed! The matter is closed.'

He was silent for a moment, then said quietly: 'She died just a week later. Mademoiselle Virginie passed through her novitiate, and duly took the veil. That, my friend, is the story. I must admit that I do not make a fine figure in it.'

'But that was hardly a failure,' I expostulated. 'What else could you have thought under the circumstances?'

'Ah, sacré , mon ami,' cried Poirot, becoming suddenly animated. 'Is it that you do not see? But I was thirty-six times an idiot! My grey cells, they functioned not at all. The whole time I had the true clue in my hands.'

'What clue?'

'The chocolate box! Do you not see? Would anyone in possession of their full eyesight make such a mistake? I knew Madame Dé roulard had cataract - the atropine drops told me that. There was only one person in the household whose eyesight was such that she could not see which lid to replace. It was the chocolate box that started me on the track, and yet up to the end I failed consistently to perceive its real significance!

'Also my psychology was at fault. Had M. de Saint Alard been the criminal, he would never have kept an incriminating bottle. Finding it was a proof of his innocence. I had learned already from Mademoiselle Virginie that he was absent-minded. Altogether it was a miserable affair that I have recounted to you there! Only to you have I told the story. You comprehend, I do not figure well in it! An old lady commits a crime in such a simple and clever fashion that I, Hercule Poirot, am completely deceived. Sapristi! It does not bear thinking of! Forget it. Or no - remember it, and if you think at any time that I am growing conceited - it is not likely, but it might arise.'

I concealed a smile.

'Eh bien, my friend, you shall say to me, "Chocolate box". Is it agreed?'

'It's a bargain!'

'After all,' said Poirot reflectively, 'it was an experience! I, who have undoubtedly the finest brain in Europe at present, can afford to be magnanimous!'

'Chocolate box,' I murmured gently.

'Pardon, mon ami?'

I looked at Poirot's innocent face, as he bent forward inquiringly, and my heart smote me. I had suffered often at his hands, but I, too, though not possessing the finest brain in Europe, could afford to be magnanimous!

'Nothing,' I lied, and lit another pipe, smiling to myself.

THE SUBMARINE PLANS

A note had been brought by special messenger. Poirot read it, and a gleam of excitement and interest came into his eyes as he did so. He dismissed the man with a few curt words and then turned to me.

'Pack a bag with all haste, my friend. We're going down to Sharples.'

I started at the mention of the famous country place of Lord Alloway. Head of the newly formed Ministry of Defence, Lord Alloway was a prominent member of the Cabinet. As Sir Ralph Curtis, head of a great engineering firm, he had made his mark in the House of Commons, and he was now freely spoken of as the coming man, and the one most likely to be asked to form a ministry should the turnouts as to Mr David MacAdam's health prove well founded.

A big Rolls-Royce car was waiting for us below, and as we glided off into the darkness, I plied Poirot with questions.

'What on earth can they want us for at this time of night?' I demanded. It was past eleven.

Poirot shook his head. 'Something of the most urgent, without doubt.'

'I remember,' I said, 'that some years ago there was some rather ugly scandal about Ralph Curtis, as he then was - some jugglery with shares, I believe. In the end, he was completely exonerated; but perhaps something of the kind has arisen again?'

'It would hardly be necessary for him to send for me in the middle of the night, my friend.'

I was forced to agree, and the remainder of the journey was passed in silence. Once out of London, the powerful car forged rapidly ahead, and we arrived at Sharples in a little under the hour.

A pontifical butler conducted us at once to a small study where Lord Alloway was awaiting us. He sprang up to greet us - a tall, spare man who seemed actually to radiate power and vitality.

'M. Poirot, I am delighted to see you. It is the second time the Government has demanded your services. I remember only too well what you did for us during the war, when the Prime Minister was kidnapped in that astounding fashion. Your masterly deductions - and may I add, your discretion? - saved the situation.'

Poirot's eyes twinkled a little.

'Do I gather then, Milord, that this is another case for - discretion?'

'Most emphatically. Sir Harry and I - oh, let me introduce you - Admiral Sir Harry Weardale, our First Sea Lord - M. Poirot and - let me see, Captain -'

'Hastings,' I supplied.

'I've often heard of you, M. Poirot,' said Sir Harry, shaking hands. 'This is a most unaccountable business, and if you can solve it, we'll be extremely grateful to you.'

I liked the First Sea Lord immediately, a square, bluff sailor of the good old-fashioned type.

Poirot looked inquiringly at them both, and Alloway took up the tale.

'Of course, you understand that all this is in confidence, M. Poirot. We have had a most serious loss. The plans of the new Z type of submarine have been stolen.'

'When was that?'

'Tonight - less than three hours ago. You can appreciate perhaps, M. Poirot, the magnitude of the disaster. It is essential that the loss should not be made public. I will give you the facts as briefly as possible. My guests over the week-end were the Admiral, here, his wife and son, and a Mrs Conrad, a lady well known in London society. The ladies retired to bed early - about ten o'clock; so did Mr Leonard Weardale. Sir Harry is down here partly for the purpose of discussing the construction of this new type of submarine with me. Accordingly, I asked Mr Fitzroy, my secretary, to get out the plans from the safe in the corner there, and to arrange them ready for me, as well as various other documents that bore upon the subject in hand. While he was doing this, the Admiral and I strolled up and down the terrace, smoking cigars and enjoying the warm June air. We finished our smoke and our chat, and decided to get down to business. Just as we turned at the far end of the terrace, I fancied I saw a shadow slip out of the french window here, cross the terrace, and disappear. I paid very little attention, however. I knew Fitzroy to be in this room, and it never entered my head that anything might

be amiss. There, of course, I am to blame. Well, we retraced our steps along the terrace and entered this room by the window just as Fitzroy entered it from the hall.

'"Got everything out we are likely to need, Fitzroy?" I asked.

'"I think so, Lord Alloway. The papers are all on your desk," he answered. And then he wished us both goodnight.

'"Just wait a minute," I said, going to the desk. "I may want something I haven't mentioned."

'I looked quickly through the papers that were lying there.

'"You've forgotten the most important of the lot, Fitzroy," I said. "The actual plans of the submarine!"

'"The plans are right on top, Lord Alloway."

'"Oh no, they're not," I said, turning over the papers.

'"But I put them there not a minute ago?'

'"Well, they're not here now," I said.

'Fitzroy advanced with a bewildered expression on his face. The thing seemed incredible. We turned over the papers on the desk; we hunted through the safe; but at last we had to make up our minds to it that the papers were gone - and gone within the short

space of about three minutes while Fitzroy was absent from the room.'

'Why did he leave the room?' asked Poirot quickly.

'Just what I asked him,' exclaimed Sir Harry.

'It appears,' said Lord Alloway, 'that just when he had finished arranging the papers on my desk, he was startled by hearing a woman scream. He dashed out into the hall. On the stairs he discovered Mrs Conrad's French maid. The girl looked very white and upset, and declared that she had seen a ghost - a tall figure dressed all in white that moved without a sound. Fitzroy laughed at her fears and told her, in more or less polite language, not to be a fool. Then he returned to this room just as we entered from the window.'

'It all seems very clear,' said Poirot thoughtfully. 'The only question is, was the maid an accomplice? Did she scream by arrangement with her confederate lurking outside, or was he merely waiting there in the hope of an opportunity presenting itself? It was a man, I suppose - not a woman you saw?'

'I can't tell you, M. Poirot. It was just a - shadow.'

The Admiral gave such a peculiar snort that it could not fail to attract attention.

'M. l'Admiral has something to say, I think,' said Poirot quietly, with a slight smile. 'You saw this shadow, Sir Harry?'

'No, I didn't,' returned the other. 'And neither did Alloway. The branch of a tree flapped, or something, and then afterwards, when we discovered the theft, he leaped to the conclusion that he had seen someone pass across the terrace. His imagination played a trick on him; that's all.'

'I am not usually credited with having much imagination,' said Lord Alloway with a slight smile.

'Nonsense, we've all got imagination. We can all work ourselves up to believe that we've seen more than we have. I've had a lifetime of experience at sea, and I'll back my eyes against those of any landsman. I was looking right down the terrace, and I'd have seen the same if there was anything to see.'

He was quite excited over the matter. Poirot rose and stepped quickly to the window.

'You permit?' he asked. 'We must settle this point if possible.'

He went out upon the terrace, and we followed him. He had taken an electric torch from his pocket, and was playing the light along the edge of the grass that bordered the terrace.

'Where did he cross the terrace, Milor'?' he asked.

'About opposite the window, I should say.'

Poirot continued to play the torch for some minutes longer, walking the entire length of the terrace and back. Then he shut it off and straightened himself up.

'Sir Harry is right - and you are wrong, Milor',' he said quietly. 'It rained heavily earlier this evening. Anyone who passed over that grass could not avoid leaving footmarks. But there are none - none at all.'

His eyes went from one man's face to the other's. Lord Alloway looked bewildered and unconvinced; the Admiral expressed a noisy gratification.

'Knew I couldn't be wrong,' he declared. 'Trust my eyes anywhere.'

He was such a picture of an honest old sea-dog that I could not help smiling.

'So that brings us to the people in the house,' said Poirot smoothly. 'Let us come inside again. Now, Milor', while Mr Fitzroy was speaking to the maid on the stairs, could anyone have seized the opportunity to enter the study from the hall?'

Lord Alloway shook his head.

'Quite impossible - they would have had to pass him in order to do so.'

'And Mr Fitzroy himself - you are sure of him, eh?'

Lord Alloway flushed. 'Absolutely, M. Poirot. I will answer confidently for my secretary. It is quite impossible that he should be concerned in the matter in any way.'

'Everything seems to be impossible,' remarked Poirot rather drily. 'Possibly the plans attached to themselves a little pair of wings, and flew away - comme ça!' He blew his lips out like a comical cherub.

'The whole thing is impossible,' declared Lord Alloway impatiently. 'But I beg, M. Poirot, that you will not dream of suspecting Fitzroy. Consider for one moment - had he wished to take the plans, what could have been easier for him than to take a tracing of them without going to the trouble of stealing them?'

'There, Milor',' said Poirot with approval, 'you make a remark bien juste - I see that you have a mind orderly and methodical. L'Angleterre is happy in possessing you.'

Lord Alloway looked rather embarrassed by this sudden burst of praise. Poirot returned to the matter in hand.

'The room in which you had been sitting all the evening -'

'The drawing-room? Yes?'

'That also has a window on the terrace, since I remember your saying you went out that way. Would it not be possible for someone to come out by the drawing-room window and in by this one while Mr Fitzroy was out of the room, and return the same way?'

'But we'd have seen them,' objected the Admiral.

'Not if you had your backs turned, walking the other way.'

'Fitzroy was only out of the room a few minutes, the time it would take us to walk to the end and back.'

'No matter - it is a possibility - in fact, the only one as things stand.'

'But there was no one in the drawing-room when we went out,' said the Admiral.

'They may have come there afterwards.'

'You mean,' said Lord Alloway slowly, 'that when Fitzroy heard the maid scream and went out, someone was already concealed in the drawing-room, that they darted in and out through the windows, and only left the drawing-room when Fitzroy had returned to this room?'

'The methodical mind again,' said Poirot, bowing. 'You express the matter perfectly.'

'One of the servants, perhaps?'

'Or a guest. It was Mrs Conrad's maid who screamed. What exactly can you tell me of Mrs Conrad?'

Lord Alloway considered for a minute.

'I told you that she is a lady well known in society. That is true in the sense that she gives large parties, and goes everywhere. But very little is known as to where she really comes from, and what her past life has been. She is a lady who frequents diplomatic and Foreign Office circles as much as possible. The Secret Service is inclined to ask - why?'

'I see,' said Poirot. 'And she was asked here this week-end -'

'So that - shall we say? - we might observe her at close quarter.'

'Parfaitement! It is possible that she has turned the tables on you rather neatly.'

Lord Alloway looked discomfited, and Poirot continued:

'Tell me, Milor', was any reference made in her hearing to the subjects you and the Admiral were going to discuss together?'

'Yes,' admitted the other. 'Sir Harry said: "And now for our submarine! To work!" or something of that sort. The others had left the room, but she had come back for a book.'

'I see,' said Poirot thoughtfully. 'Milor', it is very late - but this is an urgent affair. I would like to question the members of this house-party at once if it is possible.'

'It can be managed, of course,' said Lord Alloway. 'The awkward thing is, we don't want to let it get about more than can be helped. Of course, Lady Juliet Weardale and young Leonard are all right -

but Mrs Conrad, if she is not guilty, is rather a different proposition. Perhaps you could just state that an important paper is missing, without specifying what it is, or going into any of the circumstances of the disappearance?'

'Exactly what I was about to propose myself,' said Poirot, beaming. 'In fact, in all three cases. Monsieur the Admiral will pardon me, but even the best of wives - '

'No offence,' said Sir Harry. 'All women talk, bless 'em! I wish Juliet would talk a little more and play bridge a little less. But women are like that nowadays, never happy unless they're dancing or gambling. I'll get Juliet and Leonard up, shall I, Alloway?'

'Thank you. I'll call the French maid. M. Poirot will want to see her, and she can rouse her mistress. I'll attend to it now. In the meantime, I'll send Fitzroy along.'

Mr Fitzroy was a pale, thin young man with pince-nez and a frigid expression. His statement was practically word for word what Lord Alloway had already told us.

'What is your own theory, Mr Fitzroy?'

Mr Fitzroy shrugged his shoulders.

'Undoubtedly someone who knew the hang of things was waiting his chance outside. He could see what went on through the window, and he slipped in when I left the room. It's a pity Lord

Alloway didn't give chase then and there when he saw the fellow leave.'

Poirot did not undeceive him. Instead he asked: 'Do you believe the story of the French maid - that she had seen a ghost?'

'Well, hardly, M. Poirot!'

'I mean - that she really thought so?'

'Oh, as to that, I can't say. She certainly seemed rather upset. She had her hands to her head.'

'Aha!' cried Poirot with the air of one who has made a discovery. 'Is that so indeed - and she was without doubt a pretty girl?'

'I didn't notice particularly,' said Mr Fitzroy in a repressive voice.

'You did not see her mistress, I suppose?'

'As a matter of fact, I did. She was in the gallery at the top of the steps and was calling her - "Lé onie!" Then she saw me - and of course retired.'

'Upstairs,' said Poirot, frowning.

'Of course, I realize that all this is very unpleasant for me - or rather would have been, if Lord Alloway had not chanced to see the man actually leaving. In any case, I should be glad if you would make a point of searching my room - and myself.'

'You really wish that?'

'Certainly I do.'

What Poirot would have replied I do not know, but at that moment Lord Alloway reappeared and informed us that the two ladies and Mr Leonard Weardale were in the drawing-room.

The women were in becoming negligees. Mrs Conrad wa a beautiful woman of thirty-five, with golden hair and a slight tendency to embonpoint. Lady Juliet Weardale must have been forty, tall and dark, very thin, still beautiful, with exquisite hands and feet, and a restless, haggard manner. Her son was rather an effeminate-looking young man, as great a contrast to his bluff, hearty father as could well be imagined.

Poirot gave forth the little rigmarole we had agreed upon, and then explained that he was anxious to know if anyone had heard or seen anything that night which might assist us.

Turning to Mrs Conrad first, he asked her if she would be so kind as to inform him exactly what her movements had been.

'Let me see... I went upstairs. I rang for my maid. Then, as she did not put in an appearance, I came out and called her. I could hear her talking on the stairs. After she had brushed my hair, I sent her away - she was in a very curious nervous state. I read awhile and then went to bed.'

'And you, Lady Juliet?'

'I went straight upstairs and to bed. I was very tired.'

'What about your book, dear?' asked Mrs Conrad with a sweet smile.

'My book?' Lady Juliet flushed.

'Yes, you know, when I sent Lé onie away, you were coming up the stairs. You had been down to the drawing-room for a book, you said.'

'Oh yes, I did go down. I - I forgot.'

Lady Juliet clasped her hands nervously together.

'Did you hear Mrs Conrad's maid scream, milady?'

'No - no, I didn't.'

'How curious - because you must have been in the drawing-room at the time.'

'I heard nothing,' said Lady Juliet in a firmer voice.

Poirot turned to young Leonard.

'Monsieur?'

'Nothing doing. I went straight upstairs and turned in.'

Poirot stroked his chin.

'Alas, I fear there is nothing to help me here. Mesdames and monsieur, I regret - I regret infinitely to have deranged you from your slumbers for so little. Accept my apologies, I pray of you.'

Gesticulating and apologizing, he marshalled them out. He returned with the French maid, a pretty, impudent-looking girl. Alloway and Weardale had gone out with the ladies.

'Now, mademoiselle,' said Poirot in a brisk tone, 'let us have the truth. Recount to me no histories. Why did you scream on stairs?'

'Ah, monsieur, I saw a tall figure - all in white -'

Poirot arrested her with an energetic shake of his forefinger.

'Did I not say, recount to me no histories? I will make a guess. He kissed you, did he not? M. Leonard Weardale, I mean?'

'Eh bien, monsieur, and after all, what is a kiss?'

'Under the circumstances, it is most natural,' replied Poirot gallantly. 'I myself, or Hastings here - but tell me just what occurred.'

'He came up behind me, and caught me. I was startled, and I screamed. If I had known, I would not have screamed - but he came upon me like a cat. Then came M. le secretaire. M. Leonard flew up the stairs. And what could I say? Especially to a jeune homme comme ça - tellement comme il faut? Ma foi, I invent a ghost.'

'And all is explained,' cried Poirot genially. 'You then mounted to the chamber of Madame your mistress. Which is her room, by the way?'

'It is at the end, monsieur. That way.'

'Directly over the study, then. Bien, mademoiselle, I will detain you no longer. And la prochaine fois, do not scream.'

Handing her out, he came back to me with a smile.

'An interesting case, is it not, Hastings? I begin to have a few little ideas. Et vous?'

'What was Leonard Weardale doing on the stairs? I don't like that young man, Poirot. He's a thorough young rake, I should say.'

'I agree with you, mon ami.'

'Fitzroy seems an honest fellow.'

'Lord Alloway is certainly insistent on that point.'

'And yet there is something in his manner -'

'That is almost too good to be true? I felt it myself. On the other hand, our friend Mrs Conrad is certainly not good at all.'

'And her room is over the study,' I said musingly, and keeping a sharp eye on Poirot.

He shook his head with a slight smile.

'No, mon ami, I cannot bring myself seriously to believe that that immaculate lady swarmed down the chimney, or let herself down from the balcony.'

As he spoke, the door opened, and to my great surprise, Lady Juliet Weardale flitted in.

'M. Poirot,' she said somewhat breathlessly, 'can I speak to you alone?'

'Milady, Captain Hastings is as my other self. You can speak before him as though he were a thing of no account, not there at all. Be seated, I pray you.'

She sat down, still keeping her eyes fixed on Poirot.

'What I have to say is - rather difficult. You are in charge of this case. If the - papers were to be returned, would that end the matter? I mean, could it be done without questions being asked?'

Poirot stared hard at her.

'Let me understand you, madame. They are to be placed in my hands - is that right? And I am to return them to Lord Alloway on the condition that he asks no questions as to where I got them?'

She bowed her head. 'That is what I mean. But I must be sure there will be no - publicity.'

'I do not think Lord Alloway is particularly anxious for publicity,' said Poirot grimly.

'You accept then?' she cried eagerly in response.

'A little moment, milady. It depends on how soon you can place those papers in my hands.'

'Almost immediately.'

Poirot glanced up at the clock.

'How soon, exactly?'

'Say - ten minutes,' she whispered.

'I accept, milady.'

She hurried from the room. I pursed my mouth up for a whistle.

'Can you sum up the situation for me, Hastings?'

'Bridge,' I replied succinctly.

'Ah, you remember the careless words of Monsieur the Admiral! What a memory! I felicitate you, Hastings.'

We said no more, for Lord Alloway came in, and looked inquiringly at Poirot.

'Have you any further ideas, M. Poirot? I am afraid the answer to your questions have been rather disappointing.'

'Not at all, Milor'. They have been quite sufficiently illuminating. It will be unnecessary for me to stay here any longer, and so, with your permission, I will return at once to London.'

Lord Alloway seemed dumbfounded.

'But - but what have you discovered? Do you know who took the plans?'

'Yes, Milor', I do. Tell me - in the case of the papers being returned to you anonymously, you would prosecute no further inquiry?'

Lord Alloway stared at him.

'Do you mean on payment of a sum of money?'

'No, Milor', returned unconditionally.'

'Of course, the recovery of the plans is the great thing,' said Lord Alloway slowly. He still looked puzzled and uncomprehending.

'Then I should seriously recommend you to adopt that course. Only you, the Admiral and your secretary know of the loss. Only they need know of the restitution. And you may count on me to support you in every way - lay the mystery on my shoulders. You asked me to restore the papers - I have done so. You know no more.' He rose and held out his hand. 'Milor', I am glad to have met you. I have faith in you - and your devotion to England. You will guide her destinies with a strong, sure hand.'

'M. Poirot - I swear to you that I will do my best. It may be a fault, or it may be a virtue - but I believe in myself.'

'So does every great man. Me, I am the same!' said Poirot grandiloquently.

The car came round to the door in a few minutes, and Lord Alloway bade us farewell on the steps with renewed cordiality.

'That is a great man, Hastings,' said Poirot as we drove off. 'He has brains, resource, power. He is the strong man that England needs to guide her through these difficult days of reconstruction.'

'I'm quite ready to agree with all you say, Poirot - but what about Lady Juliet? Is she to return the papers straight to Alloway? What will she think when she finds you have gone off without a word?'

'Hastings, I will ask you a little question. Why, when she was talking with me, did she not hand me the plans then and there?'

'She hadn't got them with her.'

'Perfectly. How long would it take her to fetch them from her room? Or from any hiding-place in the house? You need not answer. I will tell you. Probably about two minutes and a half! Yet she asks for ten minutes. Why? Clearly she has to obtain them from some other person, and to reason or argue with that person before they give them up. Now, what person could that be? Not Mrs Conrad, clearly, but a member of her own family, her husband or son. Which is it likely to be? Leonard Weardale said he went straight to bed. We know that to be untrue. Supposing his mother went to his room and found it empty; supposing she came down filled with a nameless dread - he is no beauty that son of hers! She does not find him, but later she hears him deny that he ever left his room. She leaps to the conclusion that he is the thief. Hence her interview with me.

'But, mon ami, we know something that Lady Juliet does not. We know that her son could not have been in the study, because he was on the stairs, making love to the pretty French maid. Although she does not know it, Leonard Weardale has an alibi.'

'Well, then, who did steal the papers? We seem to have eliminated everybody - Lady Juliet, her son, Mrs Conrad, the French maid -'

'Exactly. Use your little grey cells, my friend. The solution stares you in the face.'

I shook my head blankly.

'But yes! If you would only persevere! See, then, Fitzroy goes out of the study; he leaves the papers on the desk. A few minutes later Lord Alloway enters the room, goes to the desk, and the papers are gone. Only two things are possible: either Fitzroy did not leave the papers on the desk, but put them in his pocket - and that is not reasonable, because, as Alloway pointed out, he could have taken a tracing at his own convenience any time - or else the papers were still on the desk when Lord Alloway went to it - in which case they went into his pocket.'

'Lord Alloway the thief,' I said, dumbfounded. 'But why? Why?'

'Did you not tell me of some scandal in the past? He was exonerated, you said. But suppose, after all, it had been true? In English public life there must be no scandal. If this were raked up and proved against him now - goodbye to his political career. We will suppose that he was being blackmailed, and the price asked was the submarine plans.'

'But the man's a black traitor!' I cried.

'Oh no, he is not. He is clever and resourceful. Supposing, my friend, that he copied those plans, making - for he is a clever engineer - a slight alteration in each part which will render them quite impracticable. He hands the faked plans to the enemy's agent - Mrs Conrad, I fancy; but in order that no suspicion of their genuineness may arise, the plans must seem to be stolen. He does his best to throw no suspicion on anyone in the house, by pretending to see a man leaving the window. But there he ran up

against the obstinacy of the Admiral. So his next anxiety is that no suspicion shall fall on Fitzroy.'

'This is all guesswork on your part, Poirot,' I objected.

'It is psychology, mon ami. A man who had handed over the real plans would not be overscrupulous as to who was likely to fall under suspicion. And why was he so anxious that no details of the robbery should be given to Mrs Conrad? Because he had handed over the faked plans earlier in the evening, and did not want her to know that the theft could only have taken place later.'

'I wonder if you are right,' I said.

'Of course, I am right. I spoke to Alloway as one great man to another - and he understood perfectly. You will see.'

One thing is quite certain. On the day when Lord Alloway became Prime Minister, a cheque and a signed photograph arrived; on the photograph were the words: 'To my discreet friend, Hercule Poirot - from Alloway.'

I believe that the Z type of submarine is causing great exultation in naval circles. They say it will revolutionize modern naval warfare. I have heard that a certain foreign power essayed to construct something of the same kind and the result was a dismal failure. But I still consider that Poirot was guessing. He will do it once too often one of these days.

THE THIRD-FLOOR FLAT

'Bother!' said Pat.

With a deepening frown she rummaged wildly in the silken trifle she called an evening bag. Two young men and another girl watched her anxiously. They were all standing outside the closed door of Patricia Garnett's flat.

'It's no good,' said Pat. 'It's not there. And now what shall we do?'

'What is life without a latchkey?' murmured Jimmy Faulkener.

He was a short, broad-shouldered young man, with good-tempered blue eyes.

Pat turned on him angrily. 'Don't make jokes, Jimmy. This is serious.'

'Look again, Pat,' said Donovan Bailey. 'It must be there somewhere.'

He had a lazy, pleasant voice that matched his lean, dark figure.

'If you ever brought it out,' said the other girl, Mildred Hope.

'Of course I brought it out,' said Pat. 'I believe I gave it to one of you two.' She turned on the man accusingly. 'I told Donovan to take it for me.'

But she was not to find a scapegoat so easily. Donovan put in a firm disclaimer, and Jimmy backed him up.

'I saw you put it in your bag, myself,' said Jimmy.

'Well, then, one of you dropped it out when you picked up my bag. I've dropped it once or twice.'

'Once or twice!' said Donovan. 'You've dropped it a dozen times at least, besides leaving it behind on every possible occasion.'

'I can't see why everything on earth doesn't drop out of it the whole time,' said Jimmy.

'The point is - how are we going to get in?' said Mildred.

She was a sensible girl, who kept to the point, but she was not nearly so attractive as the impulsive and troublesome Pat.

All four of them regarded the closed door blankly.

'Couldn't the porter help?' suggested Jimmy. 'Hasn't he got a master key or something of that kind?'

Pat shook her head. There were only two keys. One was inside the flat hung up in the kitchen and the other was - or should be in the maligned bag.

'If only the flat were on the ground floor,' wailed Pat. 'We could have broken open a window or something. Donovan, you wouldn't like to be a cat burglar, would you?'

Donovan declined firmly but politely to be a cat burglar.

'A flat on the fourth floor is a bit of an undertaking,' said Jimmy.

'How about a fire-escape?' suggested Donovan.

'There isn't one.'

'There should be,' said Jimmy. 'A building five storeys high ought to have a fire escape.'

'I dare say,' said Pat. 'But what should be doesn't help us. How am I ever to get into my flat?'

'Isn't there a sort of thingummybob?' said Donovan. 'A thing the tradesmen send up chops and brussels sprouts in?'

'The service lift,' said Pat. 'Oh yes, but it's only a sort of wire-basket thing. Oh! wait - I know. What about the coal lift?'

'Now that,' said Donovan, 'is an idea.'

Mildred made a discouraging suggestion. 'It'll be bolted,' she said. 'In Pat's kitchen, I mean, on the inside.'

But the idea was instantly negatived.

'Don't you believe it,' said Donovan.

'Not in Pat's kitchen,' said Jimmy. 'Pat never locks and bolts things.'

'I don't think it's bolted,' said Pat. 'I took the dustbin off this morning, and I'm sure I never bolted it afterwards, and I don't think I've been near it since.'

'Well,' said Donovan, 'that fact's going to be very useful to us tonight, but, all the same, young Pat, let me point out to you that these slack habits are leaving you at the mercy of burglars - non-feline - every night.'

Pat disregarded these admonitions.

'Come on,' she cried, and began racing down the four flights of stairs. The others followed her. Pat led them through a dark recess, apparently full to overflowing of perambulators, and through another door into the well of the flats, and guided them to the right lift. There was, at the moment, a dustbin on it. Donovan lifted it off and stepped gingerly on to the platform in its place. He wrinkled up his nose.

'A little noisome,' he remarked. 'But what of that? Do I go alone on this venture or is anyone coming with me?'

'I'll come, too,' said Jimmy.

He stepped on by Donovan's side.

'I suppose the lift will bear me,' he added doubtfully.

'You can't weigh much more than a ton of coal,' said Pat, who had never been particularly strong on her weights-and-measures table.

'And, anyway, we shall soon find out,' said Donovan cheerfully, as he hauled on the rope.

With a grinding noise they disappeared from sight.

'This thing makes an awful noise,' remarked Jimmy, as they passed up through blackness. 'What will the people in the other flats think?'

'Ghosts or burglars, I expect,' said Donovan. 'Hauling this rope is quite heavy work. The porter of Friars Mansions does more work than I ever suspected. I say, Jimmy, old son, are you counting the floors?'

'Oh, Lord! No. I forgot about it.'

'Well, I have, which is just as well. That's the third we're passing now. The next is ours.'

'And now, I suppose,' grumbled Jimmy, 'we shall find that Pat did bolt the door after all.'

But these fears were unfounded. The wooden door swung back at a touch, and Donovan and Jimmy stepped out into the inky blackness of Pat's kitchen.

'We ought to have a torch for this wild night work,' explained Donovan. 'If I know Pat, everything's on the floor, and we shall smash endless crockery before I can get to the light switch. Don't move about, Jimmy, till I get the light on.'

He felt his way cautiously over the floor, uttering one fervent 'Damn!' as a corner of the kitchen table took him unawares in the ribs. He reached the switch, and in another moment another 'Damn!' floated out of the darkness.

'What's the matter?' asked Jimmy.

'Light won't come on. Dud bulb, I suppose. Wait a minute. I'll turn the sitting-room light on.'

The sitting-room was the door immediately across the passage. Jimmy heard Donovan go out of the door, and presently fresh muffled curses reached him. He himself edged his way cautiously across the kitchen.

'What's the matter?'

'I don't know. Rooms get bewitched at night, I believe. Everything seems to be in a different place. Chairs and tables where you least expected them. Oh, hell! Here's another!'

But at this moment Jimmy fortunately connected with the electric-light switch and pressed it down. In another minute two young men were looking at each other in silent horror.

This room was not Pat's sitting-room. They were in the wrong flat.

To begin with, the room was about ten times more crowded than Pat's, which explained Donovan's pathetic bewilderment at repeatedly cannoning into chairs and tables. There was a large round table in the centre of the room covered with a baize cloth, and there was an aspidistra in the window. It was, in fact, the kind of room whose owner, the young men felt sure, would be difficult to explain to. With silent horror they gazed down at the table, on which lay a little pile of letters.

'Mrs Ernestine Grant,' breathed Donovan, picking them up and reading the name. 'Oh, help! Do you think she's heard us?'

'It's a miracle she hasn't heard you,' said Jimmy. 'What with your language and the way you've been crashing into the furniture. Come on, for the Lord's sake, let's get out of here quickly.'

They hastily switched off the light and retraced their steps on tiptoe to the lift. Jimmy breathed a sigh of relief as they regained the fastness of its depths without further incident.

'I do like a woman to be a good, sound sleeper,' he said approvingly. 'Mrs Ernestine Grant has her points.'

'I see it now,' said Donovan; 'why we made the mistake in the floor, I mean. Out in that well we started up from the basement.' He heaved on the rope, and the lift shot up. 'We're right this time.'

'I devoutly trust we are,' said Jimmy as he stepped out into another inky void. 'My nerves won't stand many more shocks of this kind.'

But no further nerve strain was imposed. The first click of the light showed them Pat's kitchen, and in another minute they were opening the front door and admitting the two girls who were waiting outside.

'You have been a long time,' grumbled Pat. 'Mildred and I have been waiting here ages.'

'We've had an adventure,' said Donovan. 'We might have been hauled off to the police-station as dangerous malefactors.'

Pat had passed on into the sitting-room, where she switched on the light and dropped her wrap on the sofa. She listened with lively interest to Donovan's account of his adventures.

'I'm glad she didn't catch you,' she commented. 'I'm sure she's an old curmudgeon. I got a note from her this morning - wanted to see me some time - something she had to complain about - my piano, I suppose. People who don't like pianos over their heads shouldn't come and live in flats. I say, Donovan, you've hurt your hand. It's all over blood. Go and wash it under the tap.'

Donovan looked down at his hand in surprise. He went out of the room obediently and presently his voice called to Jimmy.

'Hullo,' said the other, 'what's up? You haven't hurt yourself badly, have you?'

'I haven't hurt myself at all.'

There was something so queer in Donovan's voice that Jimmy stared at him in surprise. Donovan held out his washed hand and Jimmy saw that there was no mark or cut of any kind on it.

'That's odd,' he said, frowning. 'There was quite a lot of blood. Where did it come from?' And then suddenly he realized what his quicker-witted friend had already seen. 'By Jove,' he said. 'It must have come from that flat.' He stopped, thinking over the possibilities his words implied. 'You're sure it was - er - blood?' he said. 'Not paint?'

Donovan shook his head. 'It was blood, all right,' he said, and shivered.

They looked at each other. The same thought was clearly in each of their minds. It was Jimmy who voiced it first.

'I say,' he said awkwardly. 'Do you think we ought to - well go down again - and have - a - a look around? See it's all right, you know?'

'What about the girls?'

'We won't say anything to them. Pat's going to put on an apron and make us an omelette. We'll be back by the time they wonder where we are.'

'Oh, well, come on,' said Donovan. 'I suppose we've got to go through with it. I dare say there isn't anything really wrong.' But his tone lacked conviction. They got into the lift and descended to the floor below. They found their way across the kitchen without much difficulty and once more switched on the sitting-room light.

'It must have been in here,' said Donovan, 'that - that I got the stuff on me. I never touched anything in the kitchen.'

He looked round him. Jimmy did the same, and they both frowned. Everything looked neat and commonplace and miles removed from any suggestion of violence or gore.

Suddenly Jimmy started violently and caught his companion's arm.

'Look!'

Donovan followed the pointing finger, and in his turn uttered an exclamation. From beneath the heavy rep curtains there protruded a foot - a woman's foot in a gaping patent-leather shoe.

Jimmy went to the curtains and drew them sharply apart. In the recess of the window a woman's huddled body lay on the floor, a sticky dark pool beside it. She was dead, there was no doubt of that. Jimmy was attempting to raise her up when Donovan stopped him.

'You'd better not do that. She oughtn't to be touched till the police come.'

'The police. Oh, of course. I say, Donovan, what a ghastly business. Who do you think she is? Mrs Ernestine Grant?'

'Looks like it. At any rate, if there's anyone else in the flat they're keeping jolly quiet.'

'What do we do next?' asked Jimmy. 'Run out and get a policeman or ring up from Pat's flat?'

'I should think ringing up would be best. Come on, we might as well go out the front door. We can't spend the whole night going up and down in that evil-smelling lift.'

Jimmy agreed. Just as they were passing through the door he hesitated. 'Look here; do you think one of us ought to stay - just to keep an eye on things - till the police come?'

'Yes, I think you're right. If you'll stay I'll run up and telephone.'

He ran quickly up the stairs and rang the bell of the flat above. Pat came to open it, a very pretty Pat with a flushed face and a cooking apron on. Her eyes widened in surprise.

'You? But how - Donovan, what is it? Is anything the matter?'

He took both her hands in his. 'It's all right, Pat - only we've made rather an unpleasant discovery in the flat below. A woman - dead.'

'Oh!' She gave a little gasp. 'How horrible. Has she had a fit or something?'

'No. It looks - well - it looks rather as though she had been murdered.'

'Oh, Donovan!'

'I know. It's pretty beastly.'

Her hands were still in his. She had left them there - was even clinging to him. Darling Pat - how he loved her. Did she care at all for him? Sometimes he thought she did. Sometimes he was afraid that Jimmy Faulkener - remembrances of Jimmy waiting patiently below made him start guiltily.

'Pat, dear, we must telephone to the police.'

'Monsieur is right,' said a voice behind him. 'And in the meantime, while we are waiting their arrival, perhaps I can be of some slight assistance.'

They had been standing in the doorway of the flat, and now they peered out on to the landing. A figure was standing on the stairs a little way above them. It moved down and into their range of vision.

They stood staring at a little man with a very fierce moustache and an egg-shaped head. He wore a resplendent dressing-gown and embroidered slippers. He bowed gallantly to Patricia.

'Mademoiselle!' he said. 'I am, as perhaps you know, the tenant of the flat above. I like to be up high - the air - the view over London. I take the flat in the name of Mr O'Connor. But I am not an Irishman. I have another name. That is why I venture to put myself at your service. Permit me.' With a flourish he pulled out a card and handed it to Pat. She read it.

'M. Hercule Poirot. Oh!' She caught her breath. 'The M. Poirot! The great detective? And you will really help?'

'That is my intention, mademoiselle. I nearly offered my help earlier in the evening.'

Pat looked puzzled.

'I heard you discussing how to gain admission to your flat. Me, I am very clever at picking locks. I could, without doubt, have opened your door for you, but I hesitated to suggest it. You would have had the grave suspicions of me.'

Pat laughed.

'Now, monsieur,' said Poirot to Donovan. 'Go in, I pray of you, and telephone to the police. I will descend to the flat below.'

Pat came down the stairs with him. They found Jimmy on guard, and Pat explained Poirot's presence. Jimmy, in his turn, explained to Poirot his and Donovan's adventures. The detective listened attentively.

'The lift door was unbolted, you say? You emerged into the kitchen, but the light it would not turn on.'

He directed his footsteps to the kitchen as he spoke. His fingers pressed the switch.

'Tiens! Voilà ce qui est curieux!' he said as the light flashed on. 'It functions perfectly now. I wonder -'

He held up a finger to ensure silence and listened. A faint sound broke the stillness - the sound of an unmistakable snore.

'Ah!' said Poirot. 'La chambre de domestique.'

He tiptoed across the kitchen into a little pantry, out of which led a door. He opened the door and switched on the light. The room was the kind of dog kennel designed by the builders of flats to accommodate a human being. The floor space was almost entirely occupied by the bed. In the bed was a rosy-cheeked girl lying on her back with her mouth wide-open, snoring placidly.

Poirot switched off the light and beat a retreat.

'She will not wake,' he said. 'We will let her sleep till the police come.'

He went back to the sitting-room. Donovan had joined them.

'The police will be here almost immediately, they say,' he said breathlessly. 'We are to touch nothing.'

Poirot nodded. 'We will not touch,' he said. 'We will look, that is all.'

He moved into the room. Mildred had come down with Donovan, and all four young people stood in the doorway and watched him with breathless interest.

'What I can't understand, sir, is this,' said Donovan. 'I never went near the window - how did the blood come on my hand?'

'My young friend, the answer to that stares you in the face. Of what colour is the tablecloth? Red, is it not? and doubtless you did put your hand on the table.'

'Yes, I did. Is that -' He stopped.

Poirot nodded. He was bending over the table. He indicated with his hand a dark patch on the red.

'It was here that the crime was committed,' he said solemnly. 'The body was moved afterwards.'

Then he stood upright and looked slowly round the room. He did not move, he handled nothing, but nevertheless the four watching felt

as though every object in that rather frowsty place gave up its secret to his observant eye.

Hercule Poirot nodded his head as though satisfied. A little sigh escaped him. 'I see,' he said.

'You see what?' asked Donovan curiously.

'I see,' said Poirot, 'what you doubtless felt - that the room is overfull of furniture.'

Donovan smiled ruefully. 'I did go barging about a bit,' he confessed. 'Of course, everything was in a different place to Pat's room, and I couldn't make it out.'

'Not everything,' said Poirot.

Donovan looked at him inquiringly.

'I mean,' said Poirot apologetically, 'that certain things are alway fixed. In a block of flats the door, the window, the fireplace - they are in the same place in the rooms which are below each other.'

'Isn't that rather splitting hairs?' asked Mildred. She was looking at Poirot with faint disapproval.

'One should always speak with absolute accuracy. That is a little - how do you say? - fad of mine.'

There was the noise of footsteps on the stairs, and three men came in. They were a police inspector, a constable, and the divisional surgeon. The inspector recognized Poirot and greeted him in an almost reverential manner. Then he turned to the others.

'I shall want statements from everyone,' he began, 'but in the first place -'

Poirot interrupted. 'A little suggestion. We will go back to the flat upstairs and mademoiselle here shall do what she was planning to do - make us an omelette. Me, I have a passion for the omelettes. Then, M. l'Inspecteur, when you have finished here, you will mount to us and ask questions at your leisure.'

It was arranged accordingly, and Poirot went up with them.

'M. Poirot,' said Pat, 'I think you're a perfect dear. And you shall have a lovely omelette. I really make omelettes frightfully well.'

'That is good. Once, mademoiselle, I loved a beautiful young English girl, who resembled you greatly - but alas! - she could not cook. So perhaps everything was for the best.'

There was a faint sadness in his voice, and Jimmy Faulkener looked at him curiously.

Once in the flat, however, he exerted himself to please and amuse. The grim tragedy below was almost forgotten.

The omelette had been consumed and duly praised by the time that Inspector Rice's footsteps were heard. He came in accompanied by the doctor, having left the constable below.

'Well, Monsieur Poirot,' he said. 'It all seems clear and above-board - not much in your line, though we may find it hard to catch the man. I'd just like to hear how the discovery came to be made.'

Donovan and Jimmy between them recounted the happenings of the evening. The inspector turned reproachfully to Pat.

'You shouldn't leave your lift door unbolted, miss. You really shouldn't.'

'I shan't again,' said Pat, with a shiver. 'Somebody might come in and murder me like that poor woman below.'

'Ah, but they didn't come in that way, though,' said the inspector.

'You will recount to us what you have discovered, yes?' said Poirot.

'I don't know as I ought to - but seeing it's you, M. Poirot -'

'Pré cisé ment,' said Poirot. 'And these young people - they will be discreet.'

'The newspapers will get hold of it, anyway, soon enough,' said the inspector. 'There's no real secret about the matter. Well, the dead woman's Mrs Grant, all right. I had the porter up to identify her. Woman of about thirty-five. She was sitting at the table, and she

was shot with an automatic pistol of small calibre, probably by someone sitting opposite her at table. She fell forward, and that's how the bloodstain came on the table.'

'But wouldn't someone have heard the shot?' asked Mildred.

'The pistol was fitted with a silencer. No, you wouldn't hear anything. By the way, did you hear the screech the maid let out when we told her her mistress was dead? No. Well, that just shows how unlikely it was that anyone would hear the other.'

'Has the maid no story to tell?' asked Poirot.

'It was her evening out. She's got her own key. She came in about ten o'clock. Everything was quiet. She thought her mistress had gone to bed.'

'She did not look in the sitting-room, then?'

'Yes, she took the letters in there which had come by the evening post, but she saw nothing unusual - any more than Mr Faulkener and Mr Bailey did. You see, the murderer had concealed the body rather neatly behind the curtains.'

'But it was a curious thing to do, don't you think?'

Poirot's voice was very gentle, yet it held something that made the inspector look up quickly.

'Didn't want the crime discovered till he'd had time to make his getaway.'

'Perhaps, perhaps - but continue with what you were saying.'

'The maid went out at five o'clock. The doctor here puts the time of death as - roughly - about four to five hours ago. That's right, isn't it?'

The doctor, who was a man of few words, contented himself with jerking his head affirmatively.

'It's a quarter to twelve now. The actual time can, I think, be narrowed down to a fairly definite hour.'

He took out a crumpled sheet of paper.

'We found this in the pocket of the dead woman's dress. You needn't be afraid of handling it. There are no fingerprints on it.'

Poirot smoothed out the sheet. Across it some words were printed in small, prim capitals.

I WILL COME TO SEE YOU THIS EVENING AT HALF PAST SEVEN. - J.F.

'A compromising document to leave behind,' commented Poirot, as he handed it back.

'Well, he didn't know she'd got it in her pocket,' said the inspector. 'He probably thought she'd destroyed it. We've evidence that he was a careful man, though. The pistol she was shot with we found under the body - and there again no fingerprints. They'd been wiped off very carefully with a silk handkerchief.'

'How do you know,' said Poirot, 'that it was a silk handkerchief?'

'Because we found it,' said the inspector triumphantly. 'At the last, as he was drawing the curtains, he must have let it fall unnoticed.'

He handed across a big white silk handkerchief - a good-quality handkerchief. It did not need the inspector's finger to draw Poirot's attention to the mark on it in the centre. It was neatly marked and quite legible. Poirot read the name out.

'John Fraser.'

'That's it,' said the inspector. 'John Fraser - J.F. in the note. We know the name of the man we have to look for, and I dare say when we find out a little about the dead woman, and her relations come forward, we shall soon get a line on him.'

'I wonder,' said Poirot. 'No, mon cher, somehow I do not think he will be easy to find, your John Fraser. He is a strange man - careful, since he marks his handkerchiefs and wipes the pistol with which he has committed the crime - yet careless since he loses his handkerchief and does not search for a letter that might incriminate him.'

'Flurried, that's what he was,' said the inspector.

'It is possible,' said Poirot. 'Yes, it is possible. And he was not seen entering the building?'

'There are all sorts of people going in and out at the time. These are big blocks. I suppose none of you -' he addressed the four collectively - 'saw anyone coming out of the flat?'

Pat shook her head. 'We went out earlier - about seven o'clock.'

'I see.' The inspector rose. Poirot accompanied him to the door.

'As a little favour, may I examine the flat below?'

'Why, certainly, M. Poirot. I know what they think of you at headquarters. I'll leave you a key. I've got two. It will be empty. The maid cleared out to some relatives, too scared to stay there alone.'

'I thank you,' said M. Poirot. He went back into the flat, thoughtful.

'You're not satisfied, M. Poirot?' said Jimmy.

'No,' said Poirot. 'I am not satisfied.'

Donovan looked at him curiously. 'What is it that - well, worries you?'

Poirot did not answer. He remained silent for a minute or two, frowning, as though in thought, then he made a sudden impatient movement of shoulders.

'I will say good night to you, mademoiselle. You must be tired You have had much cooking to do - eh?'

Pat laughed. 'Only the omelette. I didn't do dinner. Donovan and Jimmy came and called for us, and we went out to a little place in Soho.'

'And then without doubt, you went to a theatre?'

'Yes. The Brown Eyes of Caroline.'

'Ah!' said Poirot. 'It should have been blue eyes - the blue eyes of mademoiselle.'

He made a sentimental gesture, and then once more wished Pat good night, also Mildred, who was staying the night by special request, as Pat admitted frankly that she would get the horrors, if left alone on this particular night.

The two young men accompanied Poirot. When the door was shut, and they were preparing to say goodbye to him on the landing, Poirot forestalled them.

'My young friends, you heard me say that I was not satisfied! Eh bien, it is true - I am not. I go now to make some little investigations of my own. You would like to accompany me - yes?'

An eager assent greeted this proposal. Poirot led the way to the flat below and inserted the key the inspector had given him in the lock. On entering, he did not, as the others had expected, enter the sitting-room. Instead he went straight to the kitchen. In a little recess which served as a scullery a big iron bin was standing. Poirot uncovered this and, doubling himself up, began to rootle in it with the energy of a ferocious terrier.

Both Jimmy and Donovan stared at him in amazement.

Suddenly with a cry of triumph he emerged. In his hand he held aloft a small stoppered bottle.

'Voilà!' he said. 'I find what I seek.' He sniffed at it delicately. 'Alas! I am enrhumé - I have the cold in the head.'

Donovan took the bottle from him and sniffed in his turn, but could smell nothing. He took out the stopper and held the bottle to his nose before Poirot's warning cry could stop him.

Immediately he fell like a log. Poirot, by springing forward, partly broke his fall.

'Imbecile!' he cried. 'The idea. To remove the stopper in that foolhardy manner! Did he not observe how delicately I handled it? Monsieur - Faulkener - is it not? Will you be so good as to get me a little brandy? I observed a decanter in the sitting-room.'

Jimmy hurried off, but by the time he returned, Donovan was sitting up and declaring himself quite all right again. He had to listen to a short lecture from Poirot on the necessity of caution in sniffing at possibly poisonous substances.

'I think I'll be off home,' said Donovan, rising shakily to his feet. 'That is, if I can't be any more use here. I feel a bit wonky still.'

'Assuredly,' said Poirot. 'That is the best thing you can do. M. Faulkener, attend me here a little minute. I will return on the instant.'

He accompanied Donovan to the door and beyond. They remained outside on the landing talking for some minutes. When Poirot at last re-entered the flat he found Jimmy standing in the sitting-room gazing round him with puzzled eyes.

'Well, M. Poirot,' he said, 'what next?'

'There is nothing next. The case is finished.'

'What?'

'I know everything - now.'

Jimmy stared at him. 'That little bottle you found?'

'Exactly. That little bottle.'

Jimmy shook his head. 'I can't make head or tail of it. For some reason or other I can see you are dissatisfied with the evidence against this John Fraser, whoever he may be.'

'Whoever he may be,' repeated Poirot softly. 'If he is anyone at all - well, I shall be surprised.'

'I don't understand.'

'He is a name - that is all - a name carefully marked on a handkerchief!'

'And the letter?'

'Did you notice that it was printed? Now, why? I will tell you. Handwriting might be recognized, and a typewritten letter is more easily traced than you would imagine - but if a real John Fraser wrote that letter those two points would not have appealed to him! No, it was written on purpose, and put in the dead woman's pocket for us to find. There is no such person as John Fraser.'

Jimmy looked at him inquiringly.

'And so,' went on Poirot, 'I went back to the point that first struck me. You heard me say that certain things in a room were always in the same place under given circumstances. I gave three instances. I might have mentioned a fourth - the electric-light switch, my friend.'

Jimmy still stared uncomprehendingly. Poirot went on.

'Your friend Donovan did not go near the window - it was by resting his hand on this table that he got it covered in blood! But I asked myself at once - why did he rest it there? What was he doing groping about this room in darkness? For remember, my friend, the electric-light switch is always in the same place - by the door. Why, when he came to this room, did he not at once feel for the light and turn it on? That was the natural, the normal thing to do. According to him, he tried to turn on the light in the kitchen, but failed. Yet when I tried the switch it was in perfect working order. Did he, then, not wish the light to go on just then? If it had gone on you would both have seen at once that you were in the wrong flat. There would have been no reason to come into this room.'

'What are you driving at, M. Poirot? I don't understand. What do you mean?'

'I mean - this.'

Poirot held up a Yale door key.

'The key of this flat?'

'No, mon ami, the key of the flat above. Mademoiselle Patricia's key, which M. Donovan Bailey abstracted from her bag some time during the evening.'

'But why - why?'

'Parbleu! So that he could do what he wanted to do - gain admission to this flat in a perfectly unsuspicious manner. He made sure that the lift door was unbolted earlier in the evening.'

'Where did you get the key?'

Poirot's smile broadened. 'I found it just now - where I looked for it - in M. Donovan's pocket. See you, that little bottle I pretended to find was a ruse. M. Donovan is taken in. He does what I knew he would do - unstoppers it and sniffs. And in that little bottle is ethyl chloride, a very powerful instant anaesthetic. It gives me just the moment or two of unconsciousness I need. I take from his pocket the two things that I knew would be there. This key was one of them - the other -'

He stopped and then went on.

'I questioned at the time the reason the inspector gave for the body being concealed behind the curtain. To gain time? No, there was more than that. And so I thought of just one thing - the post, my friend. The evening post that comes at half past nine or thereabouts. Say the murderer does not find something he expects to find, but that something may be delivered by post later. Clearly, then, he must come back. But the crime must not be discovered by the maid when she comes in, or the police would take possession of the flat, so he hides the body behind the curtain. And the maid suspects nothing and lays the letters on the table as usual.'

'The letters?'

'Yes, the letters.' Poirot drew something from his pocket. 'This is the second article I took from M. Donovan when he was unconscious.' He showed the superscription - a typewritten envelope addressed to Mrs Ernestine Grant. 'But I will ask you one thing first, M. Faulkener, before we look at the contents of this letter. Are you or are you not in love with Mademoiselle Patricia?'

'I care for Pat damnably - but I've never thought I had a chance.'

'You thought that she cared for M. Donovan? It may be that she had begun to care for him - but it was only a beginning, my friend. It is for you to make her forget - to stand by her in her trouble.'

'Trouble?' said Jimmy sharply.

'Yes, trouble. We will do all we can to keep her name out of it, but it will be impossible to do so entirely. She was, you see, the motive.'

He ripped open the envelope that he held. An enclosure fell out. The covering letter was brief, and was from a firm of solicitors.

Dear Madam,

The document you enclose is quite in order, and the fact of the marriage having taken place in a foreign country does not invalidate it in any way.

Yours truly, etc.

Poirot spread out the enclosure. It was a certificate of marriage between Donovan Bailey and Ernestine Grant, dated eight years go.

'Oh, my God!' said Jimmy. 'Pat said she'd had a letter from the woman asking to see her, but she never dreamed it was anything important.'

Poirot nodded. 'M. Donovan knew - he went to see his wife this evening before going to the flat above - a strange irony, by the way, that led the unfortunate woman to come to this building where her rival lived - he murdered her in cold blood, and then went on to his evening's amusement. His wife must have told him that she had sent the marriage certificate to her solicitors and was expecting to hear from them. Doubtless he himself had tried to make her believe that there was a flaw in the marriage.'

'He seemed in quite good spirits, too, all the evening. M. Poirot, you haven't let him escape?' Jimmy shuddered.

'There is no escape for him,' said Poirot gravely. 'You need not fear.'

'It's Pat I'm thinking about mostly,' said Jimmy. 'You don't think - she really cared.'

'Mon ami, that is your part,' said Poirot gently. 'To make her turn to you and forget. I do not think you will find it very difficult!'

DOUBLE SIN

I had called in at my friend Poirot's rooms to find him sadly overworked. So much had he become the rage that every rich woman who had mislaid a bracelet or lost a pet kitten rushed to secure the services of the great Hercule Poirot. My little friend was a strange mixture of Flemish thrift and artistic fervor. He accepted many cases in which he had little interest owing to the first instinct being predominant.

He also undertook cases in which there was a little or no monetary reward sheerly because the problem involved interested him. The result was that, as I say, he was overworking himself. He admitted as much himself, and I found little difficulty in persuading him to accompany me for a week's holiday to that well-known South Coast resort, Ebermouth.

We had spent four very agreeable days when Poirot came to me, an open letter in his hand.

"Mon ami, you remember my friend Joseph Aarons, the theatrical agent?"

I assented after a moment's thought. Poirot's friends are so many and so varied, and range from dustmen to dukes.

"Eh bien, Hastings, Joseph Aarons finds himself at Charlock Bay. He is far from well, and there is a little affair that it seems is worrying him. He begs me to go over and see him. I think, mon ami, that I must accede to his request. He is a faithful friend, the good Joseph Aarons, and has done much to assist me in the past."

"Certainly, if you think so," I said. "I believe Charlock Bay is a beautiful spot, and as it happens I've never been there."

"Then we combine business with pleasure," said Poirot. "You will inquire the trains, yes?"

"It will probably mean a change or two," I said with a grimace. "You know what these cross-country lines are. To go from the South Devon coast to the North Devon coast is sometimes a day's journey."

However, on inquiry, I found that the journey could be accomplished by only one change at Exeter and that the trains were good. I was hastening back to Poirot with the information when I happened to pass the offices of the Speedy cars and saw written up:

Tomorrow. All-day excursion to Charlock Bay. Starting 8:30 through some of the most beautiful scenery in Devon.

I inquired a few particulars and returned to the hotel full of enthusiasm. Unfortunately, I found it hard to make Poirot share my feelings.

"My friend, why this passion for the motor coach? The train, see you, it is sure? The tires, they do not burst; the accidents, they do not happen. One is not incommoded by too much air. The windows can be shut and no drafts admitted."

I hinted delicately that the advantage of fresh air was what attracted me most to the motor-coach scheme.

"And if it rains? Your English climate is so uncertain."

"There's a hood and all that. Besides, if it rains badly, the excursion doesn't take place."

"Ah!" said Poirot. "Then let us hope that it rains."

"Of course, if you feel like that and..."

"No, no, man ami. I see that you have set your heart on the trip. Fortunately, I have my great coat with me and two mufflers." He sighed. "But shall we have sufficient time at Charlock Bay?"

"Well, I'm afraid it means staying the night there. You see, the tour goes round by Dartmoor. We have lunch at Monkhampton. We arrive at Char lock Bay about four o'clock, and the coach starts back at five, arriving here at ten o'clock."

"So!" said Poirot. "And there are people who do this for pleasure! We shall, of course, get a reduction of the fare since we do not make the return journey?"

"I hardly think that's likely."

"You must insist."

"Come now, Poirot, don't be mean. You know you're coining money."

"My friend, it is not the meanness. It is the business sense. If I were a millionaire, I would pay only what was just and right."

As I had foreseen, however, Poirot was doomed to fail in this respect. The gentleman who issued tickets at the Speedy office was calm and unimpassioned but adamant. His point was that we ought to return. He even implied that we ought to pay extra for the privilege of leaving the coach at Charlock Bay.

Defeated, Poirot paid over the required sum and left the office.

"The English, they have no sense of money," he grumbled. "Did you observe a young man, Hastings, who paid over the full fare and yet mentioned his intention of leaving the coach at Monkhampton?"

"I don't think I did. As a matter of fact..."

"You were observing the pretty young lady who booked No.5, the next seat to ours. Ah! Yes, my friend, I saw you. And that is why

when I was on the point of taking seats No. 13 and 14 - which are in the middle and as well sheltered as it is possible to be - you rudely pushed yourself forward and said that 3 and 4 would be better."

"Really, Poirot," I said, blushing.

"Auburn hair - always the auburn hair!"

"At any rate, she was more worth looking at than an odd young man."

"That depends upon the point of view. To me, the young man was interesting."

Something rather significant in Poirot's tone made me look at him quickly. "Why? What do you mean?"

"Oh! Do not excite yourself. Shall I say that he interested me because he was trying to grow a mustache and as yet the result is poor." Poirot stroked his own magnificent mustache tenderly. "It is an art," he murmured, "the growing of the mustache! I have sympathy for all who attempt it."

It is always difficult with Poirot to know when he is serious and when he is merely amusing himself at one's expense. I judged it safest to say no more.

The following morning dawned bright and sunny. A really glorious day! Poirot, however, was taking no chances. He wore a woolly waistcoat, a mackintosh, a heavy overcoat, and two mufflers, in

addition to wearing his thickest suit. He also swallowed two tablets of "Antigrippe" before starting and packed a further supply.

We took a couple of small suitcases with us. The pretty girl we had noticed the day before had a small suitcase, and so did the young man whom I gathered to have been the object of Poirot's sympathy. Otherwise, there was no luggage. The four pieces were stowed away by the driver, and we all took our places.

Poirot, rather maliciously, I thought, assigned me the outside place as "I had the mania for the fresh air" and himself occupied the seat next to our fair neighbor. Presently, however, he made amends. The man in seat 6 was a noisy fellow, inclined to be facetious and boisterous, and Poirot asked the girl in a low voice if she would like to change seats with him. She agreed gratefully, and, the change having been effected, she entered into conversation with us and we were soon all three chattering together merrily.

She was evidently quite young, not more than nineteen, and as ingenuous as a child. She soon confided to us the reason of her trip. She was going, it seemed, on business for her aunt who kept a most interesting antique shop in Ebermouth.

This aunt had been left in very reduced circumstances on the death of her father and had used her small capital and a houseful of beautiful things which her father had left to start in business. She had been extremely successful and had made quite a name for herself in the trade. This girl, Mary Durrant, had come to be with her aunt and learn the business and was very excited about it - much

preferring it to the other alternative - becoming a nursery governess or companion.

Poirot nodded interest and approval to all this.

"Mademoiselle will be successful, I am sure," he said gallantly. "But I will give her a little word of advice. Do not be too trusting, mademoiselle. Everywhere in the world there are rogues and vagabonds, even it may be on this very coach of ours. One should always be on the guard, suspicious!"

She stared at him open-mouthed, and he nodded sapiently.

"But yes, it is as I say. Who knows? Even I who speak to you may be a malefactor of the worst description."

And he twinkled more than ever at her surprised face.

We stopped for lunch at Monkhampton, and, after a few words with the waiter, Poirot managed to secure us a small table for three close by the window. Outside, in a big courtyard, about twenty char-a-bancs were parked - char-a-bancs which had come from all over the county. The hotel dining room was full, and the noise was rather considerable.

"One can have altogether too much of the holiday spirit," I said with a grimace.

Mary Durrant agreed. "Ebermouth is quite spoiled in the summers nowadays. My aunt says it used to be quite different. Now one can hardly get along the pavements for the crowd."

"But it is good for business, mademoiselle."

"Not for ours particularly. We sell only rare and valuable things. We do not go in for cheap bric-a-brac. My aunt has clients all over England. If they want a particular period table or chair, or a certain piece of china, they write to her, and, sooner or later, she gets it for them. That is what has happened in this case."

We looked interested and she went on to explain. A certain American gentleman, Mr J. Baker Wood, was a connoisseur and collector of miniatures. A very valuable set of miniatures had recently come into the market, and Miss Elizabeth Penn - Mary's aunt - had purchased them. She had written to Mr Wood describing the miniatures and naming a price. He had replied at once, saying that he was prepared to purchase if the miniatures were as represented and asking that someone should be sent with them for him to see where he was staying at Charlock Bay. Miss Durrant had accordingly been dispatched, acting as representative for the firm.

"They're lovely things, of course," she said. "But I can't imagine anyone paying all that money for them. Five hundred pounds! Just think of it! They're by Cosway. Is it Cosway I mean? I get so mixed up in these things."

Poirot smiled. "You are not yet experienced, eh, mademoiselle?"

"I've had no training," said Mary ruefully. "We weren't brought up to know about old things. It's a lot to learn."

She sighed. Then suddenly, I saw her eyes widen in surprise. She was sitting facing the window, and her glance now was directed out of that window, into the courtyard. With a hurried word, she rose from her seat and almost ran out of the room. She returned in a few moments, breathless and apologetic.

"I'm so sorry rushing off like that. But I thought I saw a man taking my suitcase out of the coach. I went flying after him, and it turned out to be his own. It's one almost exactly like mine. I felt like such a fool. It looked as though I were accusing him of stealing it."

She laughed at the idea.

Poirot, however, did not laugh. "What man was it, mademoiselle? Describe him to me."

"He had on a brown suit. A thin weedy young man with a very indeterminate mustache."

"Aha," said Poirot. "Our friend of yesterday, Hastings. You know this young man, mademoiselle. You have seen him before?"

"No, never. Why?"

"Nothing. It is rather curious - that is all."

He relapsed into silence and took no further part in the conversation until something Mary Durrant said caught his attention.

"Eh, mademoiselle, what is that you say?"

"I said that on my return journey I should have to be careful of 'malefactors,' as you call them. I believe Mr Wood always pays for things in cash. If I have five hundred pounds in notes on me, I shall be worth some malefactor's attention."

She laughed but again Poirot did not respond. Instead, he asked her what hotel she proposed to stay at in Charlock Bay.

"The Anchor Hotel. It is small and not expensive, but quite good."

"So!" said Poirot. "The Anchor Hotel. Precisely where Hastings here has made up his mind to stay. How odd!"

He twinkled at me.

"You are staying long in Charlock Bay?" asked Mary.

"One night only. I have business there. You could not guess, I am sure, what my profession is, mademoiselle?"

I saw Mary consider several possibilities and reject them - probably from a feeling of caution. At last, she hazarded the suggestion that Poirot was a conjurer. He was vastly entertained.

"Ah! But it is an idea, that! You think I take the rabbits out of the hat? No, mademoiselle. Me, I am the opposite of a conjurer. The conjurer, he makes things disappear. Me, I make things that have disappeared, reappear." He leaned forward dramatically so as to give the words full effect. "It is a secret, mademoiselle, but I will tell you, I am a detective!"

He leaned back in his chair pleased with the effect he had created. Mary Durrant stared at him spellbound. But any further conversation was barred for the braying of various horns outside announced that the road monsters were ready to proceed.

As Poirot and I went out together I commented on the charm of our luncheon companion. Poirot agreed.

"Yes, she is charming. But, also rather silly?"

"Silly?"

"Do not be outraged. A girl may be beautiful and have auburn hair and yet be silly. It is the height of foolishness to take two strangers into her confidence as she has done."

"Well, she could see we were all right."

"That is imbecile, what you say, my friend. Anyone who knows his job - naturally he will appear 'all right.' That little one she talked of being careful when she would have five hundred pounds in money with her. But she has five hundred pounds with her now."

"In miniatures."

"Exactly. In miniatures. And between one and the other, there is no great difference, mon ami."

"But no one knows about them except us."

"And the waiter and the people at the next table. And, doubtless, several people in Ebermouth! Mademoiselle Durrant, she is charming, but, if I were Miss Elizabeth Penn, I would first of all instruct my new assistant in the common sense." He paused and then said in a different voice: "You know, my friend, it would be the easiest thing in the world to remove a suitcase from one of those char-a-bancs while we were all at luncheon."

"Oh! Come, Poirot, somebody will be sure to see."

"And what would they see? Somebody removing his luggage. It would be done in an open and aboveboard manner, and it would be nobody's business to interfere."

"Do you mean - Poirot, are you hinting - But that fellow in the brown suit - it was his own suitcase?"

Poirot frowned. "So it seems. All the same, it is curious, Hastings, that he should have not removed his suitcase before, when the car first arrived. He has not lunched here, you notice."

"If Miss Durrant hadn't been sitting opposite the window, she wouldn't have seen him," I said slowly.

"And since it was his own suitcase, that would not have mattered," said Poirot. "So let us dismiss it from our thoughts, mon ami."

Nevertheless, when we had resumed our places and were speeding along once more, he took the opportunity of giving Mary Durrant a further lecture on the dangers of indiscretion which she received meekly enough but with the air of thinking it all rather a joke.

We arrived at Charlock Bay at four o'clock and were fortunate enough to be able to get rooms at the Anchor Hotel - a charming old-world inn in one of the side streets.

Poirot had just unpacked a few necessaries and was applying a little cosmetic to his mustache preparatory to going out to call upon Joseph Aarons when there came a frenzied knocking at the door. I called "Come in," and, to my utter amazement, Mary Durrant appeared, her face white and large tears standing in her eyes.

"I do beg your pardon - but - but the most awful thing has happened. And you did say you were a detective?" This to Poirot.

"What has happened, mademoiselle?"

"I opened my suitcase. The miniatures were in a crocodile dispatch case - locked, of course. Now, look!"

She held out a small square crocodile-covered case. The lid hung loose. Poirot took it from her. The case had been forced; great

strength must have been used. The marks were plain enough. Poirot examined it and nodded.

"The miniatures?" he asked, though we both knew the answer well enough.

"Gone. They've been stolen. Oh! What shall I do?"

"Don't worry," I said. "My friend is Hercule Poirot. You must have heard of him. He'll get them back for you if anyone can."

"Monsieur Poirot. The great Monsieur Poirot."

Poirot was vain enough to be pleased at the obvious reverence in her voice. "Yes, my child," he said. "It is I, myself. And you can leave your little affair in my hands. I will do all that can be done. But I fear - I much fear - that it will be too late. Tell me, was the lock of your suitcase forced also?"

She shook her head.

"Let me see it, please."

We went together to her room, and Poirot examined the suitcase closely. It had obviously been opened with a key.

"Which is simple enough. These suitcase locks are all much of the same pattern. Eh, bien, we must ring up the police and we must also get in touch with Mr Baker Wood as soon as possible. I will attend to that myself."

I went with him and asked what he meant by saying it might be too late. "Mon cher, I said today that I was the opposite of the conjurer - that I make the disappearing things reappear - but suppose someone has been beforehand with me. You do not understand? You will in a minute."

He disappeared into the telephone box. He came out five minutes later looking very grave. "It is as I feared. A lady called upon Mr Wood with the miniatures half an hour ago. She represented herself as coming from Miss Elizabeth Penn. He was delighted with the miniatures and paid for them forthwith."

"Half an hour ago - before we arrived here."

Poirot smiled rather enigmatically. "The Speedy cars are quite speedy, but a fast motor from say, Monkhampton would get here a good hour ahead of them at least."

"And what do we do now?"

"The good Hastings - always practical. We inform the police, do all we can for Miss Durrant, and - yes, I think decidedly, we have an interview with Mr J. Baker Wood."

We carried out this program. Poor Mary Durrant was terribly upset, fearing her aunt would blame her.

"Which she probably will," observed Poirot, as we set out for the Seaside Hotel where Mr Wood was staying. "And with perfect

justice. The idea of leaving five hundred pounds' worth of valuables in a suitcase and going to lunch! All the same, mon ami, there are one or two curious points about the case. That dispatch box, for instance, why was it forced?"

"To get out the miniatures."

"But was not that a foolishness? Say our thief is tampering with the luggage at lunch time under the pretext of getting out his own. Surely it is much simpler to open the suitcase, transfer the dispatch case unopened to his own suitcase, and get away, than to waste the time forcing the lock?"

"He had to make sure the miniatures were inside."

Poirot did not look convinced, but, as we were just being shown into Mr Wood's suite, we had no time for more discussion.

I took an immediate dislike to Mr Baker Wood.

He was a large vulgar man, very much overdressed and wearing a diamond solitaire ring. He was blustering and noisy.

Of course, he'd not suspected anything amiss? Why should he? The woman said she had the miniatures all right. Very fine specimens, too! Had he the numbers of the notes? No, he hadn't. And who was Mr - er - Poirot, anyway, to come asking him all these questions?

"I will not ask you anything more, monsieur, except for one thing. A description of the woman who called upon you. Was she young and pretty?"

"No, sir, she was not. Most emphatically not. A tall woman, middle-aged, grey hair, blotchy complexion and a budding mustache. A siren? Not on your life."

"Poirot," I cried, as we took our departure. "A mustache. Did you hear?"

"I have the use of my ears, thank you, Hastings."

"But what a very unpleasant man."

"He has not the charming manner, no."

"Well, we ought to get the thief all right," I remarked. "We can identify him."

"You are of such a naive simplicity, Hastings. Do you not know that there is such a thing as an alibi?"

"You think he will have an alibi?"

Poirot replied unexpectedly: "I sincerely hope so."

"The trouble with you is," I said, "that you like a thing to be difficult."

"Quite right, mon ami. I do not like - how do you say it - the bird who sits!"

Poirot's prophecy was fully justified. Our traveling companion in the brown suit turned out to be a Mr Norton Kane. He had gone straight to the Gorge Hotel at Monkhampton and had been there during the afternoon. The only evidence against him was that of Miss Durrant who declared that she had seen him getting out his luggage from the car while we were at lunch.

"Which in itself is not a suspicious act," said Poirot meditatively.

After that remark, he lapsed into silence and refused to discuss the matter any further, saying when I pressed him, that he was thinking of mustaches in general, and that I should be well advised to do the same.

I discovered, however, that he had asked Joseph Aarons - with whom he spent the evening - to give him every detail possible about Mr Baker Wood. As both men were staying at the same hotel, there was a chance of gleaning some stray crumbs of information. Whatever Poirot learned, he kept to himself, however.

Mary Durrant, after various interviews with the police, had returned to Ebermouth by an early morning train. We lunched with Joseph Aarons, and, after lunch, Poirot announced to me that he had settled the theatrical agent's problem satisfactorily, and that we could return to Ebermouth as soon as we liked. "But not by road, mon ami; we go by rail this time."

"Are you afraid of having your pocket picked, or of meeting another damsel in distress?"

"Both those affairs, Hastings, might happen to me on the train. No, I am in haste to be back in Ebermouth, because I want to proceed with our case."

"Our case?"

"But, yes, my friend. Mademoiselle Durrant appealed to me to help her. Because the matter is now in the hands of the police, it does not follow that I am free to wash my hands of it. I came here to oblige an old friend, but it shall never be said of Hercule Poirot that he deserted a stranger in need!" And he drew himself up grandiloquently.

"I think you were interested before that," I said shrewdly. "In the office of cars, when you first caught sight of that young man, though what drew your attention to him I don't know."

"Don't you, Hastings? You should. Well, well, that must remain my little secret."

We had a short conversation with the police inspector in charge of the case before leaving. He had interviewed Mr Norton Kane, and told Poirot in confidence that the young man's manner had not impressed him favorably. He had blustered, denied, and contradicted himself.

"But just how the trick was done, I don't know," he confessed. "He could have handed the stuff to a confederate who pushed off at once in a fast car. But that's just theory. We've got to find the car and the confederate and pin the thing down."

Poirot nodded thoughtfully.

"Do you think that was how it was done?" I asked him, as we were seated in the train.

"No, my friend, that was not how it was done. It was cleverer than that."

"Won't you tell me?"

"Not yet. You know - it is my weakness - I like to keep my little secrets till the end."

"Is the end going to be soon?"

"Very soon now."

We arrived in Ebermouth a little after six and Poirot drove at once to the shop which bore the name "Elizabeth Penn." The establishment was closed, but Poirot rang the bell, and presently Mary herself opened the door, and expressed surprise and delight at seeing us.

"Please come in and see my aunt," she said.

She led us into a back room. An elderly lady came forward to meet us; she had white hair and looked rather like a miniature herself with her pink-and-white skin and her blue eyes. Round her rather bent shoulders she wore a cape of priceless old lace.

"Is this the great Monsieur Poirot?" she asked in a low charming voice. "Mary has been telling me. I could hardly believe it. And you will really help us in our trouble. You will advise us?"

Poirot looked at her for a moment, then bowed.

"Mademoiselle Penn - the effect is charming. But you should really grow a mustache."

Miss Penn gave a gasp and drew back.

"You were absent from business yesterday, were you not?"

"I was here in the morning. Later I had a bad headache and went directly home."

"Not home, mademoiselle. For your headache you tried the change of air, did you not? The air of Charlock Bay is very bracing, I believe."

He took me by the arm and drew me toward the door. He paused there and spoke over his shoulder.

"You comprehend, I know everything. This little - farce - it must cease."

There was a menace in his tone. Miss Penn, her face ghastly white, nodded mutely. Poirot turned to the girl.

"Mademoiselle," he said gently, "you are young and charming. But participating in these little affairs will lead to that youth and charm being hidden behind prison walls - and I, Hercule Poirot, tell you that that will be a pity."

Then he stepped out into the street and I followed him, bewildered.

"From the first, man ami, I was interested. When that young man booked his place as far as Monkhampton only, I saw the girl's attention suddenly riveted on him. Now why? He was not of the type to make a woman look at him for himself alone. When we started on that coach, I had a feeling that something would happen. Who saw the young man tampering with the luggage? Mademoiselle and mademoiselle only, and remember she chose that seat - a seat facing the window - a most unfeminine choice.

"And then she comes to us with the tale of robbery - the dispatch box forced which makes not the common sense, as I told you at the time.

"And what is the result of it all? Mr Baker Wood has paid over good money for stolen goods. The miniatures will be returned to Miss Penn. She will sell them and will have made a thousand pounds instead of five hundred. I make the discreet inquiries and learn that her business is in a bad state - touch and go. I say to myself - the aunt and niece are in this together."

"Then you never suspected Norton Kane?"

"Mon ami! With that mustache? A criminal is either clean shaven or he has a proper mustache that can be removed at will. But what an opportunity for the clever Miss Penn - a shrinking elderly lady with a pink-and-white complexion as we saw her. But if she holds herself erect, wears large boots, alters her complexion with a few unseemly blotches and - crowning touch - adds a few sparse hairs to her upper lip. What then? A masculine woman, says Mr Wood, and - 'a man in disguise' say we at once."

"She really went to Charlock yesterday?"

"Assuredly. The train, as you may remember telling me, left here at eleven and got to Charlock Bay at two o'clock. Then the return train is even quicker - the one we came by. It leaves Charlock at four-five and gets here at six-fifteen. Naturally, the miniatures were never in the dispatch case at all. That was artistically forced before being packed. Mademoiselle Mary has only to find a couple of mugs who will be sympathetic to her charm and champion beauty in distress. But one of the mugs was no mug - he was Hercule Poirot!"

I hardly liked the inference. I said hurriedly:

"Then, when you said you were helping a stranger, you were willfully deceiving me. That's exactly what you were doing."

"Never do I deceive you, Hastings. I only permit you to deceive yourself. I was referring to Mr Baker Wood - a stranger to these

shores." His face darkened. "Ah! When I think of that imposition, that iniquitous overcharge; the same fare single to Charlock as return, my blood boils to protect the visitor! Not a pleasant man, Mr Baker Wood, not, as you would say, sympathetic. But a visitor! And we visitors, Hastings, must stand together. Me, I am all for the visitors!"

THE MARKET BASING MYSTERY

'After all, there's nothing like the country, is there?' said Inspector Japp, breathing in heavily through his nose and out through his mouth in the most approved fashion.

Poirot and I applauded the sentiment heartily. It had been the Scotland Yard inspector's idea that we should all go for the weekend to the little country town of Market Basing. When off duty, Japp was an ardent botanist, and discoursed upon minute flowers possessed of unbelievably lengthy Latin names (somewhat strangely pronounced) with an enthusiasm even greater than that he gave to his cases.

'Nobody knows us, and we know nobody,' explained Japp. 'That's the idea.'

This was not to prove quite the case, however, for the local constable happened to have been transferred from a village fifteen miles away where a case of arsenical poisoning had brought him into contact with the Scotland Yard man. However, his delighted recognition of the great man only enhanced Japp's sense of well-

being, and as we sat down to breakfast on Sunday morning in the parlour of the village inn, with the sun shining, and tendrils of honeysuckle thrusting themselves in at the window, we were all in the best of spirits. The bacon and eggs were excellent, the coffee not so good, but passable and boiling hot.

'This is the life,' said Japp. 'When I retire, I shall have a little place in the country. Far from crime, like this!'

'Le crime, il est partout,' remarked Poirot, helping himself to a neat square of bread, and frowning at a sparrow which had balanced itself impertinently on the windowsill.

I quoted lightly:

'That rabbit has a pleasant face,

His private life is a disgrace

I really could not tell to you

The awful things that rabbits do.'

'Lord,' said Japp, stretching himself backward, 'I believe I could manage another egg, and perhaps a rasher or two of bacon. What do you say, Captain?'

'I'm with you,' I returned heartily. 'What about you, Poirot?'

Poirot shook his head.

'One must not so replenish the stomach that the brain refuses to function,' he remarked.

'I'll risk replenishing the stomach a bit more,' laughed Japp. 'I take a large size in stomachs; and by the way, you're getting stout yourself, M. Poirot. Here, miss, eggs and bacon twice.'

At that moment, however, an imposing form blocked the doorway. It was Constable Pollard.

'I hope you'll excuse me troubling the inspector, gentlemen, but I'd be glad of his advice.'

'I'm on my holiday,' said Japp hastily. 'No work for me. What is the case?'

'Gentleman up at Leigh Hall - shot himself - through the head.'

'Well, they will do it,' said Japp prosaically. 'Debt, or a woman, I suppose. Sorry I can't help you, Pollard.'

'The point is,' said the constable, 'that he can't have shot himself. Leastways, that's what Dr Giles says.'

Japp put down his cup.

'Can't have shot himself? What do you mean?'

'That's what Dr Giles says,' repeated Pollard. 'He says it's plumb impossible. He's puzzled to death, the door being locked on the inside and the window bolted; but he sticks to it that the man couldn't have committed suicide.'

That settled it. The further supply of bacon and eggs were waved aside, and a few minutes later we were all walking as fast as we could in the direction of Leigh House, Japp eagerly questioning the constable.

The name of the deceased was Walter Protheroe; he was a man of middle age and something of a recluse. He had come to Market Basing eight years ago and rented Leigh House, a rambling, dilapidated old mansion fast falling into ruin. He lived in a corner of it, his wants attended to by a housekeeper whom he had brought with him. Miss Clegg was her name, and she was a very superior woman and highly thought of in the village. Just lately Mr Protheroe had had visitors staying with him, a Mr and Mrs Parker from London. This morning, unable to get a reply when she went to call her master, and finding the door locked, Miss Clegg became alarmed, and telephoned for the police and the doctor. Constable Pollard and Dr Giles had arrived at the same moment. Their united efforts had succeeded in breaking down the oak door of his bedroom.

Mr Protheroe was lying on the floor, shot through the head, and the pistol was clasped in his right hand. It looked a clear case of suicide.

After examining the body, however, Dr Giles became clearly perplexed, and finally he drew the constable aside, and communicated his perplexities to him; whereupon Pollard had at once thought of Japp. Leaving the doctor in charge, he had hurried down to the inn.

By the time the constable's recital was over, we had arrived at Leigh House, a big, desolate house surrounded by an unkempt, weed-ridden garden. The front door was open, and we passed at once into the hall and from there into a small morning-room whence proceeded the sound of voices. Four people were in the room: a somewhat flashily dressed man with a shifty, unpleasant face to whom I took an immediate dislike; a woman of much the same type, though handsome in a coarse fashion; another woman dressed in neat black who stood apart from the rest, and whom I took to be the housekeeper; and a tall man dressed in sporting tweeds, with a clever, capable face, and who was clearly in command of the situation.

'Dr Giles,' said the constable, 'this is Detective-Inspector Japp of Scotland Yard, and his two friends.'

The doctor greeted us and made us known to Mr and Mrs Parker. Then we accompanied him upstairs. Pollard, in obedience to a sign from Japp, remained below, as it were on guard over the household. The doctor led us upstairs and along a passage. A door was open at the end; splinters hung from the hinges, and the door itself had crashed to the floor inside the room.

We went in. The body was still lying on the floor. Mr Protheroe had been a man of middle age, bearded, with hair grey at the temples. Japp went and knelt by the body.

'Why couldn't you leave it as you found it?' he grumbled.

The doctor shrugged his shoulders.

'We thought it a clear case of suicide.'

'H'm!' said Japp. 'Bullet entered the head behind the left ear.'

'Exactly,' said the doctor. 'Clearly impossible for him to have fired it himself. He'd have had to twist his hand right round his head. It couldn't have been done.'

'Yet you found the pistol clasped in his hand? Where is it, by the way?'

The doctor nodded to the table.

'But it wasn't clasped in his hand,' he said. 'It was inside the hand, but the fingers weren't closed over it.'

'Put there afterwards,' said Japp; 'that's clear enough.' He was examining the weapon. 'One cartridge fired. We'll test it for fingerprints, but I doubt if we'll find any but yours, Dr Giles. How long has he been dead?'

'Some time last night. I can't give the time to an hour or so, as the wonderful doctors in detective stories do. Roughly, he's been dead about twelve hours.'

So far, Poirot had not made a move of any kind. He had remained by my side, watching Japp at work and listening to his questions. Only, from time to time he had sniffed the air very delicately, and as if puzzled. I too bad sniffed, but could detect nothing to arouse interest. The air seemed perfectly fresh and devoid of odour. And yet, from time to time, Poirot continued to sniff it dubiously, as though his keener nose detected something I had missed.

Now, as Japp moved away from the body, Poirot knelt down by it. He took no interest in the wound. I thought at first that he was examining the fingers of the hand that had held the pistol, but in a minute I saw that it was a handkerchief carried in the coat-sleeve that interested him. Mr Protheroe was dressed in a dark grey lounge-suit. Finally Poirot got up from his knees, but his eyes still strayed back to the handkerchief as though puzzled.

Japp called to him to come and help to lift the door. Seizing my opportunity, I too knelt down, and taking the handkerchief from the sleeve, scrutinized it minutely. It was a perfectly plain handkerchief of white cambric; there was no mark or stain on it of any kind. I replaced it, shaking my head, and confessing myself baffled.

The others had raised the door. I realized that they were hunting for the key. They looked in vain.

'That settles it,' said Japp. 'The window's shut and bolted. The murderer left by the door, locking it and taking the key with him. He thought it would be accepted that Protheroe had locked himself in and shot himself, and that the absence of the key would not be noticed. You agree, M. Poirot?'

'I agree, yes; but it would have been simpler and better to slip the key back inside the room under the door. Then it would look as though it had fallen from the lock.'

'Ah, well, you can't expect everybody to have the bright ideas that you have. You'd have been a holy terror if you'd taken to crime. Any remarks to make, M. Poirot?'

Poirot, it seemed to me, was somewhat at a loss. He looked round the room and remarked mildly and almost apologetically:

'He smoked a lot, this monsieur.'

True enough, the grate was filled with cigarette-stubs, as was an ashtray that stood on a small table near the big armchair.

'He must have got through about twenty cigarettes last night,' remarked Japp. Stooping down, he examined the contents of the grate carefully, then transferred his attention to the ashtray. 'They're all the same kind,' he announced, 'and smoked by the same man. There's nothing there, M. Poirot.'

'I did not suggest that there was,' murmured my friend.

'Ha,' cried Japp, 'what's this?' He pounced on something bright and glittering that lay on the floor near the dead man. 'A broken cuff-link. I wonder who this belongs to. Dr Giles, I'd be obliged if you'd go down and send up the housekeeper.'

'What about the Parkers? He's very anxious to leave the house - says he's got urgent business in London.'

'I dare say. It'll have to get on without him. By the way things are going, it's likely that there'll be some urgent business down here for him to attend to! Send up the housekeeper, and don't let either of the Parkers give you and Pollard the slip. Did any of the household come in here this morning?'

The doctor reflected.

'No, they stood outside in the corridor while Pollard and I came in.'

'Sure of that?'

'Absolutely certain.'

The doctor departed on his mission.

'Good man, that,' said Japp approvingly. 'Some of these sporting doctors are first-class fellows. Well, I wonder who shot this chap. It looks like one of the three in the house. I hardly suspect the housekeeper. She's had eight years to shoot him in if she wanted

to. I wonder who these Parkers are? They're not a prepossessing-looking couple.'

Miss Clegg appeared at this juncture. She was a thin, gaunt woman with neat grey hair parted in the middle, very staid and calm in manner. Nevertheless there was an air of efficiency about her which commanded respect. In answer to Japp's questions, she explained that she had been with the dead man for fourteen years. He had been a generous and considerate master. She had never seen Mr and Mrs Parker until three days ago, when they arrived unexpectedly to stay. She was of the opinion that they had asked themselves - the master had certainly not seemed pleased to see them. The cuff-links which Japp showed her had not belonged to Mr Protheroe - she was sure of that. Questioned about the pistol, she said that she believed her master had a weapon of that kind. He kept it locked up. She had seen it once some years ago, but could not say whether this was the same one. She had heard no shot last night, but that was not surprising, as it was a big, rambling house, and her rooms and those prepared for the Parkers were at the other end of the building. She did not know what time Mr Protheroe had gone to bed - he was still up when she retired at half past nine. It was not his habit to go at once to bed when he went to his room. Usually he would sit up half the night, reading and smoking. He was a great smoker.

Then Poirot interposed a question:

'Did your master sleep with his window open or shut, as a rule?'

Miss Clegg considered.

'It was usually open, at any rate at the top.'

'Yet now it is closed. Can you explain that?'

'No, unless he felt a draught and shut it.'

Japp asked her a few more questions and then dismissed her. Next he interviewed the Parkers separately. Mrs Parker was inclined to be hysterical and tearful; Mr Parker was full of bluster and abuse. He denied that the cuff-link was his, but as his wife had previously recognized it, this hardly improved matters for him; and as he had also denied ever having been in Protheroe's room, Japp considered that he had sufficient evidence to apply for a warrant.

Leaving Pollard in charge, Japp bustled back to the village and got into telephonic communication with headquarters. Poirot and I strolled back to the inn.

'You're unusually quiet,' I said. 'Doesn't the case interest you?'

'Au contraire, it interests me enormously. But it puzzles me also.'

'The motive is obscure,' I said thoughtfully, 'but I'm certain that Parker's a bad lot. The case against him seems pretty clear but for the lack of motive, and that may come out later.'

'Nothing struck you as being especially significant, although overlooked by Japp?'

I looked at him curiously.

'What have you got up your sleeve, Poirot?'

'What did the dead man have up his sleeve?'

'Oh, that handkerchief!'

'Exactly, the handkerchief.'

'A sailor carries his handkerchief in his sleeve,' I said thoughtfully.

'An excellent point, Hastings, though not the one I had in mind.'

'Anything else?'

'Yes, over and over again I go back to the smell of cigarette-smoke.'

'I didn't smell any,' I cried wonderingly.

'No more did I, cher ami."

I looked earnestly at him. It is so difficult to know when Poirot is pulling one's leg, but he seemed thoroughly in earnest and was frowning to himself.

The inquest took place two days later. In the meantime other evidence had come to light. A tramp had admitted that he had climbed over the wall into the Leigh House garden, where he often slept in a shed that was left unlocked. He declared that at twelve o'clock he had heard two men quarrelling loudly in a room on the first floor. One was demanding a sum of money; the other was angrily refusing. Concealed behind a bush, he had seen the two men as they passed and repassed the lighted window. One he knew well as being Mr Protheroe, the owner of the house; the other he identified positively as Mr Parker.

It was clear now that the Parkers had come to Leigh House to blackmail Protheroe, and when later it was discovered that the dead man's real name was Wendover, and that he had been a lieutenant in the Navy and had been concerned in the blowing up of the first-class cruiser Merrythought, in 1910, the case seemed to be rapidly clearing. It was supposed that Parker, cognizant of the part Wendover had played, had tracked him down and demanded hush-money which the other refused to pay. In the course of the quarrel, Wendover drew his revolver, and Parker snatched it from him and shot him, subsequently endeavouring to give it the appearance of suicide.

Parker was committed for trial, reserving his defence. We had attended the police-court proceedings. As we left, Poirot nodded his head.

'It must be so,' he murmured to himself. 'Yes, it must be so. I will delay no longer.'

He went into the post office, and wrote off a note which he despatched by special messenger. I did not see to whom it was addressed. Then we returned to the inn where we had stayed on that memorable weekend.

Poirot was restless, going to and from the window.

'I await a visitor,' he explained. 'It cannot be - surely it cannot be that I am mistaken? No, here she is.'

To my utter astonishment, in another minute Miss Clegg walked into the room. She was less calm than usual, and was breathing hard as though she had been running. I saw the fear in her eyes as she looked at Poirot.

'Sit down, mademoiselle,' he said kindly. 'I guessed rightly, did I not?'

For answer she burst into tears.

'Why did you do it?' asked Poirot gently. 'Why?'

'I loved him so,' she answered. 'I was nursemaid to him when he was a little boy. Oh, be merciful to me!'

'I will do all I can. But you understand that I cannot permit an innocent man to hang - even though he is an unpleasing scoundrel.'

She sat up and said in a low voice:

'Perhaps in the end I could not have, either. Do whatever must be done.'

Then, rising, she hurried from the room.

'Did she shoot him?' I asked, utterly bewildered.

Poirot smiled and shook his head.

'He shot himself. Do you remember that he carried his handkerchief in his right sleeve? That showed me that he was left-handed. Fearing exposure, after his stormy interview with Mr Parker, he shot himself. In the morning Miss Clegg came to call him as usual and found him lying dead. As she has just told us, she had known him from a little boy upward, and was filled with fury against the Parkers, who had driven him to this shameful death. She regarded them as murderers, and then suddenly she saw a chance of making them suffer for the deed they had inspired. She alone knew that he was left-handed. She changed the pistol to his right hand, closed and bolted the window, dropped the bit of cuff-link she had picked up in one of the downstairs rooms, and went out, locking the door and removing the key.'

'Poirot,' I said, in a burst of enthusiasm, 'you are magnificent. All that from the one little clue of the handkerchief!'

'And the cigarette-smoke. If the window had been closed, and all those cigarettes smoked, the room ought to have been full of stale tobacco. Instead, it was perfectly fresh, so I deduced at once that

the window must have been open all night, and only closed in the morning, and that gave me a very interesting line of speculation. I could conceive of no circumstances under which a murderer could want to shut the window. It would be to his advantage to leave it open, and pretend that the murderer had escaped that way, if the theory of suicide did not go down. Of course, the tramp's evidence, when I heard it, confirmed my suspicions. He could never have overheard that conversation unless the window had been open.'

'Splendid!' I said heartily. 'Now, what about some tea?'

'Spoken like a true Englishman,' said Poirot with a sigh. 'I suppose it is not likely that I could obtain here a glass of sirop?'

WASPS' NEST

Out of the house came John Harrison and stood a moment on the terrace looking out over the garden. He was a big man with a lean, cadaverous face. His aspect was usually somewhat grim but when as now, the rugged features softened into a smile, there was something very attractive about him.

John Harrison loved his garden, and it had never looked better than it did on this August evening, summery and languorous. The rambler roses were still beautiful; sweet peas scented the air.

A well-known creaking sound made Harrison turn his head sharply. Who was coming in through the garden gate? In another minute, an expression of utter astonishment came over his face, for the

dandified figure coming up the path was the last he expected to see in this part of the world.

"By all that's wonderful," cried Harrison. "Monsieur Poirot!"

It was, indeed, the famous Hercule Poirot whose renown as a detective had spread over the whole world.

"Yes," he said, "it is I. You said to me once: 'If you are ever in this part of the world, come and see me.' I take you at your word. I arrive."

"And I'm delighted," said Harrison heartily. "Sit down and have a drink."

With a hospitable hand, he indicated a table on the veranda bearing assorted bottles.

"I thank you," said Poirot, sinking down into a basket chair. "You have, I suppose, no syrup? No, no, I thought not. A little plain soda water then - no whisky." And he added in a feeling voice as the other placed the glass beside him: "Alas: My mustaches are limp. It is this heat!"

"And what brings you into this quiet spot?" asked Harrison as he dropped into another chair. "Pleasure?"

"No, mon ami, business."

"Business? In this out-of-the-way place?"

Poirot nodded gravely. "But yes, my friend, all crimes are not committed in crowds, you know?"

The other laughed. "I suppose that was rather an idiotic remark of mine. But what particular crime are you investigating down here, or is that a thing I mustn't ask?"

"You may ask," said the detective. "Indeed, I would prefer that you asked."

Harrison looked at him curiously. He sensed something a little unusual in the other's manner. "You are investigating a crime, you say?" he advanced rather hesitatingly. "A serious crime?"

"A crime of the most serious there is."

"You mean..."

"Murder."

So gravely did Hercule Poirot say that word that Harrison was quite taken aback. The detective was looking straight at him and again there was something so unusual in his glance that Harrison hardly knew how to proceed. At last, he said: "But I have heard of no murder."

"No," said Poirot, "you would not have heard of it."

"Who has been murdered?"

"As yet," said Hercule Poirot, "nobody."

"What?"

"That is why I said you would not have heard of it. I am investigating a crime that has not yet taken place."

"But look here, that is nonsense."

"Not at all. If one can investigate a murder before it has happened, surely that is very much better than afterward. One might even - a little idea - prevent it."

Harrison stared at him. "You are not serious, Monsieur Poirot."

"But yes, I am serious."

"You really believe that a murder is going to be committed? Oh, it's absurd!"

Hercule Poirot finished the first part of the sentence without taking any notice of the exclamation.

"Unless we can manage to prevent it. Yes, mon ami, that is what I mean."

"We?"

"I said we. I shall need your cooperation."

"Is that why you came down here?"

Again Poirot looked at him, and again an indefinable something made Harrison uneasy.

"I came here, Monsieur Harrison because I - well - like you."

And then he added in an entirely different voice: "I see, Monsieur Harrison, that you have a wasps' nest there. You should destroy it."

The change of subject made Harrison frown in a puzzled way. He followed Poirot's glance and said in rather a bewildered voice: "As a matter of fact, I'm going to. Or rather, young Langton is. You remember Claude Langton? He was at the same dinner where I met you. He's coming over this evening to take the nest. Rather fancies himself at the job."

"Ah!" said Poirot. "And how is he going to do it?"

"Petrol and the garden syringe. He's bringing his own syringe over; it's a more convenient size than mine."

"There is another way, is there not?" asked Poirot. "With cyanide of potassium?"

Harrison looked a little surprised. "Yes, but that's rather dangerous stuff. Always a bit of risk having it about the place."

Poirot nodded gravely. "Yes, it is deadly poison." He waited a minute and then repeated in a grave voice. "Deadly poison."

"Useful if you want to do away with your mother-in-law, eh?" said Harrison with a laugh.

But Hercule Poirot remained grave. "And you are quite sure, Monsieur Harrison, that it is with petrol that Monsieur Langton is going to destroy your wasps' nest?"

"Quite sure. Why?"

"I wondered. I was at the chemist's in Barchester this afternoon. For one of my purchases I had to sign the poison book. I saw the last entry. It was for cyanide of potassium and it was signed for by Claude Langton."

Harrison stared. "That's odd," he said. "Langton told me the other day that he'd never dream of using the stuff; in fact, he said it oughtn't to be sold for the purpose."

Poirot looked out over the roses. His voice was very quiet as he asked a question. "Do you like Langton?"

The other started. The question somehow seemed to find him quite unprepared. "I - I - well, I mean - of course, I like him. Why shouldn't I?"

"I only wondered," said Poirot placidly, "whether you did."

And as the other did not answer, he went on. "I also wondered if he liked you?"

"What are you getting at, Monsieur Poirot? There's something in your mind I can't fathom."

"I am going to be very frank. You are engaged to be married, Monsieur Harrison. I know Miss Molly Deane. She is a very charming, a very beautiful girl. Before she was engaged to you, she was engaged to Claude Langton. She threw him over for you."

Harrison nodded.

"I do not ask what her reasons were; she may have been justified. But I tell you this, it is not too much to suppose that Langton has not forgotten or forgiven."

"You're wrong, Monsieur Poirot. I swear you're wrong. Langton's been a sportsman; he's taken things like a man. He's been amazingly decent to me - gone out of his way to be friendly."

"And that does not strike you as unusual? You use the word 'amazingly,' but you do not seem to be amazed."

"What do you mean, M. Poirot?"

"I mean," said Poirot, and his voice had a new note in it, "that a man may conceal his hate till the proper time comes."

"Hate?" Harrison shook his head and laughed.

"The English are very stupid," said Poirot. "They think that they can deceive anyone but that no one can deceive them. The sportsman - the good fellow - never will they believe evil of him. And because they are brave, but stupid, sometimes they die when they need not die."

"You are warning me," said Harrison in a low voice. "I see it now - what has puzzled me all along. You are warning me against Claude Langton. You came here today to warn me..."

Poirot nodded. Harrison sprang up suddenly. "But you are mad, Monsieur Poirot. This is England. Things don't happen like that here. Disappointed suitors don't go about stabbing people in the back and poisoning them. And you're wrong about Langton. That chap wouldn't hurt a fly."

"The lives of flies are not my concern," said Poirot placidly. "And although you say Monsieur Langton would not take the life of one, yet you forget that he is even now preparing to take the lives of several thousand wasps."

Harrison did not at once reply. The little detective in his turn sprang to his feet. He advanced to his friend and laid a hand on his shoulder. So agitated was he that he almost shook the big man, and, as he did so, he hissed into his ear: "Rouse yourself, my friend, rouse yourself. And look - look where I am pointing. There on the bank, close by that tree root. See you, the wasps returning home, placid at the end of the day? In a little hour, there will be destruction, and they know it not. There is no one to tell them. They

have not, it seems, a Hercule Poirot. I tell you, Monsieur Harrison, I am down here on business. Murder is my business. And it is my business before it has happened as well as afterward. At what time does Monsieur Langton come to take this wasps' nest?"

"Langton would never..."

"At what time?"

"At nine o'clock. But I tell you, you're all wrong. Langton would never..."

"These English!" cried Poirot in a passion. He caught up his hat and stick and moved down the path, pausing to speak over his shoulder. "I do not stay to argue with you. I should only enrage myself. But you understand, I return at nine o'clock?"

Harrison opened his mouth to speak, but Poirot did not give him the chance. "I know what you would say: 'Langton would never,' et cetera. Ah, Langton would never! But all the same I return at nine o'clock. But, yes, it will amuse me - put it like that - it will amuse me to see the taking of a wasps' nest. Another of your English sports!"

He waited for no reply but passed rapidly down the path and out through the door that creaked. Once outside on the road, his pace slackened. His vivacity died down, his face became grave and troubled. Once he drew his watch from his pocket and consulted it. The hands pointed to ten minutes past eight. "Over three quarters of an hour," he murmured. "I wonder if I should have waited."

His footsteps slackened; he almost seemed on the point of returning. Some vague foreboding seemed to assail him. He shook it off resolutely, however, and continued to walk in the direction of the village. But his face was still troubled, and once or twice he shook his head like a man only partly satisfied.

It was still some minutes of nine when he once more approached the garden door. It was a dear, still evening; hardly a breeze stirred the leaves. There was, perhaps, something a little sinister in the stillness, like the lull before a storm.

Poirot's footsteps quickened ever so slightly. He was suddenly alarmed - and uncertain. He feared he knew not what.

And at that moment the garden door opened and Claude Langton stepped quickly out into the road. He started when he saw Poirot.

"Oh - er - good evening."

"Good evening, Monsieur Langton. You are early."

Langton stared at him. "I don't know what you mean."

"You have taken the wasps' nest?"

"As a matter of fact, I didn't."

"Oh!" said Poirot softly. "So you did not take the wasps' nest. What did you do then?"

"Oh, just sat and yarned a bit with old Harrison. I really must hurry along now, Monsieur Poirot. I'd no idea you were remaining in this part of the world."

"I had business here, you see."

"Oh! Well, you'll find Harrison on the terrace. Sorry I can't stop."

He hurried away. Poirot looked after him. A nervous young fellow, good looking with a weak mouth!

"So I shall find Harrison on the terrace," murmured Poirot. "I wonder." He went in through the garden door and up the path. Harrison was sitting in a chair by the table. He sat motionless and did not even turn his head as Poirot came up to him.

"Ah! Mon ami," said Poirot. "You are all right, eh?"

There was a long pause and then Harrison said in a queer, dazed voice, "What did you say?"

"I said - are you all right?"

"All right? Yes, I'm all right. Why not?"

"You feel no ill effects? That is good."

"Ill effects? From what?"

"Washing soda."

Harrison roused himself suddenly.

"Washing soda? What do you mean?"

Poirot made an apologetic gesture. "I infinitely regret the necessity, but I put some in your pocket."

"You put some in my pocket? What on earth for?"

Harrison stared at him. Poirot spoke quietly and impersonally like a lecturer coming down to the level of a small child.

"You see, one of the advantages, or disadvantages, of being a detective is that it brings you into contact with the criminal classes. And the criminal classes, they can teach you some very interesting and curious things. There was a pickpocket once - I interested myself in him because for once in a way he has not done what they say he has done - and so I get him off. And because he is grateful he pays me in the only way he can think of - which is to show me the tricks of his trade.

"And so it happens that I can pick a man's pocket if I choose without his ever suspecting the fact. I lay one hand on his shoulder, I excite myself, and he feels nothing. But all the same I have managed to transfer what is in his pocket to my pocket and leave washing soda in its place.

"You see," continued Poirot dreamily, "if a man wants to get at some poison quickly to put in a glass, unobserved, he positively

must keep it in his righthand coat pocket; there is nowhere else. I knew it would be there."

He dropped his hand into his pocket and brought out a few white, lumpy crystals. "Exceedingly dangerous," he murmured, "to carry it like that - loose."

Calmly and without hurrying himself, he took from another pocket a wide-mouthed bottle. He slipped in the crystals, stepped to the table and filled up the bottle with plain water. Then carefully corking it, he shook it until all the crystals were dissolved. Harrison watched him as though fascinated.

Satisfied with his solution, Poirot stepped across to the nest. He uncorked the bottle, turned his head aside, and poured the solution into the wasps' nest, then stood back a pace or two watching.

Some wasps that were returning alighted, quivered a little and then lay still. Other wasps crawled out of the hole only to die. Poirot watched for a minute or two and then nodded his head and came back to the veranda.

"A quick death," he said. "A very quick death."

Harrison found his voice. "How much do you know?"

Poirot looked straight ahead. "As I told you, I saw Claude Langton's name in the book. What I did not tell you was that almost immediately afterward, I happened to meet him. He told me he had been buying cyanide of potassium at your request - to take a wasps'

nest. That struck me as a little odd, my friend, because I remember that at that dinner of which you spoke, you held forth on the superior merits of petrol and denounced the buying of cyanide as dangerous and unnecessary."

"Go on."

"I knew something else. I had seen Claude Langton and Molly Deane together when they thought no one saw them. I do not know what lovers' quarrel it was that originally parted them and drove her into your arms, but I realized that misunderstandings were over and that Miss Deane was drifting back to her love."

"Go on."

"I knew something more, my friend. I was in Harley Street the other day, and I saw you come out of a certain doctor's house. I know that doctor and for what disease one consults him, and I read the expression on your face. I have seen it only once or twice in my lifetime, but it is not easily mistaken. It was the face of a man under sentence of death. I am right, am I not?"

"Quite right. He gave me two months."

"You did not see me, my friend, for you had other things to think about. I saw something else on your face - the thing that I told you this afternoon men try to conceal. I saw hate there, my friend. You did not trouble to conceal it, because you thought there were none to observe."

"Go on," said Harrison.

"There is not much more to say. I came down here, saw Langton's name by accident in the poison book as I tell you, met him, and came here to you. I laid traps for you. You denied having asked Langton to get cyanide, or rather you expressed surprise at his having done so. You were taken aback at first at my appearance, but presently, you saw how well it would fit in and you encouraged my suspicions. I knew from Langton himself that he was coming at half past eight. You told me nine o'clock, thinking I should come and find everything over. And so I knew everything."

"Why did you come?" cried Harrison. "If only you hadn't come!"

Poirot drew himself up. "I told you," he said, "murder is my business."

"Murder? Suicide, you mean."

"No." Poirot's voice rang out sharply and clearly. "I mean murder. Your death was to be quick and easy, but the death you planned for Langton was the worst death any man can die. He bought the poison; he comes to see you, and he is alone with you. You die suddenly, and the cyanide is found in your glass, and Claude Langton hangs. That was your plan."

Again Harrison moaned.

"Why did you come? Why did you come?"

"I have told you, but there is another reason. I liked you. Listen, mon ami, you are a dying man; you have lost the girl you loved, but there is one thing that you are not: you are not a murderer. Tell me now: are you glad or sorry that I came?"

There was a moment's pause and then Harrison drew himself up. There was a new dignity in his face - the look of a man who has conquered his own baser self. He stretched out his hand across the table.

"Thank goodness you came," he cried. "Oh! Thank goodness you came."

THE VEILED LADY

I had noticed that for some time Poirot had been growing increasingly dissatisfied and restless. We had had no interesting cases of late, nothing on which my little friend could exercise his keen wits and remarkable powers of deduction. This morning he flung down the newspaper with an impatient 'Tchah!' - a favourite exclamation of his which sounded exactly like a cat sneezing.

'They fear me, Hastings; the criminals of your England they fear me! When the cat is there, the little mice, they come no more to the cheese!'

'I don't suppose the greater part of them even know of your existence,' I said, laughing.

Poirot looked at me reproachfully. He always imagines that the whole world is thinking and talking of Hercule Poirot. He had certainly made a name for himself in London, but I could hardly believe that his existence struck terror into the criminal world.

'What about that daylight robbery of jewels in Bond Street the other day?' I asked.

'A neat coup,' said Poirot approvingly, 'though not in my line. Pas de finesse, seuelment de l'audace! A man with a loaded cane smashes the plate-glass window of a jeweller's shop and grabs a number of precious stones. Worthy citizens immediately seize him; a policeman arrives. He is caught red-handed with the jewels on him. He is marched off to the police, and then it is discovered that the stones are paste. He has passed the real ones to a confederate - one of the aforementioned worthy citizens. He will go to prison - true; but when he comes out, there will be a nice little fortune awaiting him. Yes, not badly imagined. But I could do better than that. Sometimes, Hastings, I regret that I am of such a moral disposition. To work against the law, it would be pleasing, for a change.'

'Cheer up, Poirot; you know you are unique in your own line.'

'But what is there on hand in my own line?'

I picked up the paper.

'Here's an Englishman mysteriously done to death in Holland,' I said.

'They always say that - and later they find that he ate the tinned fish and that his death is perfectly natural.'

'Well, if you're determined to grouse!'

'Tiens!' said Poirot, who had strolled across to the window. 'Here in the street is what they call in novels a "heavily veiled lady". She mounts the steps; she rings the bell - she comes to consult us. Here is a possibility of something interesting. When one is as young and pretty as that one, one does not veil the face except for a big affair.'

A minute later our visitor was ushered in. As Poirot had said, she was indeed heavily veiled. It was impossible to distinguish her features until she raised her veil of black Spanish lace. Then I saw that Poirot's intuition had been right; the lady was extremely pretty, with fair hair and large blue eyes. From the costly simplicity of her attire, I deduced at once that she belonged to the upper strata of society.

'Monsieur Poirot,' said the lady in a soft, musical voice, 'I am in great trouble. I can hardly believe that you can help me, but I have heard such wonderful things of you that I come literally as a last hope to beg you to do the impossible.'

'The impossible, it pleases me always,' said Poirot. 'Continue, I beg of you, mademoiselle.'

Our fair guest hesitated.

'But you must be frank,' added Poirot. 'You must not leave me in the dark on any point.'

'I will trust you,' said the girl suddenly. 'You have heard of Lady Millicent Castle Vaughan?'

I looked up with keen interest. The announcement of Lady Millicent's engagement to the young Duke of Southshire had appeared a few days previously. She was, I knew, the fifth daughter of an impecunious Irish peer, and the Duke of Southshire was one of the best matches in England.

'I am Lady Millicent,' continued the girl. 'You may have read of my engagement. I should be one of the happiest girls alive; but oh, M. Poirot, I am in terrible trouble! There is a man, a horrible man - his name is Lavington; and he - I hardly know how to tell you. There was a letter I wrote - I was only sixteen at the time; and he - he -'

'A letter that you wrote to this Mr Lavington?'

'Oh no - not to him! To a young soldier - I was very fond of him - he was killed in the war.'

'I understand,' said Poirot kindly.

'It was a foolish letter, an indiscreet letter, but indeed, M. Poirot, nothing more. But there are phrases in it which - which might bear a different interpretation.'

'I see,' said Poirot. 'And this letter has come into the possession of Mr Lavington?'

'Yes, and he threatens, unless I pay him an enormous sum of money, a sum that it is quite impossible for me to raise, to send it to the Duke.'

'The dirty swine!' I ejaculated. 'I beg your pardon, Lady Millicent.'

'Would it not be wiser to confess all to your future husband?'

'I dare not, M. Poirot. The Duke is a rather peculiar character, jealous and suspicious and prone to believe the worst. I might as well break off my engagement at once.'

'Dear, dear,' said Poirot with an expressive grimace. 'And what do you want me to do, milady?'

'I thought perhaps that I might ask Mr Lavington to call upon you. I would tell him that you were empowered by me to discuss the matter. Perhaps you could reduce his demands.'

'What sum does he mention?'

'Twenty thousand pounds - an impossibility. I doubt if I could raise a thousand, even.'

'You might perhaps borrow the money on the prospect of your approaching marriage - but I doubt if you could get hold of half that sum. Besides - eh bien, it is repugnant to me that you should pay!

No, the ingenuity of Hercule Poirot shall defeat your enemies! Send me this Mr Lavington. Is he likely to bring the letter with him?'

The girl shook her head.

'I do not think so. He is very cautious.'

'I suppose there is no doubt that he really has it?'

'He showed it to me when I went to his house.'

'You went to his house? That was very imprudent, milady.'

'Was it? I was so desperate. I hoped my entreaties might move him.'

'Oh, la la! The Lavingtons of this world are not moved by entreaties! He would welcome them as showing how much importance you attached to the document. Where does he live, this fine gentleman?'

'At Buona Vista, Wimbledon. I went there after dark -' Poirot groaned. 'I declared that I would inform the police in the end, but he only laughed in a horrid, sneering manner. "By all means, my dear Lady Millicent, do so if you wish," he said.'

'Yes, it is hardly an affair for the police,' murmured Poirot.

'"But I think you will be wiser than that," he continued. "See, here is your letter - in this little Chinese puzzle box!" He held it so that I could see. I tried to snatch at it, but he was too quick for me. With a horrid smile he folded it up and replaced it in the little wooden box.

"It will be quite safe here, I assure you," he said, "and the box itself lives in such a clever place that you would never find it." My eyes turned to the small wall-safe, and he shook his head and laughed. "I have a better safe than that," he said. Oh, he was odious! M. Poirot, do you think that you can help me?'

'Have faith in Papa Poirot. I will find a way.'

These reassurances were all very well, I thought, as Poirot gallantly ushered his fair client down the stairs, but it seemed to me that we had a tough nut to crack. I said as much to Poirot when he returned. He nodded ruefully.

'Yes - the solution does not leap to the eye. He has the whip hand, this M. Lavington. For the moment I do not see how we are to circumvent him.'

Mr Lavington duly called upon us that afternoon. Lady Millicent had spoken truly when she described him as an odious man. I felt a positive tingling in the end of my boot, so keen was I to kick him down the stairs. He was blustering and overbearing in manner, laughed Poirot's gentle suggestions to scorn, and generally showed himself as master of the situation. I could not help feeling that Poirot was hardly appearing at his best. He looked discouraged and crestfallen.

'Well, gentlemen,' said Lavington, as he took up his hat, 'we don't seem to be getting much further. The case stands like this: I'll let the Lady Millicent off cheap, as she is such a charming young lady.'

He leered odiously. 'We'll say eighteen thousand. I'm off to Paris today - a little piece of business to attend to over there. I shall be back on Tuesday. Unless the money is paid by Tuesday evening, the letter goes to the Duke. Don't tell me Lady Millicent can't raise the money. Some of her gentlemen friends would be only too willing to oblige such a pretty woman with a loan - if she goes the right way about it.'

My face flushed, and I took a step forward, but Lavington had wheeled out of the room as he finished his sentence.

'My God!' I cried. 'Something has got to be done. You seem to be taking this lying down, Poirot.'

'You have an excellent heart, my friend - but your grey cells are in a deplorable condition. I have no wish to impress Mr Lavington with my capabilities. The more pusillanimous he thinks me, the better.'

'Why?'

'It is curious,' murmured Poirot reminiscently, 'that I should have uttered a wish to work against the law just before Lady Millicent arrived!'

'You are going to burgle his house while he is away?' I gasped.

'Sometimes, Hastings, your mental processes are amazingly quick.'

'Suppose he takes the letter with him?'

Poirot shook his head.

'That is very unlikely. He has evidently a hiding-place in his house that he fancies to be pretty impregnable.'

'When do we - er - do the deed?'

'Tomorrow night. We will start from here about eleven o'clock.'

At the time appointed I was ready to set off. I had donned a dark suit, and a soft dark hat. Poirot beamed kindly on me.

'You have dressed the part, I see,' he observed. 'Come let us take the underground to Wimbledon.'

'Aren't we going to take anything with us? Tools to break in with?'

'My dear Hastings, Hercule Poirot does not adopt such crude methods.'

I retired, snubbed, but my curiosity was alert.

It was just on midnight that we entered the small suburban garden of Buona Vista. The house was dark and silent. Poirot went straight to a window at the back of the house, raised the sash noiselessly and bade me enter.

'How did you know this window would be open?' I whispered, for really it seemed uncanny.

'Because I sawed through the catch this morning.'

'What?'

'But yes, it was the most simple. I called, presented a fictitious card and one of Inspector Japp's official ones. I said I had been sent, recommended by Scotland Yard, to attend to some burglarproof fastenings that Mr Lavington wanted fixed while he was away. The housekeeper welcomed me with enthusiasm. It seems they have had two attempted burglaries here lately - evidently our little idea has occurred to other clients of Mr Lavington's - with nothing of value taken. I examined all the windows, made my little arrangement, forbade the servants to touch the windows until tomorrow, as they were electrically connected up, and withdrew gracefully.'

'Really, Poirot, you are wonderful.'

'Mon ami, it was of the simplest. Now, to work! The servants sleep at the top of the house, so we will run little risk of disturbing them.'

'I presume the safe is built into the wall somewhere?'

'Safe? Fiddlesticks! There is no safe. Mr Lavington is an intelligent man. You will see, he will have devised a hiding-place much more intelligent than a safe. A safe is the first thing everyone looks for.'

Whereupon we began a systematic search of the entire place. But after several hours' ransacking of the house, our search had been unavailing. I saw symptoms of anger gathering on Poirot's face.

'Ah, sapristi, is Hercule Poirot to be beaten? Never! Let us be calm. Let us reflect. Let us reason. Let us - enfin! - employ our little grey cells!'

He paused for some moments, bending his brows in concentration; then the green light I knew so well stole into his eyes.

'I have been an imbecile! The kitchen!'

'The kitchen,' I cried. 'But that's impossible. The servants!'

'Exactly. Just what ninety-nine people out of a hundred would say! And for that very reason the kitchen is the ideal place to choose. It is full of various homely objects. En avant, to the kitchen!'

I followed him, completely sceptical, and watched whilst he dived into bread-bins, tapped saucepans, and put his head into the gas-oven. In the end, tired of watching him, I strolled back to the study. I was convinced that there, and there only, would we find the cache. I made a further minute search, noted that it was now a quarter past four and that therefore it would soon be growing light, and then went back to the kitchen regions.

To my utter amazement, Poirot was now standing right inside the coal-bin, to the utter ruin of his neat light suit. He made a grimace.

'But yes, my friend, it is against all my instincts so to ruin my appearance, but what will you?'

'But Lavington can't have buried it under the coal?'

'If you would use your eyes, you would see that it is not the coal that I examine.'

I then saw that on a shelf behind the coal-bunker some logs of wood were piled. Poirot was dexterously taking them down one by one. Suddenly he uttered a low exclamation.

'Your knife, Hastings!'

I handed it to him. He appeared to insert it in the wood, and suddenly the log split in two. It had been neatly sawn in half and a cavity hollowed out in the centre. From this cavity Poirot took a little wooden box of Chinese make.

'Well done!' I cried, carried out of myself.

'Gently, Hastings! Do not raise your voice too much. Come, let us be off, before the daylight is upon us.'

Slipping the box into his pocket, he leaped lightly out of the coal-bunker, brushed himself down as well as he could, and leaving the house by the same way as we had come, we walked rapidly in the direction of London.

'But what an extraordinary place!' I expostulated. 'Anyone might have used the log.'

'In July, Hastings? And it was at the bottom of the pile - a very ingenious hiding-place. Ah, here is a taxi! Now for home, a wash, and a refreshing sleep.'

After the excitement of the night, I slept late. When I finally strolled into our sitting-room just before one o'clock, I was surprised to see Poirot, leaning back in an armchair, the Chinese box open beside him, calmly reading the letter he had taken from it.

He smiled at me affectionately, and tapped the sheet he held.

'She was right, the Lady Millicent; never would the Duke have pardoned this letter! It contains some of the most extravagant terms of affection I have ever come across.'

'Really, Poirot,' I said, rather disgustedly, 'I don't think you should really have read the letter. That's the sort of thing that isn't done.'

'It is done by Hercule Poirot,' replied my friend imperturbably.

'And another thing,' I said. 'I don't think using Japp's official card yesterday was quite playing the game.'

'But I was not playing a game, Hastings. I was conducting a case.'

I shrugged my shoulders. One can't argue with a point of view.

'A step on the stairs,' said Poirot. 'That will be Lady Millicent.'

Our fair client came in with an anxious expression on her face which changed to one of delight on seeing the letter and box which Poirot held up.

'Oh, M. Poirot. How wonderful of you! How did you do it?'

'By rather reprehensible methods, milady. But Mr Lavington will not prosecute. This is your letter, is it not?'

She glanced through it.

'Yes. Oh, how can I ever thank you! You are a wonderful, wonderful man. Where was it hidden?'

Poirot told her.

'How very clever of you!' She took up the small box from the table. 'I shall keep this as a souvenir.'

'I had hoped, milady, that you would permit me to keep it - also as a souvenir.'

'I hope to send you a better souvenir than that - on my wedding day. You shall not find me ungrateful, M. Poirot.'

'The pleasure of doing you a service will be more to me than a cheque - so you permit that I retain the box.'

'Oh no, M. Poirot, I simply must have that,' she cried laughingly.

She stretched out her hand, but Poirot was before her. His hand closed over it.

'I think not.' His voice had changed.

'What do you mean?' Her voice seemed to have grown sharper.

'At any rate, permit me to abstract its further contents. You observe that the original cavity has been reduced by half. In the top half, the compromising letter; in the bottom -'

He made a nimble gesture, then held out his hand. On the palm were four large glittering stones, and two big milky white pearls.

'The jewels stolen in Bond Street the other day, I rather fancy,' murmured Poirot. 'Japp will tell us.'

To my utter amazement, Japp himself stepped out from Poirot's bedroom.

'An old friend of yours, I believe,' said Poirot politely to Lady Millicent.

'Nabbed, by the Lord!' said Lady Millicent, with a complete change of manner. 'You nippy old devil!' She looked at Poirot with almost affectionate awe.

'Well, Gertie, my dear,' said Japp, 'the game's up this time, I fancy. Fancy seeing you again so soon! We've got your pal, too, the gentleman who called here the other day calling himself Lavington. As for Lavington himself, alias Croker, alias Reed, I wonder which of the gang it was who stuck a knife into him the other day in Holland? Thought he'd got the goods with him, didn't you? And he hadn't. He double-crossed you properly - hid 'em in his own house. You had two fellows looking for them, and then you tackled M. Poirot here, and by a piece of amazing luck he found them.'

'You do like talking, don't you?' said the late Lady Millicent. 'Easy there, now. I'll go quietly. You can't say that I'm not the perfect lady. Ta-ta, all!'

'The shoes were wrong,' said Poirot dreamily, while I was still too stupefied to speak. 'I have made my little observations of your English nation, and a lady, a born lady, is always particular about her shoes. She may have shabby clothes, but she will be well shod. Now, this Lady Millicent had smart, expensive clothes, and cheap shoes. It was not likely that either you or I should have seen the real Lady Millicent; she has been very little in London, and this girl had a certain superficial resemblance which would pass well enough. As I say, the shoes first awakened my suspicions, and then her story - and her veil - were a little melodramatic, eh? The Chinese box with a bogus compromising letter in the top must have been known to all the gang, but the log of wood was the late Mr Lavington's own idea.

Eh, par exemple, Hastings, I hope you will not again wound my feelings as you did yesterday by saying that I am unknown to the criminal classes. Ma foi, they even employ me when they themselves fail!'

PROBLEM AT SEA

'Colonel Clapperton!' said General Forbes. He said it with an effect midway between a snort and a sniff.

Miss Ellie Henderson leaned forward, a strand of her soft grey hair blowing across her face. Her eyes, dark and snapping, gleamed with a wicked pleasure.

'Such a soldierly-looking man,' she said with malicious intent, and smoothed back the lock of hair to await the result.

'Soldierly!' exploded General Forbes. He tugged at his military moustache and his face became bright red.

'In the Guards, wasn't he?' murmured Miss Henderson, completing her work.

'Guards? Guards? Pack of nonsense. Fellow was on the music hall stage! Fact! Joined up and was out in France counting tins of plum and apple. Huns dropped a stray bomb and he went home with a flesh wound in the arm. Somehow or other got into Lady Carrington's hospital.'

'So that's how they met.'

'Fact! Fellow played the wounded hero. Lady Carrington had no sense and oceans of money. Old Carrington had been in munitions. She'd been a widow only six months. This fellow snaps her up in no time. She wangled him a job at the War Office. Colonel Clapperton! Pah!' he snorted.

'And before the war he was on the music hall stage,' mused Miss Henderson, trying to reconcile the distinguished grey-haired Colonel Clapperton with a red-nosed comedian singing mirth-provoking songs.

'Fact!' said General Forbes. 'Heard it from old Bassington-ffrench. And he heard it from old Badger Cotterill who'd got it from Snooks Parker.'

Miss Henderson nodded brightly. 'That does seem to settle it!' she said.

A fleeting smile showed for a minute on the face of a small man sitting near them. Miss Henderson noticed the smile. She was observant. It had shown appreciation of the irony underlying her last remark - irony which the General never for a moment suspected.

The General himself did not notice the smiles. He glanced at his watch, rose and remarked: 'Exercise. Got to keep oneself fit on a boat,' and passed out through the open door on to the deck.

Miss Henderson glanced at the man who had smiled. It was a well-bred glance indicating that she was ready to enter into conversation with a fellow traveller.

'He is energetic - yes?' said the little man.

'He goes round the deck forty-eight times exactly,' said Miss Henderson. 'What an old gossip! And they say we are the scandal-loving sex.'

'What an impoliteness!'

'Frenchmen are always polite,' said Miss Henderson - there was the nuance of a question in her voice.

The little man responded promptly. 'Belgian, mademoiselle.'

'Oh! Belgian.'

'Hercule Poirot. At your service.'

The name aroused some memory. Surely she had heard it before -? 'Are you enjoying this trip, M. Poirot?'

'Frankly, no. It was an imbecility to allow myself to be persuaded to come. I detest la mer. Never does it remain tranquil no, not for a little minute.'

'Well, you admit it's quite calm now.'

M. Poirot admitted this grudgingly. 'At the moment, yes. That is why I revive. I once more interest myself in what passes around me - your very adept handling of the General Forbes, for instance.'

'You mean -' Miss Henderson paused.

Hercule Poirot bowed. 'Your methods of extracting the scandalous matter. Admirable!'

Miss Henderson laughed in an unashamed manner. 'That touch about the Guards? I knew that would bring the old boy up spluttering and gasping.' She leaned forward confidentially. 'I admit I like scandal - the more ill-natured, the better!'

Poirot looked thoughtfully at her - her slim well-preserved figure, her keen dark eyes, her grey hair; a woman of forty-five who was content to look her age.

Ellie said abruptly: 'I have it! Aren't you the great detective?'

Poirot bowed. 'You are too amiable, mademoiselle.' But he made no disclaimer.

'How thrilling,' said Miss Henderson. 'Are you "hot on the trail" as they say in books? Have we a criminal secretly in our midst? Or am I being indiscreet?'

'Not at all. Not at all. It pains me to disappoint your expectations, but I am simply here, like everyone else, to amuse myself.'

He said it in such a gloomy voice that Miss Henderson laughed.

'Oh! Well, you will be able to get ashore tomorrow at Alexandria. You have been to Egypt before?'

'Never, mademoiselle.'

Miss Henderson rose somewhat abruptly.

'I think I shall join the General on his constitutional,' she announced.

Poirot sprang politely to his feet.

She gave him a little nod and passed out on to the deck.

A faint puzzled look showed for a moment in Poirot's eyes, then, a little smile creasing his lips, he rose, put his head through the door and glanced down the deck. Miss Henderson was leaning against the rail talking to a tall, soldierly-looking man.

Poirot's smile deepened. He drew himself back into the smoking-room with the same exaggerated care with which a tortoise withdraws itself into its shell. For the moment he had the smoking-room to himself, though he rightly conjectured that that would not last long.

It did not. Mrs Clapperton, her carefully waved platinum head protected with a net, her massaged and dieted form dressed in a smart sports suit, came through the door from the bar with the

purposeful air of a woman who has always been able to pay top price for anything she needed.

She said: 'John -? Oh! Good morning, M. Poirot - have you seen John?'

'He's on the starboard deck, madame. Shall I -?'

She arrested him with a gesture. 'I'll sit here a minute.' She sat down in a regal fashion in the chair opposite him. From the distance she had looked a possible twenty-eight. Now, in spite of her exquisitely made-up face, her delicately plucked eyebrows, she looked not her actual forty-nine years, but a possible fifty-five. Her eyes were a hard pale blue with tiny pupils.

'I was sorry not to have seen you at dinner last night,' she said. 'It was just a shade choppy, of course -'

'Pré cisé ment,' said Poirot with feeling.

'Luckily, I am an excellent sailor,' said Mrs Clapperton. 'I say luckily, because, with my weak heart, seasickness would probably be the death of me.'

'You have the weak heart, madame?'

'Yes, I have to be most careful. I must not overtire myself. All the specialists say so!' Mrs Clapperton had embarked on the - to her - ever-fascinating topic of her health. 'John, poor darling, wears

himself out trying to prevent me from doing too much. I live so intensely, if you know what I mean, M. Poirot?'

'Yes, yes.'

'He always says to me: "Try to be more of a vegetable, Adeline." But I can't. Life was meant to be lived, I feel. As a matter of fact I wore myself out as a girl in the war. My hospital - you've heard of my hospital? Of course I had nurses and matrons and all that but I actually ran it.' She sighed.

'Your vitality is marvellous, dear lady,' said Poirot, with the slightly mechanical air of one responding to his cue.

Mrs Clapperton gave a girlish laugh.

'Everyone tells me how young I am! It's absurd. I never try to pretend I'm a day less than forty-three,' she continued with lightly mendacious candour, 'but a lot of people find it hard to believe. "You're so alive, Adeline," they say to me. But really, M. Poirot, what would one be if one wasn't alive?'

'Dead,' said Poirot.

Mrs Clapperton frowned. The reply was not to her liking. The man, she decided, was trying to be funny. She got up and said coldly: 'I must find John.'

As she stepped through the door she dropped her handbag. It opened and the contents flew far and wide. Poirot rushed gallantly

to the rescue. It was some few minutes before the lipsticks, vanity boxes, cigarette case and lighter and other odds and ends were collected. Mrs Clapperton thanked him politely, then she swept down the deck and said, 'John!'

Colonel Clapperton was still deep in conversation with Miss Henderson. He swung round and came quickly to meet his wife. He bent over her protectively. Her deck chair - was it in the right place? Wouldn't it be better -? His manner was courteous - full of gentle consideration. Clearly an adored wife spoilt by an adoring husband.

Miss Ellie Henderson looked out at the horizon as though something about it rather disgusted her.

Standing in the smoking-room door, Poirot looked on.

A hoarse quavering voice behind him said: 'I'd take a hatchet to that woman if I were her husband.' The old gentleman known disrespectfully among the younger set on board as the Grandfather of All the Tea Planters, had just shuffled in. 'Boy!' he called. 'Get me a whisky peg.'

Poirot stooped to retrieve a torn scrap of notepaper, an overlooked item from the contents of Mrs Clapperton's bag. Part of a prescription, he noted, containing digitalin. He put it in his pocket, meaning to restore it to Mrs Clapperton later.

'Yes,' went on the aged passenger. 'Poisonous woman. I remember a woman like that in Poona. In '87 that was.'

'Did anyone take a hatchet to her?' inquired Poirot.

The old gentleman shook his head sadly.

'Worried her husband into his grave within the year. Clapperton ought to assert himself. Gives his wife her head too much.'

'She holds the purse strings,' said Poirot gravely.

'Ha, ha!' chuckled the old gentleman. 'You've put the matter in a nutshell. Holds the purse strings. Ha, ha!'

Two girls burst into the smoking-room. One had a round face with freckles and dark hair streaming out in a windswept confusion, the other had freckles and curly chestnut hair.

'A rescue - a rescue!' cried Kitty Mooney. 'Pam and I are going to rescue Colonel Clapperton.'

'From his wife,' gasped Pamela Cregan.

'We think he's a pet...'

'And she's just awful - she won't let him do anything,' the two girls exclaimed.

'And if he isn't with her, he's usually grabbed by the Henderson woman...'

'Who's quite nice. But terribly old...'

They ran out, gasping in between giggles: 'A rescue - a rescue!'

That the rescue of Colonel Clapperton was no isolated sally, but a fixed project was made clear that same evening when the eighteen-year-old Pam Cregan came up to Hercule Poirot, and murmured:

'Watch us, M. Poirot. He's going to be cut out from under her nose and taken to walk in the moonlight on the boat deck.'

It was just at that moment that Colonel Clapperton was saying:

'I grant you the price of a Rolls-Royce. But it's practically good for a lifetime. Now my car -'

'My car, I think, John.' Mrs Clapperton's voice was shrill and penetrating.

He showed no annoyance at her ungraciousness. Either he was used to it by this time, or else - 'Or else?' thought Poirot and let himself speculate.

'Certainly, my dear, your car,' Clapperton bowed to his wife and finished what he had been saying, perfectly unruffled.

'Voilà ce qu'on appelle le pukka sahib,' thought Poirot. 'But the General Forbes says that Clapperton is no gentleman at all. I wonder now.'

There was a suggestion of bridge. Mrs Clapperton, General Forbes and a hawk-eyed couple sat down to it. Miss Henderson had excused herself and gone out on deck.

'What about your husband?' asked General Forbes, hesitating.

'John won't play,' said Mrs Clapperton. 'Most tiresome of him.'

The four bridge players began shuffling the cards.

Pam and Kitty advanced on Colonel Clapperton. Each one took an arm.

'You're coming with us!' said Pam. 'To the boat deck. There's a moon.'

'Don't be foolish, John,' said Mrs Clapperton. 'You'll catch a chill.'

'Not with us, he won't,' said Kitty. 'We're hot stuff!'

He went with them, laughing.

Poirot noticed that Mrs Clapperton said No Bid to her initial bid of Two Clubs.

He strolled out on to the promenade deck. Miss Henderson was standing by the rail. She looked round expectantly as he came to stand beside her and he saw the drop in her expression.

They chatted for a while. Then presently as he fell silent she asked: 'What are you thinking about?'

Poirot replied: 'I am wondering about my knowledge of English. Mrs Clapperton said: "John won't play bridge." Is not "can't play" the usual term?'

'She takes it as a personal insult that he doesn't, I suppose,' said Ellie drily. 'The man was a fool ever to have married her.'

In the darkness Poirot smiled. 'You don't think it's just possible that the marriage may be a success?' he asked diffidently.

'With a woman like that?'

Poirot shrugged his shoulders. 'Many odious women have devoted husbands. An enigma of nature. You will admit that nothing she says or does appears to gall him.' Miss Henderson was considering her reply when Mrs Clapperton's voice floated out through the smoking-room window.

'No - I don't think I will play another rubber. So stuffy. I think I'll go up and get some air on the boat deck.'

'Good night,' said Miss Henderson. 'I'm going to bed.' She disappeared abruptly.

Poirot strolled forward to the lounge - deserted save for Colonel Clapperton and the two girls. He was doing card tricks for them and noting the dexterity of his shuffling and handling of the cards, Poirot

remembered the General's story of a career on the music hall stage.

'I see you enjoy the cards even though you do not play bridge,' he remarked.

'I've my reasons for not playing bridge,' said Clapperton, his charming smile breaking out. 'I'll show you. We'll play one hand.' He dealt the cards rapidly. 'Pick up your hands. Well, what about it?' He laughed at the bewildered expression on Kitty's face. He laid down his hand and the others followed suit. Kitty held the entire club suit, M. Poirot the hearts, Pam the diamonds and Colonel Clapperton the spades.

'You see?' he said. 'A man who can deal his partner and his adversaries any hand he pleases had better stand aloof from a friendly game! If the luck goes too much his way, ill-natured things might be said.'

'Oh!' gasped Kitty. 'How could you do that? It all looked perfectly ordinary.'

'The quickness of the hand deceives the eye,' said Poirot sententiously - and caught the sudden change in the Colonel's expression.

It was as though he realized that he had been off his guard for a moment or two.

Poirot smiled. The conjuror had shown himself through the mask of the pukka sahib.

The ship reached Alexandria at dawn the following morning.

As Poirot came up from breakfast he found the two girls all ready to go on shore. They were talking to Colonel Clapperton.

'We ought to get off now,' urged Kitty. 'The passport people will be going off the ship presently. You'll come with us, won't you? You wouldn't let us go ashore all by ourselves? Awful things might happen to us.'

'I certainly don't think you ought to go by yourselves,' said Clapperton, smiling. 'But I'm not sure my wife feels up to it.'

'That's too bad,' said Pam. 'But she can have a nice long rest.'

Colonel Clapperton looked a little irresolute. Evidently the desire to play truant was strong upon him. He noticed Poirot.

'Hullo, M. Poirot - you going ashore?'

'No, I think not,' M. Poirot replied.

'I'll - I'll -just have a word with Adeline,' decided Colonel Clapperton.

'We'll come with you,' said Pam. She flashed a wink at Poirot. 'Perhaps we can persuade her to come too,' she added gravely.

Colonel Clapperton seemed to welcome this suggestion. He looked decidedly relieved.

'Come along then, the pair of you,' he said lightly. They all three went along the passage of B deck together.

Poirot, whose cabin was just opposite the Clappertons, followed them out of curiosity.

Colonel Clapperton rapped a little nervously at the cabin door. 'Adeline, my dear, are you up?'

The sleepy voice of Mrs Clapperton from within replied: 'Oh, bother - what is it?'

'It's John. What about going ashore?'

'Certainly not.' The voice was shrill and decisive. 'I've had a very bad night. I shall stay in bed most of the day.'

Pam nipped in quickly. 'Oh, Mrs Clapperton, I'm so sorry. We did so want you to come with us. Are you sure you're not up to it?'

'I'm quite certain.' Mrs Clapperton's voice sounded even shriller.

The Colonel was turning the door-handle without result.

'What is it, John? The door's locked. I don't want to be disturbed by the stewards.'

'Sorry, my dear, sorry. Just wanted my Baedeker.'

'Well, you can't have it,' snapped Mrs Clapperton. 'I'm not going to get out of bed. Do go away, John, and let me have a little peace.'

'Certainly, certainly, my dear.' The Colonel backed away from the door. Pam and Kitty closed in on him.

'Let's start at once. Thank goodness your hat's on your head. Oh, gracious - your passport isn't in the cabin, is it?'

'As a matter of fact it's in my pocket -' began the Colonel.

Kitty squeezed his arm. 'Glory be!' she exclaimed. 'Now, come on.'

Leaning over the rail, Poirot watched the three of them leave the ship. He heard a faint intake of breath beside him and turned to see Miss Henderson. Her eyes were fastened on the three retreating figures.

'So they've gone ashore,' she said flatly.

'Yes. Are you going?'

She had a shade hat, he noticed, and a smart bag and shoes. There was a shore-going appearance about her. Nevertheless, after the most infinitesimal of pauses, she shook her head.

'No,' she said. 'I think I'll stay on board. I have a lot of letters to write.'

She turned and left him.

Puffing after his morning tour of forty-eight rounds of the deck, General Forbes took her place. 'Aha!' he exclaimed as his eyes noted the retreating figures of the Colonel and the two girls. 'So that's the game! Where's the Madam?'

Poirot explained that Mrs Clapperton was having a quiet day in bed.

'Don't you believe it!' the old warrior closed one knowing eye. 'She'll be up for tiffin - and if the poor devil's found to be absent without leave, there'll be ructions.'

But the General's prognostications were not fulfilled. Mrs Clapperton did not appear at lunch and by the time the Colonel and his attendant damsels returned to the ship at four o'clock, she had not shown herself.

Poirot was in his cabin and heard the husband's slightly guilty knock on his cabin door. Heard the knock repeated, the cabin door tried, and finally heard the Colonel's call to a steward.

'Look here, I can't get an answer. Have you a key?'

Poirot rose quickly from his bunk and came out into the passage.

The news went like wildfire round the ship. With horrified incredulity people heard that Mrs Clapperton had been found dead in her bunk - a native dagger driven through her heart. A string of amber beads was found on the floor of her cabin. Rumour succeeded rumour. All bead sellers who had been allowed on board that day were being rounded up and questioned! A large sum in cash had disappeared from a drawer in the cabin! The notes had been traced! They had not been traced! Jewellery worth a fortune had been taken! No jewellery had been taken at all! A steward had been arrested and had confessed to the murder!

'What is the truth of it all?' demanded Miss Ellie Henderson waylaying Poirot. Her face was pale and troubled.

'My dear lady, how should I know?'

'Of course you know,' said Miss Henderson.

It was late in the evening. Most people had retired to their cabins. Miss Henderson led Poirot to a couple of deck chairs on the sheltered side of the ship. 'Now tell me,' she commanded.

Poirot surveyed her thoughtfully. 'It's an interesting case,' he said.

'Is it true that she had some very valuable jewellry stolen?'

Poirot shook his head. 'No. No jewellery was taken. A small amount of loose cash that was in a drawer has disappeared, though.'

'I'll never feel safe on a ship again,' said Miss Henderson with a shiver. 'Any clue as to which of those coffee-coloured brutes did it?'

'No,' said Hercule Poirot. 'The whole thing is rather - strange.'

'What do you mean?' asked Ellie sharply.

Poirot spread out his hands. 'Eh bien - take the facts. Mrs Clapperton had been dead at least five hour when she was found. Some money had disappeared. A string of beads was on the floor by her bed. The door was locked and the key was missing. The window - window, not port-hole - gives on the deck and was open.'

'Well?' asked the woman impatiently.

'Do you not think it is curious for a murder to be committed under those particular circumstances? Remember that the postcard sellers, money changers and bead sellers who are allowed on board are all well known to the police.'

'The stewards usually lock your cabin, all the same,' Ellie pointed out.

'Yes, to prevent any chance of petty pilfering. But this - was murder.'

'What exactly are you thinking of, M. Poirot?' Her voice sounded a little breathless.

'I am thinking of the locked door.'

Miss Henderson considered this. 'I don't see anything in that. The man left by the door, locked it and took the key with him so as to avoid having the murder discovered too soon. Quite intelligent of him, for it wasn't discovered until four o'clock in the afternoon.'

'No, no, mademoiselle, you don't appreciate the point I'm trying to make. I'm not worried as to how he got out, but as to how he got in.'

'The window of course.'

'C'est possible. But it would be a very narrow fit - and there were people passing up and down the deck all the time, remember.'

'Then through the door,' said Miss Henderson impatiently.

'But you forget, mademoiselle. Mrs Clapperton had locked the door on the inside. She had done so before Colonel Clapperton left the boat this morning. He actually tried it - so we know that is so.'

'Nonsense. It probably stuck - or he didn't turn the handle properly.'

'But it does not rest on his word. We actually heard Mrs Clapperton herself say so.'

'We?'

'Miss Mooney, Miss Cregan, Colonel Clapperton and myself.'

Ellie Henderson tapped a neatly shod foot. She did not speak for a moment or two. Then she said in a slightly irritable tone:

'Well - what exactly do you deduce from that? If Mrs Clapperton could lock the door she could unlock it too, I suppose.'

'Precisely, precisely.' Poirot turned a beaming face upon her. 'And you see where that leads us. Mrs Clapperton unlocked the door and let the murderer in. Now would she be likely to do that for a bead seller?'

Ellie objected: 'She might not have known who it was. He may have knocked - she got up and opened the door - and he forced his way in and killed her.'

Poirot shook his head. 'Au contraire. She was lying peacefully in bed when she was stabbed.'

Miss Henderson stared at him. 'What's your idea?' she asked abruptly.

Poirot smiled. 'Well, it looks, does it not, as though she knew the person she admitted...'

'You mean,' said Miss Henderson and her voice sounded a little harsh, 'that the murderer is a passenger on the ship?'

Poirot nodded. 'It seems indicated.'

'And the string of beads left on the floor was a blind?'

'Precisely.'

'The theft of the money also?'

'Exactly.'

There was a pause, then Miss Henderson said slowly: 'I thought Mrs Clapperton a very unpleasant woman and I don't think anyone on board really liked her - but there wasn't anyone who had any reason to kill her.'

'Except her husband, perhaps,' said Poirot.

'You don't really think -' She stopped.

'It is the opinion of every person on this ship that Colonel Clapperton would have been quite justified in "taking a hatchet to her". That was, I think, the expression used.'

Ellie Henderson looked at him - waiting.

'But I am bound to say,' went on Poirot, 'that I myself have not noted any signs of exasperation on the good Colonel's part. Also, what is more important, he had an alibi. He was with those two girls all day and did not return to the ship till four o'clock. By then, Mrs Clapperton had been dead many hours.'

There was another minute of silence. Ellie Henderson said softly: 'But you still think - a passenger on the ship?'

Poirot bowed his head.

Ellie Henderson laughed suddenly - a reckless defiant laugh.

'Your theory may be difficult to prove, M. Poirot. There are a good many passengers on this ship.'

Poirot bowed to her. 'I will use a phrase from one of your detective story writers. "I have my methods, Watson."'

The following evening, at dinner, every passenger found a typewritten slip by his plate requesting him to be in the main lounge at 8.30. When the company were assembled, the Captain stepped on to the raised platform where the orchestra usually played and addressed them.

'Ladies and gentlemen, you all know of the tragedy which took place yesterday. I am sure you all wish to co-operate in bringing the perpetrator of that foul crime to justice.' He paused and cleared his throat. 'We have on board with us M. Hercule Poirot who is probably known to you all as a man who has had wide experience in - er - such matters. I hope you will listen carefully to what he has to say.'

It was at this minute that Colonel Clapperton, who had not been at dinner, came in and sat down next to General Forbes. He looked like a man bewildered by sorrow - not at all like a man conscious of great relief. Either he was a very good actor or else he had been genuinely fond of his disagreeable wife.

'M. Hercule Poirot,' said the Captain and stepped down. Poirot took his place. He looked comically self-important as he beamed on his audience.

'Messieurs, mesdames,' he began. 'It is most kind of you to be so indulgent as to listen to me. M. le Captaine has told you that I have had a certain experience in these matters. I have, it is true, a little idea of my own about how to get to the bottom of this particular case.' He made a sign and a steward pushed forward and passed on to him a bulky, shapeless object wrapped in a sheet.

'What I am about to do may surprise you a little,' Poirot warned them. 'It may occur to you that I am eccentric, perhaps mad. Nevertheless I assure you that behind my madness there is - as you English say - a method.'

His eyes met those of Miss Henderson for just a minute. He began unwrapping the bulky object.

'I have here, messieurs and mesdames, an important witness to the truth of who killed Mrs Clapperton.' With a deft hand he whisked away the last enveloping cloth, and the object it concealed was revealed - an almost life-sized wooden doll, dressed in a velvet suit and lace collar.

'Now, Arthur,' said Poirot and his voice changed subtly - it was no longer foreign - it had instead a confident English, a slightly Cockney inflection. 'Can you tell me - I repeat - can you tell me - anything at all about the death of Mrs Clapperton?'

The doll's neck oscillated a little, its wooden lower jaw dropped and wavered and a shrill high-pitched woman's voice spoke:

'What is it, John? The door's locked. I don't want to be disturbed by the stewards...'

There was a cry - an overturned chair - a man stood swaying, his hand to his throat - trying to speak - trying... Then suddenly, his figure seemed to crumple up. He pitched headlong.

It was Colonel Clapperton.

Poirot and the ship's doctor rose from their knees by the prostrate figure.

'All over, I'm afraid. Heart,' said the doctor briefly.

Poirot nodded. 'The shock of having his trick seen through,' he said.

He turned to General Forbes. 'It was you, General, who gave me a valuable hint with your mention of the music hall stage. I puzzle - I think - and then it comes to me. Supposing that before the war Clapperton was a ventriloquist. In that case, it would be perfectly possible for three people to hear Mrs Clapperton speak from inside her cabin when she was already dead...'

Ellie Henderson was beside him. Her eyes were dark and full of pain. 'Did you know his heart was weak?' she asked.

'I guessed it... Mrs Clapperton talked of her own heart being affected, but she struck me as the type of woman who likes to be thought ill. Then I picked up a torn prescription with a very strong dose of digitalin in it. Digitalin is a heart medicine but it couldn't be Mrs Clapperton's because digitalin dilates the pupils of the eyes. I had never noticed such a phenomenon with her but when I looked at his eyes I saw the signs at once.'

Ellie murmured: 'So you thought - it might end - this way?'

'The best way, don't you think, mademoiselle?' he said gently. He saw the tears rise in her eyes. She said: 'You've known. You've known all along... That I cared... But he didn't do it for me... It was those girls - youth - it made him feel his slavery. He wanted to be free before it was too late... Yes, I'm sure that's how it was... When did you guess - that it was he?'

'His self-control was too perfect,' said Poirot simply. 'No matter how galling his wife's conduct, it never seemed to touch him. That meant either that he was so used to it that it no longer stung him, or else - eh bien - I decided on the latter alternative... And I was right...

'And then there was his insistence on his conjuring ability - the evening before the crime he pretended to give himself away. But a man like Clapperton doesn't give himself away. There must be a reason. So long as people thought he had been a conjuror they weren't likely to think of his having been a ventriloquist.'

'And the voice we heard - Mrs Clapperton's voice?'

'One of the stewardesses had a voice not unlike hers. I induced her to hide behind the stage and taught her the words to say.'

'It was a trick - a cruel trick,' cried out Ellie.

'I do not approve of murder,' said Hercule Poirot.

HOW DOES YOUR GARDEN GROW?

Hercule Poirot arranged his letters in a neat pile in front of him. He picked up the topmost letter, studied the address for a moment, then neatly slit the back of the envelope with a little paperknife that he kept on the breakfast table for that express purpose and extracted the contents. Inside was yet another envelope, carefully sealed with purple wax and marked 'Private and Confidential'.

Hercule Poirot's eyebrows rose a little on his egg-shaped head. He murmured, 'Patience! Nous allons arriver!' and once more brought the little paper-knife into play. This time the envelope yielded a letter - written in a rather shaky and spiky handwriting. Several words were heavily underlined.

Hercule Poirot unfolded it and read. The letter was headed once again 'Private and Confidential'. On the right-hand side was the address - Rosebank, Charman's Green, Bucks - and the date - March twenty-first.

Dear M. Poirot,

I have been recommended to you by an old and valued friend of mine who knows the worry and distress I have been in lately. Not that this friend knows the actual circumstances - those I have kept entirely to myself - the matter being strictly private. My friend assures me that you are discretion itself and that there will be no fear of my being involved in a police matter which, if my suspicions should prove correct, I should very much dislike. But it is of course possible that I am entirely mistaken. I do not feel myself clear-headed enough nowadays, suffering as I do from insomnia and the result of a severe illness last winter - to investigate things for myself. I have neither the means nor the ability. On the other hand, I must reiterate once more that this is a very delicate family matter and that for many reasons I may want the whole thing hushed up. If I am once assured of the facts, I can deal with the matter myself and should prefer to do so. I hope that I have made myself clear on this point. If you will undertake this investigation, perhaps you will let me know to the above address?

Yours very truly,

Amelia Barrowby

Poirot read the letter through twice. Again his eyebrows rose slightly. Then he placed it on one side and proceeded to the next envelope in the pile.

At ten o'clock precisely he entered the room where Miss Lemon, his confidential secretary, sat awaiting her instructions for the day. Miss Lemon was forty-eight and of unprepossessing appearance. Her general effect was that of a lot of bones flung together at random. She had a passion for order almost equalling that of Poirot himself; and though capable of thinking, she never thought unless told to do so.

Poirot handed her the morning correspondence. 'Have the goodness, mademoiselle, to write refusals in correct terms to all of these.'

Miss Lemon ran an eye over the various letters, scribbling in turn a hieroglyphic on each of them. These marks were legible to her alone and were in a code of her own: 'Soft soap'; 'slap in the face'; 'purr purr'; 'curt'; and so on. Having done this, she nodded and looked up for further instructions.

Poirot handed her Amelia Barrowby's letter. She extracted it from its double envelope, read it through and looked up inquiringly.

'Yes, M. Poirot?' Her pencil hovered - ready - over her short-hand pad.

'What is your opinion of that letter, Miss Lemon?'

With a slight frown Miss Lemon put down the pencil and read through the letter again.

The contents of a letter meant nothing to Miss Lemon except from the point of view of composing an adequate reply. Very occasionally her employer appealed to her human, as opposed to her official, capacities. It slightly annoyed Miss Lemon when he did so - she was very nearly the perfect machine, completely and gloriously uninterested in all human affairs. Her real passion in life was the perfection of a filing system beside which all other filing systems should sink into oblivion. She dreamed of such a system at night. Nevertheless, Miss Lemon was perfectly capable of intelligence on purely human matters, as Hercule Poirot well knew.

'Well?' he demanded.

'Old lady,' said Miss Lemon. 'Got the wind up pretty badly.'

'Ah! The wind rises in her, you think?'

Miss Lemon, who considered that Poirot had been long enough in Great Britain to understand its slang terms, did not reply. She took a brief look at the double envelope.

'Very hush-hush,' she said. 'And tells you nothing at all.'

'Yes,' said Hercule Poirot. 'I observed that.'

Miss Lemon's hand hung once more hopefully over the shorthand pad. This time Hercule Poirot responded.

'Tell her I will do myself the honour to call upon her at any time she suggests, unless she prefers to consult me here. Do not type the letter - write it by hand.'

'Yes, M. Poirot.'

Poirot produced more correspondence. 'These are bills.'

Miss Lemon's efficient hands sorted them quickly. 'I'll pay all but these two.'

'Why those two? There is no error in them.'

'They are firms you've only just begun to deal with. It looks bad to pay too promptly when you've just opened an account - looks as though you were working up to get some credit later on.'

'Ah!' murmured Poirot. 'I bow to your superior knowledge of the British tradesman.'

'There's nothing much I don't know about them,' said Miss Lemon grimly.

The letter to Miss Amelia Barrowby was duly written and sent, but no reply was forthcoming. Perhaps, thought Hercule Poirot, the old lady had unravelled her mystery herself. Yet he felt a shade of surprise that in that case she should not have written a courteous word to say that his services were no longer required.

It was five days later when Miss Lemon, after receiving her morning's instructions, said, 'That Miss Barrowby we wrote to - no wonder there's been no answer. She's dead.'

Hercule Poirot said very softly, 'Ah - dead.' It sounded not so much like a question as an answer.

Opening her handbag, Miss Lemon produced a newspaper cutting. 'I saw it in the tube and tore it out.'

Just registering in his mind approval of the fact that, though Miss Lemon used the word 'tore', she had neatly cut the entry out with scissors, Poirot read the announcement taken from the Births, Deaths and Marriages in the Morning Post: 'On March 26th suddenly - at Rosebank, Charman's Green, Amelia Jane Barrowby, in her seventy-third year. No flowers, by request.'

Poirot read it over. He murmured under his breath, 'Suddenly'. Then he said briskly, 'If you will be so obliging as to take a letter, Miss Lemon?'

The pencil hovered. Miss Lemon, her mind dwelling on the intricacies of the filing system, took down in rapid and correct shorthand:

Dear Miss Barrowby,

I have received no reply from you, but as I shall be in the neighbourhood of Charman's Green on Friday, I will call upon you on that day and discuss more fully the matter mentioned to me in your letter.

Yours, etc.

'Type this letter, please; and if it is posted at once, it should get to Charman's Green tonight.'

On the following morning a letter in a black-edged envelope arrived by the second post:

Dear Sir,

In reply to your letter my aunt, Miss Barrowby, passed away on the twenty-sixth, so the matter you speak of is no longer of importance.

Yours truly,

Mary Delafontaine

Poirot smiled to himself. 'No longer of importance... Ah that is what we shall see. En avant - to Charman's Green.'

Rosebank was a house that seemed likely to live up to its name, which is more than can be said for most houses of its class and character.

Hercule Poirot paused as he walked up the path to the front door and looked approvingly at the neatly planned beds on either side of him. Rose trees that promised a good harvest later in the year, and at present daffodils, early tulips, blue hyacinths - the last bed was partly edged with shells.

Poirot murmured to himself, 'How does it go, the English rhyme the children sing?

Mistress Mary, quite contrary,

How does your garden grow?

With cockle-shells, and silver bells,

And pretty maids all in a row.

'Not a row, perhaps,' he considered, 'but here is at least one pretty maid to make the little rhyme come right.'

The front door had opened and a neat little maid in cap and apron was looking somewhat dubiously at the spectacle of a heavily moustached foreign gentleman talking aloud to himself in the front

garden. She was, as Poirot had noted, a very pretty little maid, with round blue eyes and rosy cheeks.

Poirot raised his hat with courtesy and addressed her: 'Pardon, but does a Miss Amelia Barrowby live here?'

The little maid gasped and her eyes grew rounder. 'Oh, sir, didn't you know? She's dead. Ever so sudden it was. Tuesday night.'

She hesitated, divided between two strong instincts: the first, distrust of a foreigner; the second, the pleasurable enjoyment of her class in dwelling on the subject of illness and death.

'You amaze me,' said Hercule Poirot, not very truthfully. 'I had an appointment with the lady for today. However, I can perhaps see the other lady who lives here.'

The little maid seemed slightly doubtful. 'The mistress? Well, you could see her, perhaps, but I don't know whether she'll be seeing anyone or not.'

'She will see me,' said Poirot, and handed her a card.

The authority of his tone had its effect. The rosy-cheeked maid fell back and ushered Poirot into a sitting-room on the right of the hall. Then, card in hand, she departed to summon her mistress.

Hercule Poirot looked round him. The room was a perfectly conventional, drawing-room - oatmeal-coloured paper with a frieze round the top, indeterminate cretonnes, rose-coloured cushions

and curtains, a good many china knick-knacks and ornaments. There was nothing in the room that stood out, that announced a definite personality.

Suddenly Poirot, who was very sensitive, felt eyes watching him. He wheeled round. A girl was standing in the entrance of the french window - a small, sallow girl, with very black hair and suspicious eyes.

She came in, and as Poirot made a little bow she burst out abruptly, 'Why have you come?'

Poirot did not reply. He merely raised his eyebrows.

'You are not a lawyer - no?' Her English was good, but not for a minute would anyone have taken her to be English.

'Why should I be a lawyer, mademoiselle?'

The girl stared at him sullenly. 'I thought you might be. I thought you had come perhaps to say that she did not know what she was doing. I have heard of such things - the not due influence; that is what they call it, no? But that is not right. She wanted me to have the money, and I shall have it. If it is needful I shall have a lawyer of my own. The money is mine. She wrote it down so, and so it shall be.' She looked ugly, her chin thrust out, her eyes gleaming.

The door opened and a tail woman entered and said, 'Katrina'.

The girl shrank, flushed, muttered something and went out through the window.

Poirot turned to face the newcomer who had so effectually dealt with the situation by uttering a single word. There had been authority in her voice, and contempt and a shade of well-bred irony. He realized at once that this was the owner of the house, Mary Delafontaine.

'M. Poirot? I wrote to you. You cannot have received my letter.'

'Alas, I have been away from London.'

'Oh, I see; that explains it. I must introduce myself. My name is Delafontaine. This is my husband. Miss Barrowby was my aunt.'

Mr Delafontaine had entered so quietly that his arrival had passed unnoticed. He was a tall man with grizzled hair and an indeterminate manner. He had a nervous way of fingering his chin. He looked often towards his wife, and it was plain that he expected her to take the lead in any conversation.

'I much regret that I intrude in the midst of your bereavement,' said Hercule Poirot.

'I quite realize that it is not your fault,' said Mrs Delafontaine. 'My aunt died or Tuesday evening. It was quite unexpected.'

'Most unexpected,' said Mr Delafontaine. 'Great blow.' His eyes watched the window where the foreign girl had disappeared.

'I apologize,' said Hercule Poirot. 'And I withdraw.' He moved a step towards the door.

'Half a sec,' said Mr Delafontaine. 'You - er - had an appointment with Aunt Amelia, you say?'

'Parfaitement.'

'Perhaps you will tell us about it,' said his wife. 'If there is anything we can do -'

'It was of a private nature,' said Poirot. 'I am a detective,' he added simply.

Mr Delafontaine knocked over a little china figure he was handling. His wife looked puzzled.

'A detective? And you had an appointment with Auntie? But how extraordinary? She stared at him. 'Can't you tell us a little more, M. Poirot? It - it seems quite fantastic.'

Poirot was silent for a moment. He chose his words with care.

'It is difficult for me, madame, to know what to do.'

'Look here,' said Mr Delafontaine. 'She didn't mention Russians, did she?'

'Russians?'

'Yes, you know - Bolshies, Reds, all that sort of thing.'

'Don't be absurd, Henry,' said his wife.

Mr Delafontaine collapsed. 'Sorry - sorry - I just wondered.'

Mary Delafontaine looked frankly at Poirot. Her eyes were very blue - the colour of forget-me-nots. 'If you can tell us anything, M. Poirot, I should be glad if you would do so. I can assure you that I have a - a reason for asking.'

Mr Delafontaine looked alarmed. 'Be careful, old girl - you know there may be nothing in it.'

Again his wife quelled him with a glance. 'Well, M. Poirot?'

Slowly, gravely, Hercule Poirot shook his head. He shook it with visible regret, but he shook it. 'At present, madame,' he said, 'I fear I must say nothing.'

He bowed, picked up his hat and moved to the door. Mary Delafontaine came with him into the hall. On the doorstep he paused and looked at her.

'You are fond of your garden, I think, madame?'

'I? Yes, I spend a lot of time gardening.'

'Je vous faits mes compliments.'

He bowed once more and strode down to the gate. As he passed out of it and turned to the right he glanced back and registered two impressions - a sallow face watching him from a first-floor window, and a man of erect and soldierly carriage pacing up and down on the opposite side of the street.

Hercule Poirot nodded to himself. 'Definitivement,' he said. 'There is a mouse in this hole! What move must the cat make now?'

His decision took him to the nearest post office. Here he put through a couple of telephone calls. The result seemed to be satisfactory. He bent his steps to Charman's Green police station, where he inquired for Inspector Sims.

Inspector Sims was a big, burly man with a hearty manner.

'M. Poirot?' he inquired. 'I thought so. I've just this minute had a telephone call through from the chief constable about you. He said you'd be dropping in. Come into my office.'

The door shut, the inspector waved Poirot to one chair, settled himself in another, and turned a gaze of acute inquiry upon his visitor.

'You're very quick on to the mark, M. Poirot. Come to see us about this Rosebank case almost before we know it is a case. What put you on to it?'

Poirot drew out the letter he had received and handed it to the inspector. The latter read it with some interest.

'Interesting,' he said. 'The trouble is, it might mean so many things. Pity she couldn't have been a little more explicit. It would have helped us now.'

'Or there might have been no need for help.'

'You mean?'

'She might have been alive.'

'You go as far as that, do you? H'm - I'm not sure you're wrong.'

'I pray of you, Inspector, recount to me the facts. I know nothing at all.'

'That's easily done. Old lady was taken bad after dinner on Tuesday night. Very alarming. Convulsions - spasms - what not. They sent for the doctor. By the time he arrived she was dead. Idea was she'd died of a fit. Well, he didn't much like the look of things. He hemmed and hawed and put it with a bit of soft powder, but he made it clear that he couldn't give a death certificate. And as far as the family go, that's where the matter stands. They're awaiting the result of the post-mortem. We've got a bit further. The doctor gave us the tip right away - he and the police surgeon did the autopsy together - and the result is in no doubt whatever. The old lady died of a large dose of strychnine.'

'Aha!'

'That's right. Very nasty bit of work. Point is, who gave it to her? It must have been administered very shortly before death. First idea was it was given to her in her food at dinner - but, frankly, that seems to be a washout. They had artichoke soup, served from a tureen, fish pie and apple tart.'

'Miss Barrowby, Mr Delafontaine and Mrs Delafontaine. Miss Barrowby had a kind of nurse-attendant - a half-Russian girl but she didn't eat with the family. She had the remains as they came out from the dining-room. There's a maid, but it was her night out. She left the soup on the stove and the fish pie in the oven, and the apple tart was cold. All three of them ate the same thing - and, apart from that, I don't think you could get strychnine down anyone's throat that way. Stuff's as bitter as gall. The doctor told me you could taste it in a solution of one in a thousand, or something like that.'

'Coffee?'

'Coffee's more like it, but the old lady never took coffee.'

'I see your point. Yes, it seems an insuperable difficulty. What did she drink at the meal?'

'Water.'

'Worse and worse.'

'Bit of a teaser, isn't it?'

'She had money, the old lady?'

'Very well to do, I imagine. Of course, we haven't got exact details yet. The Delafontaines are pretty badly off, from what I can make out. The old lady helped with the upkeep of the house.'

Poirot smiled a little. He said, 'So you suspect the Delafontaines. Which of them?'

'I don't exactly say I suspect either of them in particular. But there it is; they're her only near relations, and her death brings them a tidy sum of money, I've no doubt. We all know what human nature is!'

'Sometimes inhuman - yes, that is very true. And there was nothing else the old lady ate or drank?'

'Well, as a matter of fact -'

'Ah, voilà! I felt that you had something, as you say, up your sleeve - the soup, the fish pie, the apple tart - des bêtises! Now we come to the hub of the affair.'

'I don't know about that. But as a matter of fact, the old girl took a cachet before meals. You know, not a pill or a tablet; one of those rice-paper things with a powder inside. Some perfectly harmless thing for the digestion.'

'Admirable. Nothing is easier than to fill a cachet with strychnine and substitute it for one of the others. It slips down the throat with a drink of water and is not tasted.'

'That's all right. The trouble is, the girl gave it to her.'

'The Russian girl?'

'Yes. Katrina Rieger. She was a kind of lady-help, nurse-companion to Miss Barrowby. Fairly ordered about by her, too, I gather. Fetch this, fetch that, fetch the other, rub my back, pour out my medicine, run round to the chemist - all that sort of business. You know how it is with these old women - they mean to be kind, but what they need is a sort of black slave!'

Poirot smiled.

'And there you are, you see,' continued Inspector Sims. 'It doesn't fit in what you might call nicely. Why should the girl poison her? Miss Barrowby dies and now the girl will be out of a job, and jobs aren't so easy to find - she's not trained or anything.'

'Still,' suggested Poirot, 'if the box of cachets was left about, anyone in the house might have the opportunity.'

'Naturally we're on to that, M. Poirot. I don't mind telling you we're making our inquiries - quiet like, if you understand me. When the prescription was last made up, where it was usually kept; patience and a lot of spade work - that's what will do the trick in the end. And

then there's Miss Barrowby's solicitor. I'm having an interview with him tomorrow. And the bank manager. There's a lot to be done still.'

Poirot rose. 'A little favour, Inspector Sims; you will send me a little word how the affair marches. I would esteem it a great favour. Here is my telephone number.'

'Why, certainly, M. Poirot. Two heads are better than one; and besides, you ought to be in on this, having had that letter and all.'

'You are too amiable, Inspector.' Politely, Poirot shook hands and took his leave.

He was called to the telephone on the following afternoon. 'Is that M. Poirot? Inspector Sims here. Things are beginning to sit up and look pretty in that little matter you and I know of.'

'In verity? Tell me, I pray of you.'

'Well, here's item No. 1 - and a pretty big item. Miss B. left a small legacy to her niece and everything else to K. In consideration of her great kindness and attention - that's the way it was put. That alters the complexion of things.'

A picture rose swiftly in Poirot's mind. A sullen face and a passionate voice saying, 'The money is mine. She wrote it down and so it shall be.' The legacy would not come as a surprise to Katrina - she knew about it beforehand.

'Item No. 2,' continued the voice of Inspector Sims. 'Nobody but K. handled that cachet.'

'You can be sure of that?'

'The girl herself doesn't deny it. What do you think of that?'

'Extremely interesting.'

'We only want one thing more - evidence of how the strychnine came into her possession. That oughtn't to be difficult.'

'But so far you haven't been successful?'

'I've barely started. The inquest was only this morning.'

'What happened at it?'

'Adjourned for a week.'

'And the young lady - K.?'

'I'm detaining her on suspicion. Don't want to run any risks. She might have some funny friends in the country who'd try to get her out of it.'

'No,' said Poirot. 'I do not think she has any friends.'

'Really? What makes you say that, M. Poirot?'

'It is just an idea of mine. There were no other "items", as you call them?'

'Nothing that's strictly relevant. Miss B. seems to have been monkeying about a bit with her shares lately - must have dropped quite a tidy sum. It's rather a funny business, one way and another, but I don't see how it affects the main issue - not at present, that is.'

'No, perhaps you are right. Well, my best thanks to you. It was most amiable of you to ring me up.'

'Not at all. I'm a man of my word. I could see you were interested. Who knows, you may be able to give me a helping hand before the end.'

'That would give me great pleasure. It might help you, for instance, if I could lay my hand on a friend of the girl Katrina.'

'I thought you said she hadn't got any friends?' said Inspector Sims, surprised.

'I was wrong,' said Hercule Poirot. 'She has one.'

Before the inspector could ask a further question, Poirot had rung off.

With a serious face he wandered into the room where Miss Lemon sat at her typewriter. She raised her hands from the keys at her employer's approach and looked at him inquiringly.

'I want you,' said Poirot, 'to figure to yourself a little history.' Miss Lemon dropped her hands into her lap in a resigned manner. She enjoyed typing, paying bills, filing papers and entering up engagements. To be asked to imagine herself in hypothetical situations bored her very much, but she accepted it as a disagreeable part of a duty.

'You are a Russian girl,' began Poirot.

'Yes,' said Miss Lemon, looking intensely British.

'You are alone and friendless in this country. You have reasons for not wishing to return to Russia. You are employed as a kind of drudge, nurse-attendant and companion to an old lady. You are meek and uncomplaining.'

'Yes,' said Miss Lemon obediently, but entirely failing to see herself being meek to any old lady under the sun.

'The old lady takes a fancy to you. She decides to leave her money to you. She tells you so.' Poirot paused.

Miss Lemon said 'Yes' again.

'And then the old lady finds out something; perhaps it is a matter of money - she may find that you have not been honest with her. Or it might be more grave still - a medicine that tasted different, some food that disagreed. Anyway, she begins to suspect you of something and she writes to a very famous detective - enfin, to the most famous detective - me! I am to call upon her shortly. And then,

as you say, the dripping will be in the fire. The great thing is to act quickly. And so - before the great detective arrives - the old lady is dead. And the money comes to you... Tell me, does that seem to you reasonable?'

'Quite reasonable,' said Miss Lemon. 'Quite reasonable for a Russian, that is. Personally, I should never take a post as a companion. I like my duties clearly defined. And of course I should not dream of murdering anyone.'

Poirot sighed. 'How I miss my friend Hastings. He had such an imagination. Such a romantic mind! It is true that he always imagined wrong - but that in itself was a guide.'

Miss Lemon was silent. She had heard about Captain Hastings before, and was not interested. She looked longingly at the typewritten sheet in front of her.

'So it seems to you reasonable,' mused Poirot.

'Doesn't it to you?'

'I am almost afraid it does,' sighed Poirot.

The telephone rang and Miss Lemon went out of the room to answer it. She came back to say 'It's Inspector Sims again.'

Poirot hurried to the instrument. "Allo, 'allo. What is that you say?'

Sims repeated his statement. 'We've found a packet of strychnine in the girl's bedroom - tucked underneath the mattress. The sergeant's just come in with the news. That about clinches it, I think.'

'Yes,' said Poirot, 'I think that clinches it.' His voice had changed. It rang with sudden confidence.

When he had rung off, he sat down at his writing table and arranged the objects on it in a mechanical manner. He murmured to himself, 'There was something wrong. I felt it - no, not felt. It must have been something I saw. En avant, the little grey cells. Ponder - reflect. Was everything logical and in order? The girl - her anxiety about the money; Mme Delafontaine; her husband his suggestion of Russians - imbecile, but he is an imbecile; the room; the garden - ah! Yes, the garden.'

He sat up very stiff. The green light shone in his eyes. He sprang up and went into the adjoining room.

'Miss Lemon, will you have the kindness to leave what you are doing and make an investigation for me?'

'An investigation, M. Poirot? I'm afraid I'm not very good -'

Poirot interrupted her. 'You said one day that you knew all about tradesmen.'

'Certainly I do,' said Miss Lemon with confidence.

'Then the matter is simple. You are to go to Charman's Green and you are to discover a fishmonger.'

'A fishmonger?' asked Miss Lemon, surprised.

'Precisely. The fishmonger who supplied Rosebank with fish. When you have found him you will ask him a certain question.'

He handed her a slip of paper. Miss Lemon took it, noted its contents without interest, then nodded and slipped the lid on her typewriter.

'We will go to Charman's Green together,' said Poirot. 'You go to the fishmonger and I to the police station. It will take us but half an hour from Baker Street.'

On arrival at his destination, he was greeted by the surprised Inspector Sims. 'Well, this is quick work, M. Poirot. I was talking to you on the phone only an hour ago.'

'I have a request to make to you; that you allow me to see this girl Katrina - what is her name?'

'Katrina Rieger. Well, I don't suppose there's any objection to that.'

The girl Katrina looked even more sallow and sullen than ever. Poirot spoke to her very gently. 'Mademoiselle, I want you to believe that I am not your enemy. I want you to tell me the truth.'

Her eyes snapped defiantly. 'I have told the truth. To everyone I have told the truth! If the old lady was poisoned, it was not I who poisoned her. It is all a mistake. You wish to prevent me having the money.' Her voice was rasping. She looked, he thought, like a miserable little cornered rat.

'Tell me about this cachet, mademoiselle,' M. Poirot went on. 'Did no one handle it but you?'

'I have said so, have I not? They were made up at the chemist's that afternoon. I brought them back with me in my bag - that was just before supper. I opened the box and gave Miss Barrowby one with a glass of water.'

'No one touched them but you?'

"No.' A cornered rat - with courage!

'And Miss Barrowby had for supper only what we have been told. The soup, the fish pie, the tart?'

'Yes.' A hopeless 'yes' - dark, smouldering eyes that saw no light anywhere.

Poirot patted her shoulder. 'Be of good courage, mademoiselle. There may yet be freedom - yes, and money - a life of ease.'

She looked at him suspiciously.

As he went out Sims said to him, 'I didn't quite get what you said through the telephone - something about the girl having a friend.'

'She has one. Me!' said Hercule Poirot, and had left the police station before the inspector could pull his wits together.

At the Green Cat tearooms, Miss Lemon did not keep her employer waiting. She went straight to the point.

'The man's name is Rudge, in the High Street, and you were quite right. A dozen and a half exactly. I've made a note of what he said.' She handed it to him.

'Arrr.' It was a deep, rich sound like the purr of a cat.

Hercule Poirot betook himself to Rosebank. As he stood in the front garden, the sun setting behind him, Mary Delafontaine came out to him.

'M. Poirot?' Her voice sounded surprised. 'You have come back?'

'Yes, I have come back.' He paused and then said, 'When I first came here, madame, the children's nursery rhyme came into my head:

Mistress Mary, quite contrary,

How does your garden grow?

With cockle-shells, and silver bells,

And pretty maids all in a row.

Only they are not cockle shells, are they, madame? They are oyster shells.' His hand pointed.

He heard her catch her breath and then stay very still. Her eyes asked a question.

He nodded. 'Mais, oui, I know! The maid left the dinner ready - she will swear and Katrina will swear that that is all you had. Only you and your husband know that you brought back a dozen and a half oysters - a little treat pour la bonne tante. So easy to put the strychnine in an oyster. It is swallowed - comme ça! But there remain the shells - they must not go in the bucket. The maid would see them. And so you thought of making an edging of them to a bed. But there were not enough - the edging is not complete. The effect is bad - it spoils the symmetry of the otherwise charming garden. Those few oyster shells struck an alien note - they displeased my eye on my first visit.'

Mary Delafontaine said, 'I suppose you guessed from the letter. I knew she had written - but I didn't know how much she'd said.'

Poirot answered evasively, 'I knew at least that it was a family matter. If it had been a question of Katrina there would have been

no point in hushing things up. I understand that you or your husband handled Miss Barrowby's securities to your own profit, and that she found out -'

Mary Delafontaine nodded. 'We've done it for years - a little here and there. I never realized she was sharp enough to find out. And then I learned she had sent for a detective; and I found out, too, that she was leaving her money to Katrina - that miserable little creature!'

'And so the strychnine was put in Katrina's bedroom? I comprehend. You save yourself and your husband from what I may discover, and you saddle an innocent child with murder. Had you no pity, madame?'

Mary Delafontaine shrugged her shoulders - her blue forget-me-not eyes looked into Poirot's. He remembered the perfection of her acting the first day he had come and the bungling attempts of her husband. A woman above the average - but inhuman.

She said, 'Pity? For that miserable intriguing little rat?' Her contempt rang out.

Hercule Poirot said slowly, 'I think, madame, that you have cared in your life for two things only. One is your husband.'

He saw her lips tremble.

'And the other - is your garden.'

He looked round him. His glance seemed to apologize to the flowers for that which he had done and was about to do.

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SANCTUARY

The vicar’s wife came round the corner of the vicarage full of chrysanthemums. A good deal of rich garden soil attached to her strong brogue shoes and a few fragments of earth were adhering to her nose, but of that fact she was perfectly unconscious.

She had a slight struggle in opening the vicarage gate which hung, rustily, half off its hinges. A puff of wind caught at her battered felt hat, causing it to sit even more rakishly than it had done before. 'Bother!' said Bunch.

Christened by her optimistic parents Diana, Mrs Harmon had become Bunch at an early age for somewhat obvious reasons and the name had stuck to her ever since. Clutching the chrysanthemums, she made her way through the gate to the churchyard, and so to the church door.

The November air was mild and damp. Clouds scudded across the sky with patches of blue here and there. Inside, the church was dark and cold: it was unheated except at service times.

‘Brrrrrh!’ said Bunch expressively. 'I'd better get on with this quickly. I don't want to die of cold.'

With the quickness born of practice she collected the necessary paraphernalia: vases, water, flower-holders. 'I wish we had lilies,' thought Bunch to herself. 'I get so tired of these scraggy chrysanthemums.' Her nimble fingers arranged the blooms in their holders.

There was nothing particularly original or artistic about the decorations, for Bunch Harmon herself was neither original nor artistic, but it was a homely and pleasant arrangement. Carrying the vases carefully, Bunch stepped up the aisle and made her way towards the altar. As she did so the sun came out.

It shone through the east window of somewhat crude coloured glass, mostly blue and red - the gift of a wealthy Victorian churchgoer. The effect was almost startling in its sudden opulence. 'Like jewels,' thought Bunch. Suddenly she stopped, staring ahead of her. On the chancel steps was a huddled dark form.

Putting down the flowers carefully, Bunch went up to it and bent over it. It was a man lying there, huddled over on himself. Bunch knelt down by him and slowly, carefully, she turned him over. Her fingers went to his pulse - a pulse so feeble and fluttering that it told its own story, as did the almost greenish pallor of his face. There was no doubt. Bunch thought, that the man was dying.

He was a man of about forty-five, dressed in a dark, shabby suit. She laid down the limp hand she had picked up and looked at his other hand. This seemed clenched like a fist on his breast. Looking more closely she saw that the fingers were closed over what seemed to be a large wad or handkerchief which he was holding tightly to his chest. All round the clenched hand there were splashes of a dry brown fluid which, Bunch guessed, was dry blood. Bunch sat back on her heels, frowning.

Up till now the man's eyes had been closed but at this point they suddenly opened and fixed themselves on Bunch's face. They were neither dazed nor wandering. They seemed fully alive and intelligent. His lips moved, and Bunch bent forward to catch the words, or rather the word. It was only one word that he said:

'Sanctuary.'

There was, she thought, just a very faint smile as he breathed out this word. There was no mistaking it, for after a moment he said it again, 'Sanctuary...'

Then, with a faint, long-drawn-out sigh, his eyes closed again. Once more Bunch's fingers went to his pulse. It was still there, but fainter now and more intermittent. She got up with decision.

'Don’t move,' she said, 'or try to move. I'm going for help.'

The man's eyes opened again but he seemed now to be fixing his attention on the coloured light that came through the east window. He murmured something that Bunch could not quite catch. She thought, startled, that it might have been her husband's name.

'Julian?' she said. 'Did you come here to find Julian?' But there was no answer. The man lay with eyes closed, his breathing in slow, shallow fashion.

Bunch turned and left the church rapidly. She glanced at her watch and nodded with some satisfaction. Dr Griffiths would still be in his surgery. It was only a couple of minutes' walk from the church. She went in, without waiting to knock or ring, passing through the waiting room and into the doctor's surgery.

'You must come at once,' said Bunch. 'There's a man dying in the church.'

Some minutes later Dr Griffiths rose from his knees after a brief examination.

'Can we move him from here into the vicarage? I can attend to him better there - not that it's any use.'

'Of course,' said Bunch. 'I'll go along and gel things ready. I'll get Harper and Jones, shall I? To help you carry him.'

'Thanks. I can telephone from the vicarage for an ambulance, but I'm afraid - by the time it comes...' He left the remark unfinished.

Bunch said, 'Internal bleeding?'

Dr Griffiths nodded. He said, 'How on earth did he come here?'

'I think he must have been here all night,' said Bunch, considering. 'Harper unlocks the church in the morning as he goes to work, but he doesn't usually come in.'

It was about five minutes later when Dr Griffiths put down the telephone receiver and came back into the morning-room where the injured man was lying on quickly arranged blankets on the sofa. Bunch was moving a basin of water and clearing up after the doctor's examination.

'Well, that's that,' said Griffiths. 'I've sent for an ambulance and I've notified the police.' He stood, frowning, looking down on the patient who lay with closed eyes. His left hand was plucking in a nervous, spasmodic way at his side.

'He was shot,' said Griffiths. 'Shot at fairly close quarters. He rolled his handkerchief up into a ball and plugged the wound with it so as to stop the bleeding.'

'Could he have gone far after that happened?' Bunch asked.

'Oh, yes, it's quite possible. A mortally wounded man has been known to pick himself up and walk along a street as though nothing had happened, and then suddenly collapse five or ten minutes later. So he needn't have been shot in the church. Oh no. He may have been shot some distance away. Of course, he may have shot himself and then dropped the revolver and staggered blindly towards the church. I don't quite know why he made for the church and not for the vicarage.'

'Oh, I know that,' said Bunch. 'He said it: "Sanctuary."'

The doctor stared at her. 'Sanctuary?'

'Here's Julian,' said Bunch, turning her head as she heard her husband's steps in the hall. 'Julian! Come here.'

The Reverend Julian Harmon entered the room. His vague, scholarly manner always made him appear much older than he really was. 'Dear me!' said Julian Harmon, staring in a mild, puzzled manner at the surgical appliances and the prone figure on the sofa.

Bunch explained with her usual economy of words. 'He was in the church, dying. He'd been shot. Do you know him, Julian? I thought he said your name.'

The vicar came up to the sofa and looked down at the dying man. 'Poor fellow,' he said, and shook his head. 'No, I don't know him. I'm almost sure I've never seen him before.'

At that moment the dying man's eyes opened once more. They went from the doctor to Julian Harmon and from him to his wife. The eyes stayed there, staring into Hunch's face. Griffiths stepped forward.

‘If you could tell us,' he said urgently.

But with eyes fixed on Bunch, the man said in a weak voice, 'Please - please - ' And then, with a slight tremor, he died...

Sergeant Hayes licked his pencil and turned the page of his notebook.

"So that's all you can tell me, Mrs Harmon?'

"That's all,' said Bunch. 'These are the things out of his coat pockets.'

On a table at Sergeant Hayes's elbow was a wallet, a rather battered old watch with the initials W.S. and the return half of a ticket to London. Nothing more.

'You've found out who he is?' asked Bunch.

'A Mr and Mrs Eccles phoned up the station. He's her brother, it seems. Name of Sandboume. Been in a low state of health and nerves for some time. He's been getting worse lately. The day before yesterday he walked out and didn't come back. He took a revolver with him.'

'And he came out here and shot himself with it?' said Bunch. 'Why?'

'Well, you see, he'd been depressed...'

Bunch interrupted him. 'I don't mean that. I mean, why here?'

Since Sergeant Hayes obviously did not know the answer to that one, he replied in an oblique fashion, 'Come out here, he did, on the five-ten bus.'

'Yes,' said Bunch again. 'But why?'

'I don't know, Mrs Harmon,' said Sergeant Hayes.

'There's no accounting. If the balance of the mind is disturbed - '

Bunch finished for him. 'They may do it anywhere. But it still seems to me unnecessary to take a bus out to a small country place like this. He didn't know anyone here, did he?'

'Not so far as can be ascertained,' said Sergeant Hayes. He coughed in an apologetic manner and said, as he rose to his feet, 'It may be as Mr and Mrs Eccles will come out and see you, ma'am - if you don't mind, that is.'

'Of course I don't mind,' said Bunch. 'It's very natural. I only wish I had something to tell them.'

'I'll be getting along,' said Sergeant Hayes.

'I'm only so thankful,' said Bunch, going with him to the front door, 'that it wasn't murder.'

A car had driven up at the vicarage gate. Sergeant Hayes, glancing at it, remarked: 'Looks as though that's Mr and Mrs Eccles come here now, ma'am, to talk with you.'

Bunch braced herself to endure what, she felt, might be rather a difficult ordeal. 'However,' she thought, 'I can always call Julian to help me. A clergyman's a great help when people are bereaved.'

Exactly what she had expected Mr and Mrs Eccles to be like, Bunch could not have said, but she was conscious, as she greeted them, of a feeling of surprise. Mr Eccles was a stout florid man whose natural manner would have been cheerful and facetious. Mrs Eccles bad a vaguely flashy look about her. She had a small, mean, pursed-up mouth. Her voice was thin and reedy.

'It's been a terrible shock, Mrs Harmon, as you can imagine,' she said.

'Oh, I know,' said Bunch. 'It must have been. Do sit down. Can I offer you - well, perhaps it's a little early for tea - '

Mr Eccles waved a pudgy hand. 'No, no, nothing for us," he said. 'It's very kind of you, I'm sure. Just wanted to... well... what poor William said and all that, you know?'

'He's been abroad a long time,' said Mrs Eccles, 'and I think he must have had some very nasty experiences. Very quiet and depressed he's been, ever since he came home - Said the world wasn't fit to live in and there was nothing to look forward to. Poor Bill, he was always moody.'

Bunch stared at them both for a moment or two without speaking.

'Pinched my husband's revolver, he did,' went on Mrs Eccles. 'Without our knowing. Then it seems he come here by bus. I suppose that was nice feeling on his part. He wouldn't have liked to do it in our house.'

'Poor fellow, poor fellow,' said Mr Eccles, with a sigh. 'It doesn't do to judge.'

There was another short pause, and Mr Eccles said, 'Did he leave a message? Any last words, nothing like that?'

His bright, rather pig-like eyes watched Bunch closely. Mrs Eccles, loo, leaned forward as though anxious for the reply.

'No,' said Bunch quietly. 'He came into the church when he was dying, for sanctuary.'

Mrs Eccles said in a puzzled voice. 'Sanctuary? I don't think I quite...'

Mr Eccles interrupted. 'Holy place, my dear,' he said impatiently - 'That's what the vicar's wife means. It's a sin - suicide, you know. I expect he wanted to make amends.'

'He tried to say something just before he died,' said Bunch. 'He began, "Please," but that's as far as he got.'

Mrs Eccles put her handkerchief to her eyes and sniffed. 'Oh, dear,' she said. 'It's terribly upsetting, isn't it?'

'There, there, Pam,' said her husband. 'Don't take on. These things can't be helped. Poor Willie. Still, he's at peace now. Well, thank you very much, Mrs Harmon. I hope we haven't interrupted you. A vicar's wife is a busy lady, we know that."

They shook hands with her. Then Eccles turned back suddenly to say, 'Oh yes, there's just one other thing. I think you've got his coat here, haven't you?'

'His coat?' Bunch frowned.

Mrs Eccles said, 'We'd like all his things, you know. Sentimental-like.'

'He had a watch and a wallet and a railway ticket in the pockets,' said Bunch. 'I gave them to Sergeant Hayes.'

'That's all right, then,' said Mr Eccles. 'He'll hand them over to us, I expect. His private papers would be in the wallet.'

'There was a pound note in the wallet,' said Bunch. 'Nothing else.'

'No letters? Nothing like that?'

Bunch shook her head.

'Well, thank you again, Mrs Harmon. The coat he was wearing - perhaps the sergeant's got that too, has he?'

Bunch frowned in an effort of remembrance.

'No,' she said. 'I don't think... let me see. The doctor and I took his coat off to examine his wound.' She looked round the room vaguely - 'I must have taken it upstairs with the towels and basin.'

'I wonder now, Mrs Harmon, if you don't mind... We'd like his coat, you know, the last thing he wore. Well, the wife feels rather sentimental about it.'

'Of course,' said Bunch. 'Would you like me to have it cleaned first? I'm afraid it's rather - well - stained.'

"Oh, no, no, no, that doesn't matter.'

Bunch frowned. 'Now I wonder where... excuse me a moment.' She went upstairs and it was some few minutes before she returned.

‘I'm so sorry,' she said breathlessly, 'my daily woman must have put it aside with other clothes that were going to the cleaners. It's taken me quite a long time to find it. Here it is. I'll do it up for you in brown paper.'

Disclaiming their protests she did so; then once more effusively bidding her farewell the Eccleses departed.

Bunch went slowly back across the hall and entered the study. The Reverend Julian Harmon looked up and his brow cleared. He was composing a sermon and was fearing that he'd been led astray by the interest of the political relations between Judaea and Persia, in the reign of Cyrus.

'Yes, dear?' he said hopefully.

'Julian,' said Bunch. 'What's Sanctuary exactly?’

Julian Harmon gratefully put aside his sermon paper.

'Well,' he said. 'Sanctuary in Roman and Greek temples applied to the cella, in which stood the statue of a god. The Latin word for altar "ara" also means protection.' He continued learnedly: 'In three hundred and ninety-nine A.D. the right of sanctuary in Christian churches was finally and definitely recognized. The earliest mention of the right of sanctuary in England is in the Code of Laws issued by Ethelbert in A.D. six hundred...'

He continued for some time with his exposition but was, as often, disconcerted by his wife's reception of his erudite pronouncement.

'Darling,' she said. 'You are sweet.'

Bending over, she kissed him on the rip of his nose. Julian felt rather like a dog who has been congratulated on performing a clever trick.

'The Eccleses have been here,' said Bunch.

The vicar frowned. 'The Eccleses? I don't seem to remember...'

'You don't know them. They're the sister and her husband of the man in the church.'

'My dear, you ought to have called me.'

'There wasn't any need,' said Bunch. 'They were not in need of consolation. I wonder now...' She frowned. 'If I put a casserole in the oven tomorrow, can you manage, Julian? I think I shall go up to London for the sales.'

'The sails?' Her husband looked at her blankly. 'Do you mean a yacht or a boat or something?'

Hunch laughed. 'No, darling. There's a special white sale at Burrows and Portman's. You know, sheets, table cloths and towels and glass-cloths. I don't know what we do with our glass-cloths, the way they wear through. ‘Besides,' she added thoughtfully, 'I think I ought to go and see Aunt Jane.’

That sweet old lady, Miss Jane Marple, was enjoying the delights of the metropolis for a fortnight, comfortably installed in her nephew's studio flat.

'So kind of dear Raymond,' she murmured. 'He and Joan have gone to America for a fortnight and they insisted I should come up here and enjoy myself. And now, dear Bunch, do tell me what it is that's worrying you.’

Bunch was Miss Marple's favourite godchild, and the old lady looked at her with great affection as Bunch, thrusting her best felt hat farther on the back of her head, started her story.

Bunch's recital was concise and clear. Miss Marple nodded her head as Bunch finished. 'I see,' she said. 'Yes, I see.'

'That's why I felt I had to see you,' said Bunch. 'You see, not being clever - '

‘But you are clever, my dear.’

'No, I'm not. Not clever like Julian.'

'Julian, of course, has a very solid intellect,' said Miss Marple.

‘That's it,' said Bunch. ‘Julian’s got the intellect, but on the other hand, I've got the sense.'

'You have a lot of common sense, Bunch, and you're very intelligent.'

'You see, I don't really know what I ought to do. I can't ask Julian because - well, I mean, Julian's so full of rectitude...'

This statement appeared to be perfectly understood by Miss Marple, who said, 'I know what you mean, dear. We women - well, it's different.' She went on. 'You told me what happened. Bunch, but I'd like to know first exactly what you think.'

'It's all wrong,' said Bunch. ‘The man who was there in the church, dying, knew all about Sanctuary. He said it just the way Julian would have said it. I mean, he was a well-read, educated man. And if he'd shot himself, he wouldn't drag himself to a church afterwards and say "sanctuary". Sanctuary means that you're pursued, and when you get into a church you're safe. Your pursuers can't touch you. At one time even the law couldn't get at you.'

She looked questioningly at Miss Marple. The latter nodded. Bunch went on, ‘Those people, the Eccleses, were quite different. Ignorant and coarse. And there's another thing. That watch - the dead man's watch. It had the initials W.S. on the back of it. But inside - I opened it - in very small lettering there was "To Walter from his father" and a date. Walter. But the Eccleses kept talking of him as William or Bill.'

Miss Marple seemed about to speak but Bunch rushed on "Oh, I know you're not always called the name you're baptized by. I mean, I can understand that you might be christened William and called

"Porgy" or "Carrots" or something. But your sister wouldn't call you William or Bill if your name was Walter.'

"You mean that she wasn't his sister?'

'I'm quite sure she wasn't his sister. They were horrid - both of them. They came to the vicarage to get his things and to find out if he'd said anything before he died. When I said he hadn't I saw it in their faces - relief. I think myself,' finished Bunch, 'it was Eccles who shot him.'

'Murder?' said Miss Marple.

'Yes,' said Bunch. 'Murder. That's why I came to you, darling.'

Hunch's remark might have seemed incongruous to an ignorant listener, but in certain spheres Miss Marple had a reputation for dealing with murder.

'He said "please" to me before he died,' said Bunch. 'He wanted me to do something for him. The awful thing is I've no idea what.'

Miss Marple considered for a moment or two, and then pounced on the point that had already occurred to Bunch. 'But why was he there at all?' she asked.

'You mean,' said Bunch, 'if you wanted sanctuary you might pop into a church anywhere. There's no need to take a bus that only goes four times a day and come out to a lonely spot like ours for it.'

'He must have come there for a purpose,' Miss Marple thought. 'He must have come to see someone. Chipping Cleghorn's not a big place, Bunch. Surely you must have some idea of who it was he came to see?'

Bunch reviewed the inhabitants of her village in her mind before rather doubtfully shaking her head. 'In a way,' she said, 'it could be anybody.'

'He never mentioned a name?'

'He said Julian, or I thought he said Julian. It might have been Julia, I suppose. As far as I know, there isn't any Julia living in Chipping Cleghorn.'

She screwed up her eyes as she thought back to the scene. The man lying there on the chancel steps, the light coming through the window with its jewels of red and blue light.

'Jewels,' said Miss Marple thoughtfully.

'I'm coming now,' said Bunch, 'to the most important thing of all. The reason why I've really come here today. You see, the Eccleses made a great fuss about having his coat. We took it off when the doctor was seeing him. It was an old, shabby sort of coat - there was no reason they should have wanted it. They pretended it was sentimental, but that was nonsense.

'Anyway, I went up to find it, and as I was just going up the stairs I remembered how he'd made a kind of picking gesture with his hand, as though he was fumbling with the coat. So when I got hold of the coat I looked at it very carefully and I saw that in one place the lining had been sewn up again with a different thread. So I unpicked it and I found a little piece of paper inside. I took it out and I sewed it up again properly with thread that matched. I was careful and I don't really think that the Eccleses would know I've done it. I don't think so,

but I can't be sure. And I took the coat down to them and made some excuse for the delay.'

'The piece of paper?' asked Miss Marple.

Bunch opened her handbag. ‘I didn't show it to Julian,' she said, 'because he would have said that I ought to have given it to the Eccleses. But I thought I'd rather bring it to you instead.

‘A cloakroom ticket,' said Miss Marple, looking at it. 'Paddington Station.'

‘He had a return ticket to Paddington in his pocket,’ said Bunch.

The eyes of the two women met.

‘This calls for action,' said Miss Marple briskly. 'But it would be advisable, I think, to be careful. Would you have noticed at all, Bunch dear, whether you were followed when you came to London today?'

'Followed!'’ exclaimed Bunch. 'You don't think - ‘

‘Well, I think it's possible,' said Miss Marple. 'When anything is possible, I think we ought to take precautions.' She rose with a brisk movement. 'You came up here ostensibly, my dear, to go to the sales. I think the right thing to do, therefore, would be for us to go to the sales. But before we set out, we might put one or two little arrangements in hand. I don't suppose,' Miss Marple added obscurely, 'that I shall need the old speckled tweed with the beaver collar just at present.'

It was about an hour and a half later that the two ladies, rather the worse for wear and battered in appearance, and both clasping parcels of hardly-won household linen, sat down at a small and

sequestered hostelry called the Apple Bough to restore their forces with steak and kidney pudding followed by apple tan and custard.

'Really a prewar quality face towel,' gasped Miss Marple, slightly out of breath. 'With a J on it, too. So fortunate that Raymond's wife's name is Joan. I shall put them aside until I really need them and then they will do for her if I pass on sooner than I expect.'

'I really did need the glass-cloths,' said Bunch. 'And they were very cheap, though not as cheap as the ones that woman with the ginger hair managed to snatch from me.'

A smart young woman with a lavish application of rouge and lipstick entered the Apple Bough at that moment. After looking around vaguely for a moment or two, she hurried to their table. She laid down an envelope by Miss Marple's elbow.

'There you are, miss,' she said briskly.

'Oh, thank you, Gladys,' said Miss Marple. 'Thank you very much. So kind of you.'

'Always pleased to oblige, I'm sure,' said Gladys.

'Ernie always says to me, "Everything what's good you learned from that Miss Marple of yours that you were in service with,' and I'm sure I'm always glad to oblige you, miss.'

'Such a dear girl,' said Miss Marple as Gladys departed again. 'Always so willing and so kind.'

She looked inside the envelope and then passed it on to Bunch. 'Now be very careful, dear,' she said. 'By the way, is there still that nice young inspector at Melchester that I remember?'

'I don't know,' said Bunch. 'I expect so.'

'Well, if not,' said Miss Marple thoughtfully, 'I can always ring up the Chief Constable. I think he would remember me.'

'Of course he'd remember you,' said Bunch. 'Everybody would remember you. You're quite unique.' She rose.

Arrived at Paddington, Bunch went to the luggage office and produced the cloakroom ticket. A moment or two later a rather shabby old suitcase was passed across to her, and carrying this she made her way to the platform.

The journey home was uneventful. Bunch rose as the train approached Chipping Cleghom and picked up the old suitcase. She had just left her carriage when a man, sprinting along the platform, suddenly seized the suitcase from her hand and rushed off with it.

'Stop!' Bunch yelled. 'Stop him, stop him. He's taken my suitcase.'

The ticket collector who, at this rural station, was a man of somewhat slow processes, had just begun to say, ' Now, look here, you can't do that - ' when a smart blow in the chest pushed him aside, and the man with the suitcase rushed out from the station. He made his way towards a waiting car. Tossing the suitcase in, he was about to climb after it, but before he could move a hand fell on his shoulder, and the voice of Police Constable Abel said, 'Now then, what's all this?'

Bunch arrived, panting, from the station. 'He snatched my suitcase. I just got out of the train with it.'

'Nonsense,' said the man. 'I don't know what this lady means. It's my suitcase. I just got out of the train with it.'

He looked at Bunch with a bovine and impartial stare. Nobody would have guessed that Police Constable Abel and Mrs Harmon spent long half-hours in Police Constable Abel's off-time discussing the respective merits of manure and bone meal for rose bushes.

'You say, madam, that this is your suitcase?' said Police Constable Abel.

‘Yes,' said Bunch. 'Definitely.'

'And you, sir?'

'I say this suitcase is mine - '

The man was tall, dark and well dressed, with a drawling voice and a superior manner. A feminine voice from inside the car said, 'Of course it's your suitcase, Edwin. I don't know what this woman means.'

'We'll have to get this dear,' said Police Constable Abel. 'If it's your suitcase, madam, what do you say is inside it?'

'Clothes,' said Bunch. 'A long speckled coat with a beaver collar, two wool jumpers and a pair of shoes.'

'Well, that's clear enough,' said Police Constable Abel. He turned to the other.

'I am a theatrical costumer,' said the dark man importantly. 'This suitcase contains theatrical properties which I brought down here for an amateur performance.'

‘Right, sir,' said Police Constable Abel. 'Well, we'll Just look inside, shall we, and see? We can go along to the police station, or if you're in a hurry we'll take the suitcase back to the station and open it there.'

'It'll suit me,' said the dark man. 'My name is Moss, by the way, Edwin Moss.'

The police constable, holding the suitcase, went back into the station. 'Just taking this into the parcels office, George,' he said to the ticket collector.

Police Constable Abel laid the suitcase on the counter of the parcels office and pushed back the clasp. The case was not locked. Bunch and Mr Edwin Moss stood on either side of him, their eyes regarding each other vengefully.

'Ah!' said Police Constable Abel, as he pushed up the lid.

Inside, neatly folded, was a long rather shabby tweed coat with a beaver fur collar. There were also two wool jumpers and a pair of country shoes.

'Exactly as you say, madam,' said Police Constable Abel, turning to Bunch.

Nobody could have said that Mr Edwin Moss underdid things. His dismay and compunction were magnificent.

'I do apologize,' he said. 'I really do apologize. Please believe me, dear lady, when I tell you how very, very sorry I am. Unpardonable - quite unpardonable - my behaviour has been.' He looked at his watch. 'I must rush now. Probably my suitcase has gone on the train.'

Raising his hat once more, he said meltingly to Bunch, 'Do, do forgive me,' and rushed hurriedly out of the parcels office.

‘Are you going to let him get away?' asked Bunch in a conspiratorial whisper of Police Constable Abel.

The latter slowly closed a bovine eye in a wink.

‘He won't get too far, ma'am,' he said. ‘That's to say he won't get far unobserved, if you take my meaning.'

'Oh,' said Bunch, relieved.

‘That old lady's been on the phone,' said Police Constable Abel, 'the one as was down here a few years ago. Bright she is, isn't she? But there's been a lot cooking up all today. Shouldn't wonder if the inspector or sergeant was out to see you about it tomorrow morning.'

It was the inspector who came, the Inspector Craddock whom Miss Marple remembered. He greeted Bunch with a smile as an old friend.

‘Crime in Chipping Cleghorn again,’ he said cheerfully. 'You don't lack for sensation here, do you, Mrs Harmon?'

‘I could do with rather less,' said Bunch. 'Have you come to ask me questions or are you going to tell me things for a change?'

'I'll tell you some things first,' said the inspector. 'To begin with, Mr and Mrs Eccles have been having an eye kept on them for some time. There's reason to believe they’ve been connected with several robberies in this part of the world. For another thing, although Mrs

Eccles has a brother called Sandboume who has recently come back from abroad, the man you found dying in the church yesterday was definitely not Sandboume.'

'I knew that he wasn't,' said Bunch. 'His name was Walter, to begin with, not William.'

The inspector nodded. 'His name was Walter St John, and he escaped forty-eight hours ago from Charrington Prison.'

'Of course,' said Bunch softly to herself, 'he was being hunted down by the law, and he took sanctuary.' Then she asked, 'What had he done?'

'I'll have to go back rather a long way. It's a complicated story. Several years ago there was a certain dancer doing turns at the music halls. I don't expect you'll have ever heard of her, but she specialized in an Arabian Night turn, 'Aladdin in the Cave of Jewels' it was called. She wore bits of rhinestone and not much else.

'She wasn't much of a dancer. I believe, but she was - well - attractive. Anyway, a certain Asiatic royalty fell for her in a big way. Amongst other things he gave her a very magnificent emerald necklace.'

'The historic Jewels of a Rajah?' murmured Bunch ecstatically.

Inspector Craddock coughed. 'Well, a rather more modern version, Mrs Harmon. The affair didn't last very long, broke up when our potentate's attention was captured by a certain film star whose demands were not quite so modest.

'Zobeida, to give the dancer her stage name, hung on to the necklace, and in due course it was stolen. It disappeared from her dressing-room at the theatre, and there was a lingering suspicion in the minds of the authorities that she herself might have engineered its disappearance. Such things have been known as a publicity stunt, or indeed from more dishonest motives.

'The necklace was never recovered, but during the course of the investigation the attention of the police was drawn to this man, Walter St John. He was a man of education and breeding who had come down in the world, and who was employed as a working jeweller with n rather obscure firm which was suspected of acting as a fence for jewel robberies.

'There was evidence that this necklace had passed through his hands. It was, however, in connection with the theft of some other jewellery that he was finally brought to trial and convicted and sent to prison. He had not very much longer to serve, so his escape was rather a surprise.'

'But why did he come here?' asked Bunch.

'We'd like to know that very much, Mrs Harmon. Following up his trial, it seems that he went first to London. He didn't visit any of his old associates but he visited an elderly woman, a Mrs Jacobs who had formerly been a theatrical dresser. She won't say a word of what he came for, but according to other lodgers in the house he left carrying a suitcase.'

'I see,' said Bunch. 'He left it in the cloakroom at Paddington and then he came down here.'

'By that time,' said Inspector Craddock, 'Eccles and the man who calls himself Edwin Moss were on his trail. They wanted that suitcase. They saw him get on the bus. They must have driven out in a car ahead of him and been waiting for him when he left the bus.'

'And he was murdered?' said Bunch.

'Yes,' said Craddock. 'He was shot. It was Eccles's revolver, but I rather fancy it was Moss who did the shooting. Now, Mrs Harmon, what we want to know is, where is the suitcase that Walter St John actually deposited at Paddington Station?'

Bunch grinned. ‘I expect Aunt Jane's got it by now,' she said. 'Miss Marple, I mean. That was her plan. She sent a former maid of hers with a suitcase packed with her things to the cloakroom at Paddington and we exchanged tickets. I collected her suitcase and brought it down by train. She seemed to expect that an attempt would be made to get it from me.'

It was Inspector Craddock's turn to grin. 'So she said when she rang up. I'm driving up to London to see her. Do you want to come, too, Mrs Harmon?'

'Well,' said Bunch, considering. 'Well, as a matter of fact, it's very fortunate. I had a toothache last night so I really ought to go to London to see the dentist, oughtn't I?'

'Definitely,' said Inspector Craddock.

Miss Marple looked from Inspector Craddock's face to the eager face of Bunch Harmon. The suitcase lay on the table. 'Of course, I haven't opened it,' the old lady said. 'I wouldn't dream of doing such a thing

till somebody official arrived. Besides,' she added, with a demurely mischievous Victorian smile, 'it's locked.'

'Like to make a guess at what's inside. Miss Marple?' asked the inspector.

'I should imagine, you know,' said Miss Marple, ‘that it would be Zobeida's theatrical costumes. Would you like a chisel, Inspector?’

The chisel soon did its work. Both women gave a slight gasp as the lid drew up. The sunlight coming through the window lit up what seemed like an inexhaustible treasure of sparkling jewels, red, blue, green, orange.

'Aladdin's Cave,' said Miss Marple. 'The flashing jewels the girl wore to dance.'

'Ah,' said Inspector Craddock. 'Now, what's so precious about it, do you think, that a man was murdered to get hold of it?'

'She was a shrewd girl, I expect,' said Miss Marple thoughtfully. 'She's dead, isn't she, Inspector?'

'Yes, died three years ago.'

'She had this valuable emerald necklace,' said Miss Marple, musingly. 'Had the stones taken out of their setting and fastened here and there on her theatrical costume, where everyone would take them for merely coloured rhinestones. Then she had a replica made of the real necklace, and that, of course, was what was stolen. No wonder it never came on the market. The thief soon discovered the stones were false.'

'Here is an envelope,' said Bunch, pulling aside some of the glittering stones.

Inspector Craddock took it from her and extracted two official-looking papers from it. He read aloud, '"Marriage Certificate between Walter Edmund St John and Mary Moss." That was Zobeida's real name.'

'So they were married,' said Miss Marple. 'I see.'

‘What's the other?' asked Bunch.

'A birth certificate of a daughter, Jewel.'

'Jewel?' cried Bunch. ‘Why, of course. Jewel Jill! 'That’s it. I see now why he came to Chipping Cleghorn. That’s what he was trying to say to me. Jewel. The Mundy’s, you know. Laburnum Cottage. They look after a little girl for someone. They're devoted to her. She's been like their own granddaughter. Yes, I remember now, her name was Jewel, only, of course, they call her Jill.'

'Mrs Mundy had a stroke about a week ago, and the old man's been very ill with pneumonia. They were both going to go to the infirmary. I've been trying hard to find a good home for Jill somewhere. I didn't want her taken away to an institution.

'I suppose her father heard about it in prison and he managed to break away and get hold of this suitcase from the old dresser he or his wife left it with. I suppose if the jewels really belonged to her mother, they can be used for the child now.'

'I should imagine so, Mrs Harmon. If they're here.'

'Oh, they'll be here all right,' said Miss Marple cheerfully.

'Thank goodness you're back, dear,' said the Reverend Julian Harmon, greeting his wife with affection and a sigh of content. 'Mrs Burt always tries to do her best when you're away, but she really gave me some very peculiar fish-cakes for lunch. I didn't want to hurt her feelings so I gave them to Tiglath Pileser, but even he wouldn't eat them so I had to throw them out of the window.'

'Tiglath Pileser,' said Bunch, stroking the vicarage cat, who was purring against her knee, 'is very particular about what fish he eats. I often tell him he's got a proud stomach!'

'And your tooth, dear? Did you have it seen to?'

'Yes,' said Bunch. 'It didn't hurt much, and I went to see Aunt Jane again, too...'

Dear old thing,' said Julian. 'I hope she's not failing at all.'

'Not in the least,' said Bunch, with a grin.

The following morning Bunch took a fresh supply of chrysanthemums to the church. The sun was once more pouring through the east window, and Bunch stood in the jewelled light on the chancel steps. She said very softly under her breath, 'Your little girl will be all right. I'll see that she is. I promise.'

Then she tidied up the church, slipped into a pew and knelt for a few moments to say her prayers before returning to the vicarage to attack the piled-up chores of two neglected days.

STRANGE JEST

"And this," said Jane Helier, completing her introductions, "is Miss Marple!"

Being an actress, she was able to make her point. It was clearly the climax, the triumphant finale! Her tone was equally compounded of reverent awe and triumph.

The odd part of it was that the object thus proudly proclaimed was merely a gentle, fussy-looking, elderly spinster. In the eyes of the two young people who had just, by Jane's good offices, made her acquaintance, there showed incredulity and a tinge of dismay. They were nice-looking people; the girl, Charmian Stroud, slim and dark - the man, Edward Rossiter, a fair-haired, amiable young giant.

Charmain said, a little breathlessly, "Oh! We're awfully pleased to meet you." But there was doubt in her eyes. She flung a quick, questioning glance at Jane Helier.

"Darling," said Jane, answering the glance, "she's absolutely marvellous. Leave it all to her. I told you I'd get her here and I have." She added to Miss Marple, "You'll fix it for them, I know. It will be easy for you."

Miss Marple turned her placid, china-blue eyes towards Mr. Rossiter. "Won't you tell me," she said, "what all this is about?"

"Jane's a friend of ours," Charmian broke in impatiently. "Edward and I are in rather a fix. Jane said if we would come to her party, she'd introduce us to someone who was - who would - who could - "

Edward came to the rescue. "Jane tells us you're the last word in sleuths, Miss Marple!"

The old lady's eyes twinkled, but she protested modestly: "Oh no, no! Nothing of the kind. It's just that living in a village as I do, one gets to know so much about human nature. But really you have made me quite curious. Do tell me your problem."

"I'm afraid it's terribly hackneyed - just buried treasure," said Edward.

"Indeed? But that sounds most exciting!"

"I know. Like Treasure Island. But our problem lacks the usual romantic touches. No point on a chart indicated by a skull and crossbones, no directions like 'four paces to the left, west by north.' It's horribly prosaic - just where we ought to dig."

"Have you tried at all?"

"I should say we'd dug about two solid acres! The whole place is ready to be turned into a market garden. We're just discussing whether to grow vegetable marrows or potatoes."

Charmian said, rather abruptly, "May we really tell you all about it?"

"But, of course, my dear."

"Then let's find a peaceful spot. Come on, Edward." She led the way out of the overcrowded and smoke-laden room, and they went up the stairs, to a small sitting room on the second floor.

When they were seated, Charmian began abruptly: "Well, here goes! The story starts with Uncle Mathew, uncle - or rather, great-great-uncle - to both of us. He was incredibly ancient. Edward and I were his only relations. He was fond of us and always declared that when he died he would leave his money between us. Well, he died last March and left everything he had to be divided equally between Edward and myself. What I've just said sounds rather callous - I don't mean that it was right that he died - actually we were very fond of him. But he'd been ill for some time.

"The point is that the 'everything' he left turned out to be practically nothing at all. And that, frankly, was a bit of a blow to us both, wasn't it, Edward?"

The amiable Edward agreed. "You see," he said, "we'd counted on it a bit. I mean, when you know a good bit of money is coming to you, you don't - well - buckle down and try to make it yourself. I'm in the Army - not got anything to speak of outside my pay - and Charmian herself hasn't got a bean. She works as a stage manager in a repertory theatre - quite interesting and she enjoys it - but no money in it. We'd counted on getting married but weren't worried about the money side of it because we both knew we'd be jolly well off some day."

"And now, you see, we're not!" said Charmian. "What's more, Ansteys - that's the family place, and Edward and I both love it - will probably have to be sold. And Edward and I feel we just can't bear

that! But if we don't find Uncle Mathew's money, we shall have to sell."

Edward said, "You know, Charmian, we still haven't come to the vital point."

"Well, you talk then."

Edward turned to Miss Marple. "It's like this, you see. As Uncle Mathew grew older, he got more and more suspicious. He didn't trust anybody."

"Very wise of him," said Miss Marple. "The depravity of human nature is unbelievable."

"Well, you may be right. Anyway, Uncle Mathew thought so. He had a friend who lost his money in a bank and another friend who was ruined by an absconding solicitor, and he lost some money himself in a fraudulent company. He got so that he used to hold forth at great length that the only safe and sane thing to do was to convert your money into solid bullion and bury it."

"Ah," said Miss Marple. "I begin to see."

"Yes. Friends argued with him, pointed out that he'd get no interest that way, but he held that that didn't really matter. The bulk of your money, he said, should be 'kept in a box under the bed or buried in the garden.' Those were his words."

Charmian went on: "And when he died, he left hardly anything at all in securities, though he was very rich. So we think that that's what he must have done."

Edward explained: "We found that he had sold securities and drawn out large sums of money from time to time, and nobody knows what he did with them. But it seems probable that he lived up to his principles and that he did buy gold and bury it."

"He didn't say anything before he died? Leave any paper? No letter?"

"That's the maddening part of it. He didn't. He'd been unconscious for some days, but he rallied before he died. He looked at us both and chuckled - a faint, weak, little chuckle. He said, 'You'll be all right, my pretty pair of doves.' And then he tapped his eye - his right eye - and winked at us. And then - he died... Poor old Uncle Mathew."

"He tapped his eye," said Miss Marple thoughtfully.

Edward said eagerly, "Does that convey anything to you? It made me think of an Arsene Lupin story where there was something hidden in a man's glass eye. But Uncle Mathew didn't have a glass eye."

Miss Marple shook her head. "No - I can't think of anything at the moment."

Charmian said, disappointedly, "Jane told us you'd say at once where to dig!"

Miss Marple smiled. "I'm not quite a conjurer, you know. I didn't know your uncle, or what sort of man he was, and I don't know the house or the grounds."

Charmian said, "If you did know them?"

"Well, it must be quite simple really, mustn't it?" said Miss Marple.

"Simple!" said Charmian. "You come down to Ansteys and see if it's simple!"

It is possible that she did not mean the invitation to be taken seriously, but Miss Marple said briskly, "Well, really, my dear, that's very kind of you. I've always wanted to have the chance of looking for buried treasure. And," she added, looking at them with a beaming, late-Victorian smile, "with a love interest too!"

"You see!" said Charmian, gesturing dramatically.

They had just completed a grand tour of Ansteys. They had been round the kitchen garden - heavily trenched. They had been through the little woods, where every important tree had been dug round, and had gazed sadly on the pitted surface of the once smooth lawn. They had been up to the attic, where old trunks and chests had been rifled of their contents. They had been down to the cellars, where flagstones had been heaved unwillingly from their sockets. They had measured and tapped walls, and Miss Marple had been shown every antique piece of furniture that contained or could be suspected of containing a secret drawer.

On a table in the morning room there was a heap of papers - all the papers that the late Mathew Stroud had left. Not one had been destroyed, and Charmian and Edward were wont to return to them again and again, earnestly perusing bills, and business correspondence in the hope of spotting a hitherto unnoticed clue.

"Can you think of anywhere we haven't looked?" demanded Charmian hopefully.

Miss Marple shook her head. "You seem to have been very thorough, my dear. Perhaps, if I may say so, just a little too thorough. I always think, you know, that one should have a plan. It's like my friend, Mrs. Eldritch; she had such a nice little maid, polished linoleum beautifully, but she was so thorough that she polished the bathroom floors too much, and as Mrs. Eldritch was stepping out of the bath the cork mat slipped from under her and she had a very nasty fall and actually broke her leg! Most awkward, because the bathroom door was locked, of course, and the gardener had to get a ladder and come in through the window - terribly distressing to Mrs. Eldritch, who had always been a very modest woman."

Edward moved restlessly.

Miss Marple said quickly, "Please forgive me. So apt, I know, to fly off at a tangent. But one thing does remind one of another. And sometimes that is helpful. All I was trying to say was that perhaps if we tried to sharpen our wits and think of a likely place - "

Edward said crossly, "You think of one, Miss Marple, Charmian's brains and mine are now only beautiful blanks!"

"Dear, dear. Of course - most tiring for you. If you don't mind I'll just look through all this." She indicated the papers on the table. "That is, if there's nothing private - I don't want to appear to pry."

"Oh, that's all right. But I'm afraid you won't find anything."

She sat down by the table and methodically worked through the sheaf of documents. As she replaced each one, she sorted them automatically into tidy little heaps. When she had finished she sat staring in front of her for some minutes.

Edward asked, not without a touch of malice, "Well, Miss Marple?"

She came to herself with a little start. "I beg your pardon. Most helpful."

"You've found something relevant?"

"Oh no, nothing like that, but I do believe I know what sort of man your Uncle Mathew was. Rather like my own Uncle Henry, I think. Fond of rather obvious jokes. A bachelor, evidently - I wonder why - perhaps an early disappointment? Methodical up to a point, but not very fond of being tied up - so few bachelors are!"

Behind Miss Marple's back Charmian made a sign to Edward. It said, She's ga-ga.

Miss Marple was continuing happily to talk of her deceased Uncle Henry. "Very fond of puns, he was. And to some people puns are most annoying. A mere play upon words may be very irritating. He was a suspicious man too. Always was convinced the servants were robbing him. And sometimes, of course, they were, but not always. It grew upon him, poor man. Toward the end he suspected them of tampering with his food and finally refused to eat anything but boiled eggs! Said nobody could tamper with the inside of a boiled egg. Dear Uncle Henry, he used to be such a merry soul at one time - very fond of his coffee after dinner. He always used to say, 'This coffee is very Moorish,' meaning, you know, that he'd like a little more."

Edward felt that if he heard any more about Uncle Henry he'd go mad.

"Fond of young people, too," went on Miss Marple, "but inclined to tease them a little, if you know what I mean. Used to put bags of sweets where a child just couldn't reach them."

Casting politeness aside, Charmian said, "I think he sounds horrible!"

"Oh no, dear, just an old bachelor, you know, and not used to children. And he wasn't at all stupid, really. He used to keep a good deal of money in the house, and he had a safe put in. Made a great fuss about it - and how very secure it was. As a result of his talking so much, burglars broke in one night and actually cut a hole in the safe with a chemical device."

"Served him right," said Edward.

"Oh, but there was nothing in the safe," said Miss Marple. "You see, he really kept the money somewhere else - behind some volumes of sermons in the library, as a matter of fact. He said people never took a book of that kind out of the shelf!"

Edward interrupted excitedly, "I say, that's an idea. What about the library?"

But Charmian shook a scornful head. "Do you think I hadn't thought of that? I went through all the books Tuesday of last week, when you went off to Portsmouth. Took them all out, shook them. Nothing there."

Edward sighed. Then, rousing himself, he endeavoured to rid himself tactfully of their disappointing guest. "It's been awfully good of you to come down as you have and try to help us. Sorry it's been all a

washout. Feel we trespassed a lot on your time. However - I'll get the car out and you'll be able to catch the three-thirty - "

"Oh," said Miss Marple, "but we've got to find the money, haven't we? You mustn't give up, Mr. Rossiter, 'If at first you don't succeed, try, try, try again.'"

"You mean you're going to go on trying?"

"Strictly speaking," said Miss Marple, "I haven't begun yet. 'First catch your hare,' as Mrs. Beeton says in her cookery book - a wonderful book but terribly expensive; most of the recipes begin, 'Take a quart of cream and a dozen eggs.' Let me see, where was I? Oh yes. Well, we have, so to speak, caught our hare - the hare being, of course, your Uncle Mathew, and we've only got to decide now where he would have hidden the money. It ought to be quite simple."

"Simple?" demanded Charmian.

"Oh yes, dear. I'm sure he would have done the obvious thing. A secret drawer - that's my solution."

Edward said dryly, "You couldn't put bars of gold in a secret drawer."

"No, no, of course not. But there's no reason to believe the money is in gold."

"He always used to say - "

"So did my Uncle Henry about his safe! So I should strongly suspect that that was just a simple blind. Diamonds, now they could be in a secret drawer quite easily."

"But we've looked in all the secret drawers. We had a cabinetmaker over to examine the furniture."

"Did you, dear? That was clever of you. I should suggest your uncle's own desk would be the most likely. Was it the tall escritoire against the wall there?"

"Yes. And I'll show." Charmian went over to it. She took down the flap. Inside were pigeonholes and little drawers. She opened a small door in the centre and touched a spring inside the left-hand drawer. The bottom of the centre recess clicked and slid forward. Charmian drew it out, revealing a shallow well beneath. It was empty.

"Now isn't that a coincidence," exclaimed Miss Marple. "Uncle Henry had a desk just like this, only his was burr walnut and this is mahogany."

"At any rate," said Charmian, "there's nothing there, as you can see."

"I expect," said Miss Marple, "your cabinetmaker was a young man. He didn't know everything. People were very artful when they made hiding places in those days. There's such a thing as a secret inside a secret."

She extracted a hairpin from her neat bun of grey hair. Straightening it out, she stuck the point into what appeared to be a tiny wormhole in one side of the secret recess. With a little difficulty she pulled out a small drawer. In it was a bundle of faded letters and a folded paper."

Edward and Charmian pounced on the find together. With trembling fingers Edward unfolded the paper. He dropped it with an exclamation of disgust.

"A cookery recipe. Baked ham!"

Charmian was untying a ribbon that held the letters together. She drew one out and glanced at it. "Love letters!"

Miss Marple reacted with Victorian gusto. "How interesting! Perhaps the reason your uncle never married."

Charmian read aloud:

"'My ever dear Mathew, I must confess that the time seems long indeed since I received your last letter. I try to occupy myself with the various tasks allotted to me, and often say to myself that I am indeed fortunate to see so much of the globe, though little did I think when I went to America that I should voyage off to these far islands!'"

Charmian broke off. "Where is it from? Oh, Hawaii!" She went on:

"Alas, these natives are still far from seeing the light. They are in an unclothed and savage state and spend most of their time swimming and dancing, adorning themselves with garlands of flowers. Mr Gray had made some converts but it is up-hill work and he and Mrs. Gray get sadly discouraged. I try to do all I can to cheer and encourage him, but I, too, am often sad for a reason you can guess, dear Mathew. Alas, absence is severe trial to a loving heart. Your renewed vows and protestations of affection cheered me greatly. Now and always you have my faithful and devoted heart, dear Mathew, and I remain - Your true love, Betty Martin

"P.S. - I address my letter under cover to our mutual friend, Matilda Graves, as usual. I hope Heaven will pardon this little subterfuge."

Edward whistled. "A female missionary! So that was Uncle Mathew's romance. I wonder why they never married?"

"She seems to have gone all over the world," said Charmian, looking through the letters. "Mauritius - all sorts of places. Probably died of yellow fever or something."

A gentle chuckle made them start. Miss Marple was apparently much amused. "Well, well," she said. "Fancy that, now!"

She was reading the recipe for baked ham. Seeing their inquiring glances, she read out: "'Baked Ham with Spinach. Take a nice piece of gammon, stuff with cloves and cover with brown sugar. Bake in a slow oven. Serve with a border of puréed spinach.'

"What do you think of that now?"

"I think it sounds filthy," said Edward.

"No, no, actually it would be very good - but what do you think of the whole thing?"

A sudden ray of light illuminated Edward's face. "Do you think it's a code - cryptogram of some kind?" He seized it.

"Look here, Charmian, it might be, you know! No reason to put a cooking recipe in a secret drawer otherwise."

"Exactly," said Miss Marple. "Very, very significant."

Charmian said, "I know what it might be - invisible ink! Let's heat it. Turn on the electric fire."

Edward did so. But no signs of writing appeared under the treatment.

Miss Marple coughed. "I really think, you know, that you're making it rather too difficult. The recipe is only an indication, so to speak. It is, I think, the letters that are significant."

"The letters?"

"Especially," said Miss Marple, "the signature."

But Edward hardly heard her. He called excitedly, "Charmian! Come here! She's right. See - the envelopes are old right enough, but the letters themselves were written much later."

"Exactly," said Miss Marple.

"They're only fake old. I bet anything old Uncle Mat faked them himself - "

"Precisely," said Miss Marple.

"The whole thing's a sell. There never was a female missionary. It must be a code."

"My dear, dear children - there's really no need to make it all so difficult. Your uncle was really a very simple man. He had to have his little joke, that was all."

For the first time they gave her their full attention. "Just exactly what do you mean, Miss Marple?" asked Charmian.

"I mean, dear, that you're actually holding the money in your hand this minute."

Charmian stared down.

"The signature, dear. That gives the whole thing away. The recipe is just an indication. Shorn of all the cloves and brown sugar and the rest of it, what is it actually? Why, gammon and spinach to be sure! Gammon and spinach! Meaning - nonsense! So it's clear that it's the letters that are important. And then, if you take into consideration what your uncle did just before he died. He tapped his eye, you said. Well, there you are - that gives you the clue, you see."

Charmian said, "Are we mad, or are you?"

"Surely, my dear, you must have heard of the expression meaning that something is not a true picture, or has it quite died out nowadays: 'All my eye and Betty Martin.'"

Edward gasped, his eyes falling to the letter in his hand. "Betty Martin - "

"Of course, Mr. Rossiter. As you have just said, there isn't - there wasn't any such person. The letters were written by your uncle, and I dare say he got a lot of fun out of writing them! As you say, the writing on the envelopes is much older - in fact, the envelopes couldn't belong to the letters anyway, because the postmark of the one you are holding is eighteen fifty-one."

She paused. She made it very emphatic: "Eighteen fifty-one. And that explains everything, doesn't it?"

"Not to me," said Edward.

"Well, of course," said Miss Marple, "I dare say it wouldn't to me if it weren't for my great-nephew Lionel. Such a dear little boy and a

passionate stamp collector. Know all about stamps. It was he who told me about rare and expensive stamps and that a wonderful new find had come up for auction. And I actually remember his mentioning one stamp - an eighteen fifty-one blue two-cent. It realised something like twenty-five thousand dollars, believe. Fancy! I should imagine that the other stamps are something also rare and expensive. No doubt your uncle bought through dealers and was careful to 'cover his tracks,' as they say in detective stories."

Edward groaned. He sat down and buried his face in his hands.

"What's the matter?" demanded Charmian.

"Nothing. It's only the awful thought that, but for Miss Marple, we might have burned these letters in a decent, gentlemanly way!"

"Ah," said Miss Marple, "that's just what these old gentlemen who are fond of their joke never realise. My Uncle Henry, I remember, sent a favourite niece a five-pound note for a Christmas present. He put it inside a Christmas card, gummed the card together, and wrote on it: 'Love and best wishes. Afraid this is all I can manage this year.'

"She, poor girl, was annoyed at what she thought was his meanness and threw it all straight into the fire. So then, of course, he had to give her another."

Edward's feelings toward Uncle Henry had suffered an abrupt and complete change.

"Miss Marple," he said, "I'm going to get a bottle of champagne. We'll drink the health of your Uncle Henry."

TAPE-MEASURE MURDER

Miss Politt took hold of the knocker and rapped politely on the cottage door. After a discreet interval she knocked again. The parcel under her left arm shifted a little as she did so, and she readjusted it. Inside the parcel was Mrs. Spenlow's new green winter dress, ready for fitting. From Miss Politt's left hand dangled a bag of black silk, containing a tape measure, a pincushion, and a large, practical pair of scissors.

Miss Politt was tall and gaunt, with a sharp nose, pursed lips, and a meagre iron-grey hair. She hesitated before using the knocker for the third time. Glancing down the street, she saw a figure rapidly approaching. Miss Hartnell, jolly, weather-beaten, fifty-five, shouted out in her usual loud bass voice, "Good afternoon, Miss Politt!"

The dressmaker answered, "Good afternoon, Miss Hartnell." Her voice was excessively thin and genteel in its accents. She had started life as a lady's maid. "Excuse me," she went on, "but do you happen to know if by any chance Mrs. Spenlow isn't at home?"

"Not the least idea," said Miss Hartnell.

"It's rather awkward, you see. I was to fit on Mrs. Spenlow's new dress this afternoon. Three-thirty, she said."

Miss Hartnell consulted her wrist watch. "It's a little past the half-hour now."

"Yes. I have knocked three times, but there doesn't seem to be any answer, so I was wondering if perhaps Mrs. Spenlow might have gone out and forgotten. She doesn't forget appointments as a rule, and she wants the dress to wear the day after tomorrow."

Miss Hartnell entered the gate and walked up the path to join Miss Politt outside the door of Laburnam Cottage.

"Why doesn't Gladys answer the door?" she demanded. "Oh, no, of course, it's Thursday - Gladys's day out. I expect Mrs. Spenlow has fallen asleep. I don't expect you've made enough noise with this thing."

Seizing the knocker, she executed a deafening rat-a-tat-tat, and in addition, thumped upon the panels of the door. She also called out in a stentorian voice: "What ho, within there!"

There was no response.

Miss Politt murmured, "Oh, I think Mrs. Spenlow must have forgotten and gone out. I'll call round some other time." She began edging away down the path.

"Nonsense," said Miss Hartnell firmly. "She can't have gone out. I'd have met her. I'll just take a look through the windows and see if I can find any signs of life."

She laughed in her usual hearty manner, to indicate that it was a joke, and applied a perfunctory glance to the nearest windowpane - perfunctory because she knew quite well that the front room was seldom used, Mr. and Mrs. Spenlow preferring the small back sitting room.

Perfunctory as it was, though, it succeeded in its object. Miss Hartnell, it is true, saw no signs of life. On the contrary, she saw, through the window, Mrs. Spenlow lying on the hearthrug - dead.

"Of course," said Miss Hartnell, telling the story afterward, "I managed to keep my head. That Politt creature wouldn't have had the least idea of what to do. 'Got to keep our heads,' I said to her. 'You stay here and I'll go for Constable Palk.' She said something about not wanting to be left, but I paid no attention at all. One has to be firm with that sort of person. I've always found they enjoy making a fuss. So I was just going off when, at that very moment, Mr. Spenlow came round the corner of the house."

Here Miss Hartnell made a significant pause. It enabled her audience to ask breathlessly, "Tell me, how did he look?"

Miss Hartnell would then go on: "Frankly, I suspected something at once! He was far too calm. He didn't seem surprised in the least. And you may say what you like, it isn't natural for a man to hear that his wife is dead and display no emotion whatever."

Everybody agreed with this statement.

The police agreed with it too. So suspicious did they consider Mr. Spenlow's detachment that they lost no time in ascertaining how that gentleman was situated as a result of his wife's death. When they discovered that Mrs. Spenlow had been the moneyed partner, and that her money went to her husband under a will made soon after their marriage, they were more suspicious than ever.

Miss Marple, that sweet-faced - and, some said, vinegar-tongued - elderly spinster who lived in the house next to the rectory, was

interviewed very early - within half an hour of the discovery of the crime. She was approached by Police Constable Palk, importantly thumbing a notebook. "If you don't mind, ma'am, I've a few questions to ask you."

Miss Marple said, "In connection with the murder of Mrs. Spenlow?"

Palk was startled. "May I ask, madam, how you got to know of it?"

"The fish," said Miss Marple.

The reply was perfectly intelligible to Constable Palk. He assumed correctly that the fishmonger's boy had brought it, together with Miss Marple's evening meal.

Miss Marple continued gently. "Lying on the floor in the sitting room, strangled - possibly by a very narrow belt. But whatever it was, it was taken away."

Palk's face was wrathful. "How that young Fred gets to know everything - "

Miss Marple cut him short adroitly. She said, "There's a pin in your tunic."

Constable Palk looked down, startled. He said, "They do say: 'See a pin and pick it up, all the day you'll have good luck.'"

"I hope that will come true. Now what is it you want me to tell you?"

Constable Palk cleared his throat, looked important, and consulted his notebook. "Statement was made to me by Mr. Arthur Spenlow, husband of the deceased. Mr. Spenlow says that at two-thirty, as far as he can say, he was rung up by Miss Marple and asked if he would

come over at a quarter past three, as she was anxious to consult him about something. Now, ma'am, is that true?"

"Certainly not," said Miss Marple.

"You did not ring up Mr. Spenlow at two-thirty?"

"Neither at two-thirty nor any other time."

"Ah," said Constable Palk, and sucked his moustache with a good deal of satisfaction.

"What else did Mr. Spenlow say?"

"Mr. Spenlow's statement was that he came over here as requested, leaving his own house at ten minutes past three; that on arrival here he was informed by the maidservant that Miss Marple was 'not at 'ome.'"

"That part of it is true," said Miss Marple. "He did come here, but I was at a meeting at the Women's Institute."

"Ah," said Constable Palk again.

Miss Marple exclaimed, "Do tell me, Constable, do you suspect Mr. Spenlow?"

"It's not for me to say at this stage, but it looks to me as though somebody, naming no names, had been trying to be artful."

Miss Marple said thoughtfully, "Mr. Spenlow?"

She liked Mr. Spenlow. He was a small, spare man, stiff and conventional in speech, the acme of respectability. It seemed odd that he should have come to live in the country, he had so clearly

lived in towns all his life. To Miss Marple he confided the reason. He said, "I have always intended, ever since I was a small boy, to live in the country someday and have a garden of my own. I have always been very much attached to flowers. My wife, you know, kept a flower shop. That's where I saw her first."

A dry statement, but it opened up a vista of romance. A younger, prettier Mrs. Spenlow, seen against a background of flowers.

Mr. Spenlow, however, really knew nothing about flowers. He had no idea of seeds, of cuttings, of bedding out, of annuals or perennials. He had only a vision - a vision of a small cottage garden thickly planted with sweet-smelling, brightly coloured blossoms. He had asked, almost pathetically, for instruction and had noted down Miss Marple's replies to questions in a little book.

He was a man of quiet method. It was, perhaps, because of this trait that the police were interested in him when his wife was found murdered. With patience and perseverance they learned a good deal about the late Mrs. Spenlow - and soon all St. Mary Mead knew it too.

The late Mrs. Spenlow had begun life as a between-maid in a large house. She had left that position to marry the second gardener and with him had started a flower shop in London. The shop had prospered. Not so the gardener, who before long had sickened and died.

His widow had carried on the shop and enlarged it in an ambitious way. She had continued to prosper. Then she had sold the business at a handsome price and embarked upon matrimony for the second time - with Mr. Spenlow, a middle-aged jeweller who had inherited a

small and struggling business. Not long afterward they had sold the business and come down to St. Mary Mead.

Mrs. Spenlow was a well-to-do woman. The profits from her florist's establishment she had invested - "under spirit guidance," as she explained to all and sundry. The spirits had advised her with unexpected acumen.

All her investments had prospered, some in quite a sensational fashion. Instead, however, of this increasing her belief in spiritualism, Mrs. Spenlow basely deserted mediums and sittings and made a brief but wholehearted plunge into an obscure religion with Indian affinities which was based on various forms of deep breathing. When, however, she arrived at St. Mary Mead, she had relapsed into a period of orthodox Church-of-England beliefs. She was a good deal at the vicarage and attended church services with assiduity. She patronised the village shops, took an interest in the local happenings and played village bridge.

A humdrum, everyday life. And - suddenly - murder.

Colonel Melchett, the chief constable, had summoned Inspector Slack.

Slack was a positive type of man. When he made up his mind, he was sure. He was quite sure now. "Husband did it, sir," he said.

"You think so?"

"Quite sure of it. You've only got to look at him. Never showed a sign of grief or emotion. He came back to the house knowing she was dead."

"Wouldn't he at least have tried to act the part of the distracted husband?"

"Not him, sir. Too pleased with himself. Some gentlemen can't act. Too stiff. As I see it, he was just fed up with his wife. She'd got the money and, I should say, was a trying woman to live with - always taking up some 'ism' or other. He cold-bloodedly decided to do away with her and live comfortably on his own."

"Yes, that could be the case, I suppose."

"Depend upon it, that was it. Made his plans careful. Pretended to get a phone call - "

Melchett interrupted him: "No call been traced?"

"No, sir. That means either that he lied or that the call was put through from a public telephone booth. The only two public phones in the village are at the station and the post office. Post office it certainly wasn't. Mrs. Blade sees everyone who comes in. Station it might be. Train arrives at two twenty-seven and there's a bit of bustle then. But the main thing is he says it was Miss Marple who called him up, and that certainly isn't true. The call didn't come from her house, and she herself was away at the Institute."

"You're not overlooking the possibility that the husband was deliberately got out of the way - by someone who wanted to murder Mrs. Spenlow?"

"You're thinking of young Ted Gerard, aren't you, sir? I've been working on him - what we're up against there is lack of motive. He doesn't stand to gain anything."

"He's an undesirable character, though. Quite a pretty little spot of embezzlement to his credit."

"I'm not saying he isn't a wrong 'un. Still, he did go to his boss and own up to that embezzlement. And his employers weren't wise to it."

"An Oxford Grouper," said Melchett.

"Yes, sir. Became a convert and went off to do the straight thing and own up to having pinched money. I'm not saying, mind you, that it mayn't have been astuteness - he may have thought he was suspected and decided to gamble on honest repentance."

"You have a sceptical mind, Slack," said Colonel Melchett. "By the way, have you talked to Miss Marple at all?"

"What's she got to do with it, sir?"

"Oh, nothing. But she hears things, you know. Why don't you go and have a chat with her? She's a very sharp old lady."

Slack changed the subject. "One thing I've been meaning to ask you, sir: that domestic-service job where the deceased started her career - Sir Robert Abercrombie's place. That's where that jewel robbery was - emeralds - worth a packet. Never got them. I've been looking it up - must have happened when the Spenlow woman was there, though she'd have been quite a girl at the time. Don't think she was mixed up in it, do you, sir? Spenlow, you know, was one of those little tuppenny-ha'penny jewellers - just the chap for a fence."

Melchett shook his head. "Don't think there's anything in that. She didn't even know Spenlow at the time. I remember the case. Opinion in police circles was that a son of the house was mixed up in it - Jim Abercrombie - awful young waster. Had a pile of debts, and just after the robbery they were all paid off - some rich woman, so they said, but I don't know - old Abercrombie hedged a bit about the case - tried to call the police off."

"It was just an idea, sir," said Slack.

Miss Marple received Inspector Slack with gratification, especially when she heard that he had been sent by Colonel Melchett.

"Now, really, that is very kind of Colonel Mechett. I didn't know he remembered me."

"He remembers you all right. Told me that what you didn't know of what goes on in St. Mary Mead isn't worth knowing."

"Too kind of him, but really I don't know anything at all. About this murder, I mean."

"You know what the talk about it is."

"Of course - but it wouldn't do, would it, to repeat just idle talk?"

Slack said, with an attempt at geniality, "This isn't an official conversation, you know. It's in confidence, so to speak."

"You mean you really want to know what people are saying? Whether there's any truth in it or not?"

"That's the idea."

"Well, of course, there's been a great deal of talk and speculation. And there are really two distinct camps, if you understand me. To begin with, there are the people who think that the husband did it. A husband or a wife is, in a way, the natural person to suspect, don't you think so?"

"Maybe," said the inspector cautiously.

"Such close quarters, you know. Then, so often, the money angle. I hear that it was Mrs. Spenlow who had the money and therefore Mr. Spenlow does benefit by her death. In this wicked world I'm afraid the most uncharitable assumptions are often justified."

"He comes into a tidy sum all right."

"Just so. It would seem quite plausible, wouldn't it, for him to strangle her, leave the house by the back, come across the fields to my house, ask for me and pretend he'd had a telephone call from me, then go back and find his wife murdered in his absence - hoping, of course, that the crime would be put down to some tramp or burglar."

The inspector nodded. "What with the money angle - and if they'd been on bad terms lately - "

But Miss Marple interrupted him: "Oh, but they hadn't."

"You know that for a fact?"

"Everyone would have known if they'd quarrelled! The maid, Gladys Brent - she'd have soon spread it round the village."

The inspector said feebly, "She mightn't have known - " and received a pitying smile in reply.

Miss Marple went on: "And then there's the other school of thought. Ted Gerard. A good-looking young man. I'm afraid, you know, that good looks are inclined to influence one more than they should. Our last curate but one - quite a magical effect! All the girls came to church - evening service as well as morning. And many older women became unusually active in parish work - and the slippers and scarves that were made for him! Quite embarrassing for the poor young man.

"But let me see, where was I? Oh yes, this young man, Ted Gerard. Of course, there has been talk about him. He's come down to see her so often. Though Mrs. Spenlow told me herself that he was a member of what I think they call the Oxford Group. A religious movement. They are quite sincere and very earnest, I believe, and Mrs. Spenlow was impressed by it all."

Miss Marple took a breath and went on. "And I'm sure there was no reason to believe that there was anything more in it than that, but you know what people are. Quite a lot of people are convinced that Mrs. Spenlow was infatuated with the young man and that she'd lent him quite a lot of money. And it's perfectly true that he was actually seen at the station that day. In the train - the two twenty-seven down train. But of course it would be quite easy, wouldn't it, to slip out of the other side of the train and go through the cutting and over the fence and round the hedge and never come out of the station entrance at all? So that he need not have been seen going to the cottage. And of course people do think that what Mrs. Spenlow was wearing was rather peculiar."

"Peculiar?"

"A kimono. Not a dress." Miss Marple blushed. "That sort of thing, you know, is perhaps, rather suggestive to some people."

"You think it was suggestive?"

"Oh no, I don't think so. I think it was perfectly natural."

"You think it was natural?"

"Under the circumstances, yes." Miss Marple's glance was cool and reflective.

"Inspector Slack said, "It might give us another motive for the husband. Jealousy."

"Oh no, Mr. Spenlow would never be jealous. He's not the sort of man who notices things. If his wife had gone away and left a note on the pincushion, it would be the first he'd know of anything of that kind."

Inspector Slack was puzzled by the intent way she was looking at him. He had an idea that all her conversation was intended to hint at something he didn't understand. She said now, with some emphasis, "Didn't you find any clues, Inspector - on the spot?"

"People don't leave fingerprints and cigarette ash nowadays, Miss Marple."

"But this, I think," she suggested, "was an old-fashioned crime - "

Slack said sharply, "Now what do you mean by that?"

Miss Marple remarked slowly, "I think, you know, that Constable Palk could help you. He was the first person on the - on the 'scene of the crime,' as they say."

Mr. Spenlow was sitting in a deck chair. He looked bewildered. He said, in his thin, precise voice, "I may, of course, be imagining what occurred. My hearing is not as good as it was. But I distinctly think I heard a small boy call after me that he was of the opinion that I had - had killed my dear wife."

Miss Marple, gently snipping off a dead rose head, said, "That was the impression he meant to convey, no doubt."

"But what could possibly have put such an idea into a child's head?"

Miss Marple coughed. "Listening, no doubt, to the opinions of his elders."

"You - you really mean that other people think that also?"

"Quite half the people in St. Mary Mead."

"But - my dear lady - what can possibly have given rise to such an idea? I was sincerely attached to my wife. She did not, alas, take to living in the country as much as I had hoped she would do, but perfect agreement on every subject is an impossible idea. I assure you I feel her loss very keenly."

"Probably. But if you will excuse my saying so, you don't sound as though you do."

Mr. Spenlow drew his meagre frame up to its full height. "My dear lady, many years ago I read of a certain Chinese philosopher who, when his dearly loved wife was taken from him, continued calmly to beat a gong in the street - a customary Chinese pastime, I presume - exactly as usual. The people of the city were much impressed by his fortitude."

"But," said Miss Marple, "the people of St. Mary Mead react rather differently. Chinese philosophy does not appeal to them."

"But you understand?"

Miss Marple nodded. "My Uncle Henry," she explained, "was a man of a unusual self-control. His motto was 'Never display emotion.' He, too, was very fond of flowers."

"I was thinking," said Mr. Spenlow with something like eagerness, "that I might, perhaps, have a pergola on the west side of the cottage. Pink roses and, perhaps, wisteria. And there is a white starry flower, whose name for the moment escapes me - "

In the tone in which she spoke to her grandnephew, age three, Miss Marple said, "I have a very nice catalogue here, with pictures. Perhaps you would like to look through it - I have to go up to the village."

Leaving Mr. Spenlow sitting happily in the garden with his catalogue, Miss Marple went up to her room, hastily rolled up a dress in a piece of brown paper, and, leaving the house, walked briskly up to the post office. Miss Politt, the dressmaker, lived in rooms over the post office.

But Miss Marple did not at once go through the door and up the stairs. It was just two-thirty, and, a minute late, the Much Benham bus drew up outside the post office door. It was one of the events of the day in St. Mary Mead. The post-mistress hurried out with parcels, parcels connected with the shop side of her business, for the post office also dealt in sweets, cheap books and children's toys.

For some four minutes Miss Marple was alone in the post office.

Not till the postmistress returned to her post did Miss Marple go upstairs and explain to Miss Politt that she wanted her own grey crepe altered and made more fashionable if that were possible. Miss Politt promised to see what she could do.

The chief constable was rather astonished when Miss Marple's name was brought to him. She came in with many apologies. "So sorry - so very sorry to disturb you. You are so busy, I know, but then you have always been so very kind, Colonel Melchett, and I felt I would rather come to you instead of to Inspector Slack. For one thing, you know, I should hate Constable Palk to get into any trouble. Strictly speaking, I suppose he shouldn't have touched anything at all."

Colonel Melchett was slightly bewildered. He said, "Palk? That's the St Mary Mead constable, isn't it? What has he been doing?"

"He picked up a pin, you know. It was in his tunic. And it occurred to me at the time that it was quite probably he had actually picked it up in Mrs. Spenlow's house."

"Quite, quite. But, after all, you know, what's a pin? Matter of fact, he did pick the pin up just by Mrs. Spenlow's body. Came and told Slack

about it yesterday - you put him up to that, I gather? Oughtn't to have touched anything, of course, but, as I said, what's a pin? It was only a common pin. Sort of thing any woman might use."

"Oh no, Colonel Melchett, that's where you're wrong. To a man's eye, perhaps, it looked like an ordinary pin, but it wasn't. It was a special pin, a very thin pin, the kind you buy by the box, the kind used mostly by dressmakers."

Melchett stared at her, a faint light of comprehension breaking in on him. Miss Marple nodded her head several times eagerly.

"Yes, of course. It seems to me so obvious. She was in her kimono because she was going to try on her new dress, and she went into the front room, and Miss Politt just said something about measurements and put the tape measure round her neck - and then all she'd have to do was to cross it and pull - quite easy, so I've heard. And then of course she'd go outside and pull the door to and stand there knocking as though she'd just arrived. But the pin shows she'd already been in the house."

"And it was Miss Politt who telephoned to Spenlow?"

"Yes. From the post office at two-thirty - just when the bus comes and the post office would be empty."

"Colonel Melchett said, "But, my dear Miss Marple, why? In heaven's name, why? You can't have a murder without a motive."

"Well, I think, you know, Colonel Melchett, from all I've heard, that the crime dates from a long time back. It reminds me, you know, of my two cousins, Antony and Gordon. Whatever Antony did always went right for him, and with poor Gordon in was just the other way

about. Race horses went lame, and stocks went down, and property depreciated. As I see it, the two women were in it together."

"In what?"

"The robbery. Long ago. Very valuable emeralds, so I've heard. The lady's maid and the tweeny. Because one thing hasn't been explained - how, when the tweeny married the gardener, did they have enough money to set up a flower shop?

"The answer is, it was her share of the - the swag, I think is the right expression. Everything she did turned out well. Money made money. But the other one, the lady's maid, must have been unlucky. She came down to being just a village dressmaker. Then they met again. Quite all right at first, I expect, until Mr. Ted Gerard came on the scene.

"Mrs. Spenlow, you see, was already suffering from conscience and was inclined to be emotionally religious. This young man no doubt urged her to 'face up' and to 'come clean,' and I daresay she was strung up to do so. But Miss Politt didn't see it that way. All she saw was that she might go to prison for a robbery she had committed years ago. So she made up her mind to put a stop to it all. I'm afraid, you know, that she was always rather a wicked woman. I don't believe she'd have turned a hair if that nice, stupid Mr. Spenlow had been hanged."

Colonel Melchett said slowly, "We can - er - verify your theory - up to a point. The identity of the Politt woman with the lady's maid at the Abercrombies', but - "

Miss Marple reassured him. "It will be all quite easy. She's the kind of woman who will break down at once when she's taxed with the truth. And then, you see, I've got her tape measure. I - er - abstracted it yesterday when I was trying on. When she misses it and thinks the police have got it - well, she's quite an ignorant woman and she'll think it will prove the case against her in some way."

She smiled at him encouragingly. "You'll have no trouble, I can assure you." It was the tone in which his favourite aunt had once assured him that he could not fail to pass his entrance examination into Sandhurst.

And he had passed.

THE CASE OF THE CARETAKER

'Well,' demanded Doctor Haydock of his patient. 'And how goes it today?'

Miss Marple smiled at him wanly from pillows.

'I suppose, really, that I'm better,' she admitted, 'but I feel so terribly depressed. I can't help feeling how much better it would have been if I had died. After all, I'm an old woman. Nobody wants me or cares about me.'

Doctor Haydock interrupted with his usual brusqueness. 'Yes, yes, typical after-reaction of this type of flu. What you need is something to take you out of yourself. A mental tonic.'

Miss Marple sighed and shook her head.

'And what's more,' continued Doctor Haydock, 'I've brought my medicine with me!'

He tossed a long envelope on to the bed.

'Just the thing for you. The kind of puzzle that is right up your street.'

'A puzzle?' Miss Marple looked interested.

'Literary effort of mine,' said the doctor, blushing a little. 'Tried to make a regular story of it. "He said," "she said," "the girl thought," etc. Facts of the story are true.'

'But why a puzzle?' asked Miss Marple.

Doctor Haydock grinned. 'Because the interpretation is up to you. I want to see if you're as clever as you always make out.' With that Parthian shot he departed.

Miss Marple picked up the manuscript and began to read.

'And where is the bride?' asked Miss Harmon genially.

The village was all agog to see the rich and beautiful young wife that Harry Laxton had brought back from abroad. There was a general indulgent feeling that Harry - wicked young scapegrace - had had all the luck. Everyone had always felt indulgent towards Harry. Even the owners of windows that had suffered from his indiscriminate use of a catapult had found their indignation dissipated by young Harry's abject expression of regret. He had broken windows, robbed

orchards, poached rabbits, and later had run into debt, got entangled with the local tobacconist's daughter - been disentangled and sent off to Africa - and the village as represented by various ageing spinsters had murmured indulgently. 'Ah, well! Wild oats! He'll settle down!'

And now, sure enough, the prodigal had returned - not in affliction, but in triumph. Harry Laxton had 'made good' as the saying goes. He had pulled himself together, worked hard, and had finally met and successfully wooed a young Anglo-French girl who was the possessor of a considerable fortune.

Harry might have lived in London, or purchased an estate in some fashionable hunting county, but he preferred to come back to the pan of the world that was home to him. And there, in the most romantic way, he purchased the derelict estate in the dower house of which he had passed his childhood.

Kingsdean House had been unoccupied for nearly seventy years. It had gradually fallen into decay and abandon. An elderly caretaker and his wife lived in the one habitable corner of it. It was a vast, unprepossessing grandiose mansion, the gardens overgrown with rank vegetation and the trees hemming it in like some gloomy enchanter's den.

The dower house was a pleasant, unpretentious house and had been let for a long term of years to Major Laxton, Harry's father. As a boy, Harry had roamed over the Kingsdean estate and knew every inch of the tangled woods, and the old house itself had always fascinated him.

Major Laxton had died some years ago, so it might have been thought that Harry would have had no ties to bring him back - nevertheless it was to the home of his boyhood that Harry brought his bride. The ruined old Kingsdean House was pulled down. An army of builders and contractors swooped down upon the place, and in almost a miraculously short space of time - so marvellously does wealth tell - the new house rose white and gleaming among the trees.

Next came a posse of gardeners and after them a procession of furniture vans.

The house was ready. Servants arrived. Lastly, a costly limousine deposited Harry and Mrs Harry at the front door.

The village rushed to call, and Mrs Price, who owned the largest house, and who considered herself to lead society in the place, sent out cards of invitation for a party 'to meet the bride'.

It was a great event. Several ladies had new frocks for the occasion. Everyone was excited, curious, anxious to see this fabulous creature. They said it was all so like a fairy story!

Miss Harmon, weather-beaten, hearty spinster, threw out her question as she squeezed her way through the crowded drawing-room door. Little Miss Brent, a thin, acidulated spinster, fluttered out information.

'Oh, my dear, quite charming. Such pretty manners! And quite young. Really, you know, it makes one feel quite envious to see someone who has everything like that. Good looks and money and breeding - most distinguished, nothing in the least common about her - and dear Harry so devoted!'

'Ah,' said Miss Hannon, 'it's early days yet!'

Miss Brent's thin nose quivered appreciatively. 'Oh, my dear, do you really think - '

'We all know what Harry is,' said Miss Harmon.

'We know what he was! But I expect now - '

'Ah,' said Miss Harmon, 'men are always the same. Once a gay deceiver, always a gay deceiver. I know them.'

'Dear, dear. Poor young thing.' Miss Brent looked much happier. 'Yes, I expect she'll have trouble with him. Someone ought really to warn her. I wonder if she's heard anything of the old story?

'It seems so very unfair,' said Miss Brent, 'that she should know nothing. So awkward. Especially with only the one chemist's shop in the village.'

For the erstwhile tobacconist's daughter was now married to Mr Edge, the chemist.

'It would be so much nicer,' said Miss Brent, 'if Mrs Laxton were to deal with Boots in Much Benham.'

'I dare say,' said Miss Hannon, 'that Harry Laxton will suggest that himself.'

And again a significant look passed between them.

'But I certainly think,' said Miss Harmon, 'that she ought to know.'

'Beasts!' said Clarice Vane indignantly to her uncle, Doctor Haydock. 'Absolute beasts some people are.'

He looked at her curiously.

She was a tall, dark girl, handsome, warm-hearted and impulsive. Her big brown eyes were alight now with indignation as she said, 'All these cats - saying things - hinting things.'

'About Harry Laxton?'

'Yes, about his affair with the tobacconist's daughter.'

'Oh, that!' The doctor shrugged his shoulders. 'A great many young men have affairs of that kind.'

'Of course they do. And it's all over. So why harp on it? And bring it up years after? It's like ghouls feasting on dead bodies.'

'I dare say, my dear, it does seem like that to you. But you see, they have very little to talk about down here, and so I'm afraid they do tend to dwell upon past scandals. But I'm curious to know why it upsets you so much?'

Clarice Vane bit her lip and flushed. She said, in a curiously muffled voice. 'They - they look so happy. The Laxtons, I mean. They're young and in love, and it's all so lovely for them. I hate to think of it being spoiled by whispers and hints and innuendoes and general beastliness.'

'H'm. I see.'

Clarice went on. 'He was talking to me just now. He's so happy and eager and excited and - yes, thrilled - at having got his heart's desire

and rebuilt Kingsdean. He's like a child about it all. And she - well, I don't suppose anything has ever gone wrong in her whole life. She's always had everything. You've seen her. What did you think of her?'

The doctor did not answer at once. For other people, Louise Laxton might be an object of envy. A spoiled darling of fortune. To him she had brought only the refrain of a popular song heard many years ago. Poor little rich girl -

A small, delicate figure, with flaxen hair curled rather stiffly round her face and big, wistful blue eyes.

Louise was drooping a little. The long stream of congratulations had tired her. She was hoping it might soon be time to go. Perhaps, even now. Harry might say so. She looked at him sideways. So tall and broad-shouldered with his eager pleasure in this horrible, dull party.

Poor little rich girl -

'Ooph!' It was a sigh of relief.

Harry turned to look at his wife amusedly. They were driving away from the party.

She said, 'Darling, what a frightful party!'

Harry laughed. 'Yes, pretty terrible. Never mind, my sweet. It had to be done, you know. All these old pussies knew me when I lived here as a boy. They'd have been terribly disappointed not to have got a look at you close up.'

Louise made a grimace. She said, 'Shall we have to see a lot of them?'

'What? Oh, no. They'll come and make ceremonious calls with card cases, and you'll return the calls and then you needn't bother any more. You can have your own friends down or whatever you like.'

Louise said, after a minute or two, 'Isn't there anyone amusing living down here?'

'Oh, yes. There's the County, you know. Though you may find them a bit dull, too. Mostly interested in bulbs and dogs and horses. You'll ride, of course. You'll enjoy that. There's a horse over at Eglinton I'd like you to see. A beautiful animal, perfectly trained, no vice in him but plenty of spirit.'

The car slowed down to take the turn into the gates of Kingsdean. Harry wrenched the wheel and swore as a grotesque figure sprang up in the middle of the road and he only just managed to avoid it. It stood there, shaking a fist and shouting after them.

Louise clutched his arm. 'Who's that - that horrible old woman?'

Harry's brow was black. 'That's old Murgatroyd. She and her husband were caretakers in the old house. They were there for nearly thirty years.'

'Why does she shake her fist at you?'

Harry's face got red. 'She - well, she resented the house being pulled down. And she got the sack, of course. Her husband's been dead two years. They say she got a bit queer after he died.'

'Is she - she isn't - starving?'

Louise's ideas were vague and somewhat melodramatic. Riches prevented you coming into contact with reality.

Harry was outraged. 'Good Lord, Louise, what an idea! I pensioned her off, of course - and handsomely, too! Found her a new cottage and everything.'

Louise asked, bewildered, 'Then why does she mind?'

Harry was frowning, his brows drawn together. 'Oh, how should I know? Craziness! She loved the house.'

'But it was a ruin, wasn't it?'

'Of course it was - crumbling to pieces - roof leaking - more or less unsafe. All the same I suppose it meant something to her. She's been there a long time. Oh, I don't know! The old devil's cracked, I think.'

Louise said uneasily, 'She - I think she cursed us. Oh, Harry, I wish she hadn't.'

It seemed to Louise that her new home was tainted and poisoned by the malevolent figure of one crazy old woman. When she went out in the car, when she rode, when she walked out with the dogs, there was always the same figure waiting. Crouched down on herself, a battered hat over wisps of iron-grey hair, and the slow muttering of imprecations.

Louise came to believe that Harry was right - the old woman was mad. Nevertheless that did not make things easier. Mrs Murgatroyd never actually came to the house, nor did she use definite threats, nor offer violence. Her squatting figure remained always just outside

the gates. To appeal to the police would have been useless and, in any case, Harry Laxton was averse to that course of action. It would, he said, arouse local sympathy for the old brute. He took the matter more easily than Louise did.

'Don't worry about it, darling. She'll get tired of this silly cursing business. Probably she's only trying it on.'

'She isn't. Harry. She - she hates us! I can feel it. She's ill-wishing us.'

'She's not a witch, darling, although she may look like one! Don't be morbid about it all.'

Louise was silent. Now that the first excitement of settling in was over, she felt curiously lonely and at a loose end. She had been used to life in London and the Riviera. She had no knowledge of or taste for English country life. She was ignorant of gardening, except for the final act of 'doing the flowers'. She did not really care for dogs. She was bored by such neighbours as she met. She enjoyed riding best, sometimes with Harry, sometimes, when he was busy about the estate, by herself. She hacked through the woods and lanes, enjoying the easy paces of the beautiful horse that Harry had bought for her. Yet even Prince Hal, most sensitive of chestnut steeds, was wont to shy and snort as he carried his mistress past the huddled figure of a malevolent old woman.

One day Louise took her courage in both hands. She was out walking. She had passed Mrs Murgatroyd, pretending not to notice her, but suddenly she swerved back and went right up to her. She said, a little breathlessly, 'What is it? What's the matter? What do you want?'

The old woman blinked at her. She had a cunning, dark gypsy face, with wisps of iron-grey hair, and bleared, suspicious eyes. Louise wondered if she drank.

She spoke in a whining and yet threatening voice. 'What do I want, you ask? What, indeed! That which has been took away from me. Who turned me out of Kingsdean House? I'd lived there, girl and woman, for near on forty years. It was a black deed to run me out and it's black bad luck it'll bring to you and him!'

Louise said, 'You've got a very nice cottage and - '

She broke off. The old woman's arms flew up. She screamed, 'What's the good of that to me? It's my own place I want and my own fire as I sat beside all them years. And as for you and him, I'm telling you there will be no happiness for you in your new fine house. It's the black sorrow will be upon you! Sorrow and death and my curse. May your fair face rot.'

Louise turned away and broke into a little stumbling run. She thought, I must get away from here! We must sell the house! We must go away.

At the moment, such a solution seemed easy to her. But Harry's utter incomprehension took her aback. He exclaimed, 'Leave here? Sell the house? Because of a crazy old woman's threats? You must be mad.'

'No, I'm not. But she - she frightens me, I know something will happen.'

Harry Laxton said grimly, 'Leave Mrs Murgatroyd to me. I'll settle her!'

A friendship had sprung up between Clarice Vane and young Mrs Laxton. The two girls were much of an age, though dissimilar both in character and in tastes. In Clarice's company, Louise found reassurance. Clarice was so self-reliant, so sure of herself. Louise mentioned the matter of Mrs Murgatroyd and her threats, but Clarice seemed to regard the matter as more annoying than frightening.

'It's so stupid, that sort of thing,' she said. 'And really very annoying for you.'

'You know, Clarice, I - I feel quite frightened sometimes. My heart gives the most awful jumps.'

'Nonsense, you mustn't let a silly thing like that get you down. She'll soon tire of it.'

She was silent for a minute or two. Clarice said, 'What's the matter?'

Louise paused for a minute, then her answer came with a rush. 'I hate this place! I hate being here. The woods and this house, and the awful silence at night, and the queer noise owls make. Oh, and the people and everything.'

'The people. What people?'

'The people in the village. Those prying, gossiping old maids.'

Clarice said sharply, 'What have they been saying?'

'I don't know. Nothing particular. But they've got nasty minds. When you've talked to them you feel you wouldn't trust anybody - not anybody at all.'

Clarice said harshly, 'Forget them. They've nothing to do but gossip. And most of the muck they talk they just invent.'

Louise said, 'I wish we'd never come here. But Harry adores it so.' Her voice softened.

Clarice thought, How she adores him. She said abruptly, 'I must go now.'

'I'll send you back in the car. Come again soon.'

Clarice nodded. Louise felt comforted by her new friend's visit. Harry was pleased to find her more cheerful and from then on urged her to have Clarice often to the house.

Then one day he said, 'Good news for you, darling.'

'Oh, what?'

'I've fixed the Murgatroyd. She's got a son in America, you know. Well, I've arranged for her to go out and join him. I'll pay her passage.'

'Oh, Harry, how wonderful. I believe I might get to like Kingsdean after all.'

'Get to like it? Why, it's the most wonderful place in the world!'

Louise gave a little shiver. She could not rid herself of her superstitious fear so easily.

If the ladies of St Mary Mead had hoped for the pleasure of imparting information about her husband's past to the bride, this pleasure was denied them by Harry Laxton's own prompt action.

Miss Harmon and Clarice Vane were both in Mr Edge's shop, the one buying mothballs and the other a packet of boracic, when Harry Laxton and his wife came in.

After greeting the two ladies, Harry turned to the counter and was just demanding a toothbrush when he stopped in mid-speech and exclaimed heartily, 'Well, well. Just see who's here! Bella, I do declare.'

Mrs Edge, who had hurried out from the back parlour to attend to the congestion of business, beamed back cheerfully at him, showing her big white teeth. She had been a dark, handsome girl and was still a reasonably handsome woman, though she had put on weight, and the lines of her face had coarsened; but her large brown eyes were full of warmth as she answered, 'Bella, it is, Mr Harry, and pleased to see you after all these years.'

Harry turned to his wife. 'Bella's an old flame of mine, Louise,' he said. 'Head-over-heels in love with her, wasn't I, Bella?'

'That's what you say,' said Mrs Edge.

Louise laughed. She said, 'My husband's very happy seeing all his old friends again.'

'Ah,' said Mrs Edge, 'we haven't forgotten you, Mr Harry. Seems like a fairy tale to think of you married and building up a new house instead of that ruined old Kingsdean House.'

'You look very well and blooming,' said Harry, and Mrs Edge laughed and said there was nothing wrong with her and what about that toothbrush?

Clarice, watching the baffled look on Miss Harmon's face, said to herself exultantly. Oh, well done, Harry. You've spiked their guns.

Doctor Haydock said abruptly to his niece, 'What's all this nonsense about old Mrs Murgatroyd hanging about Kingsdean and shaking her fist and cursing the new regime?'

'It isn't nonsense. It's quite true. It's upset Louise a good deal.'

'Tell her she needn't worry - when the Murgatroyds were caretakers they never stopped grumbling about the place - they only stayed because Murgatroyd drank and couldn't get another job.'

'I'll tell her,' said Clarice doubtfully, 'but I don't think she'll believe you. The old woman fairly screams with rage.'

'Always used to be fond of Harry as a boy. I can't understand it.'

Clarice said, 'Oh, well - they'll be rid of her soon. Harry's paying her passage to America.'

Three days later, Louise was thrown from her horse and killed.

Two men in a baker's van were witnesses of the accident. They saw Louise ride out of the gates, saw the old woman spring up and stand in the road waving her arms and shouting, saw the horse start,

swerve, and then bolt madly down the road, flinging Louise Laxton over his head.

One of them stood over the unconscious figure, not knowing what to do, while the other rushed to the house to get help.

Harry Laxton came running out, his face ghastly. They took off a door of the van and carried her on it to the house. She died without regaining consciousness and before the doctor arrived.

(End of Doctor Haydock's manuscript.)

When Doctor Haydock arrived the following day, he was pleased to note that there was a pink flush in Miss Marple's cheek and decidedly more animation in her manner.

'Well,' he said, 'what's the verdict?'

'What's the problem, Doctor Haydock?' countered Miss Marple.

'Oh, my dear lady, do I have to tell you that?'

'I suppose,' said Miss Marple, 'that it's the curious conduct of the caretaker. Why did she behave in that very odd way? People do mind being turned out of their old homes. But it wasn't her home. In fact, she used to complain and grumble while she was there. Yes, it certainly looks very fishy. What became of her, by the way?'

'Did a bunk to Liverpool. The accident scared her. Thought she'd wait there for her boat.'

'All very convenient for somebody,' said Miss Marple. 'Yes, I think the "Problem of the Caretaker's Conduct" can be solved easily enough. Bribery, was it not?'

'That's your solution?'

'Well, if it wasn't natural for her to behave in that way, she must have been "putting on an act" as people say, and that means that somebody paid her to do what she did.'

'And you know who that somebody was?'

'Oh, I think so. Money again, I'm afraid. And I've always noticed that gentlemen always tend to admire the same type.'

'Now I'm out of my depth.'

'No, no, it all hangs together. Harry Laxton admired Bella Edge, a dark, vivacious type. Your niece Clarice was the same. But the poor little wife was quite a different type - fair-haired and clinging - not his type at all. So he must have married her for her money. And murdered her for her money, too!'

'You use the word "murder"?'

'Well, he sounds the right type. Attractive to women and quite unscrupulous. I suppose he wanted to keep his wife's money and marry your niece. He may have been seen talking to Mrs Edge. But I don't fancy he was attached to her any more. Though I dare say he made the poor woman think he was, for ends of his own. He soon had her well under his thumb, I fancy.'

'How exactly did he murder her, do you think?'

Miss Marple stared ahead of her for some minutes with dreamy blue eyes.

'It was very well timed - with the baker's van as witness. They could see the old woman and, of course, they'd put down the horse's fright to that. But I should imagine, myself, that an air gun, or perhaps a catapult. Yes, just as the horse came through the gates. The horse bolted, of course, and Mrs Laxton was thrown.'

She paused, frowning.

"The fall might have killed her. But he couldn't be sure of that. And he seems the sort of man who would lay his plans carefully and leave nothing to chance. After all, Mrs Edge could get him something suitable without her husband knowing. Otherwise, why would Harry bother with her? Yes, I think he had some powerful drug handy, that could be administered before you arrived. After all, if a woman is thrown from her horse and has serious injuries and dies without recovering consciousness, well - a doctor wouldn't normally be suspicious, would he? He'd put it down to shock or something.'

Doctor Haydock nodded.

'Why did you suspect?' asked Miss Marple.

'It wasn't any particular cleverness on my part,' said Doctor Haydock. 'It was just the trite, well-known fact that a murderer is so pleased with his cleverness that he doesn't take proper precautions. I was just saying a few consolatory words to the bereaved husband - and feeling damned sorry for the fellow, too - when he flung himself down on the settee to do a bit of play-acting and a hypodermic syringe fell out of his pocket.

'He snatched it up and looked so scared that I began to think. Harry Laxton didn't drug; he was in perfect health; what was he doing with a hypodermic syringe? I did the autopsy with a view to certain possibilities. I found strophanthin. The rest was easy. There was strophanthin in Laxton's possession, and Bella Edge, questioned by the police, broke down and admitted to having got it for him. And finally old Mrs Murgatroyd confessed that it was Harry Laxton who had put her up to the cursing stunt.'

'And your niece got over it?'

'Yes, she was attracted by the fellow, but it hadn't gone far.'

The doctor picked up his manuscript.

'Full marks to you, Miss Marple - and full marks to me for my prescription. You're looking almost yourself again.'

THE CASE OF THE PERFECT MAID

'Oh, if you please, madam, could I speak to you a moment?'

It might be thought that this request was in the nature of an absurdity, since Edna, Miss Marple's little maid, was actually speaking to her mistress at the moment.

Recognising the idiom, however, Miss Marple said promptly, 'Certainly, Edna, come in and shut the door. What is it?'

Obediently shutting the door, Edna advanced into the room, pleated the corner of her apron between her fingers, and swallowed once or twice.

'Yes, Edna?' said Miss Marple encouragingly.

'Oh, please, ma'am, it's my cousin, Gladdie.'

'Dear me,' said Miss Marple, her mind leaping to the worst - and, alas, the most usual conclusion. 'Not - not in trouble?'

Edna hastened to reassure her. 'Oh, no, ma'am, nothing of that kind. Gladdie's not that kind of girl. It's just that she's upset. You see, she's lost her place.'

'Dear me, I am sorry to hear that. She was at Old Hall, wasn't she, with the Miss - Misses - Skinner?'

'Yes, ma'am, that's right, ma'am. And Gladdie's very upset about it - very upset indeed.'

'Gladys has changed places rather often before, though, hasn't she?'

'Oh, yes, ma'am. She's always one for a change, Gladdie is. She never seems to get really settled, if you know what I mean. But she's always been the one to give the notice, you see!'

'And this time it's the other way round?' asked Miss Marple dryly.

'Yes, ma'am, and it's upset Gladdie something awful.'

Miss Marple looked slightly surprised. Her recollection of Gladys, who had occasionally come to drink tea in the kitchen on her 'days out', was a stout, giggling girl of unshakeably equable temperament.

Edna went on. 'You see, ma'am, it's the way it happened - the way Miss Skinner looked.'

'How,' enquired Miss Marple patiently, 'did Miss Skinner look?'

This time Edna got well away with her news bulletin.

'Oh, ma'am, it was ever such a shock to Gladdie. You see, one of Miss Emily's brooches was missing, and such a hue and cry for it as never was, and of course nobody likes a thing like that to happen; it's upsetting, ma'am, if you know what I mean. And Gladdie's helped search everywhere, and there was Miss Lavinia saying she was going to the police about it, and then it turned up again, pushed right to the back of a drawer in the dressing-table, and very thankful Gladdie was.

'And the very next day as ever was a plate got broken, and Miss Lavinia she bounced out right away and told Gladdie to take a month's notice. And what Gladdie feels is it couldn't have been the plate and that Miss Lavinia was just making an excuse of that, and that it must be because of the brooch and they think as she took it and put it back when the police was mentioned, and Gladdie wouldn't do such a thing, not never she wouldn't, and what she feels is as it will get round and tell against her and it's a very serious thing for a girl, as you know, ma'am.'

Miss Marple nodded. Though having no particular liking for the bouncing, self-opinionated Gladys, she was quite sure of the girl's intrinsic honesty and could well imagine that the affair must have upset her.

Edna said wistfully, 'I suppose, ma'am, there isn't anything you could do about it? Gladdie's in ever such a taking.'

'Tell her not to be silly,' said Miss Marple crisply. 'If she didn't take the brooch - which I'm sure she didn't - then she has no cause to be upset.'

'It'll get about,' said Edna dismally.

Miss Marple said, 'I - er - am going up that way this afternoon. I'll have a word with the Misses Skinner.'

'Oh, thank you, ma'am,' said Edna.

Old Hall was a big Victorian house surrounded by woods and park land. Since it had been proved unlettable and unsaleable as it was, an enterprising speculator had divided it into four flats with a central hot-water system, and the use of 'the grounds' to be held in common by the tenants. The experiment had been satisfactory. A rich and eccentric old lady and her maid occupied one flat. The old lady had a passion for birds and entertained a feathered gathering to meals every day. A retired Indian judge and his wife rented a second. A very young couple, recently married, occupied the third, and the fourth had been taken only two months ago by two maiden ladies of the name of Skinner. The four sets of tenants were only on the most distant terms with each other, since none of them had anything in common. The landlord had been heard to say that this was an excellent thing. What he dreaded were friendships followed by estrangements and subsequent complaints to him.

Miss Marple was acquainted with all the tenants, though she knew none of them well. The elder Miss Skinner, Miss Lavinia, was what might be termed the working member of the firm. Miss Emily, the younger, spent most of her time in bed suffering from various complaints which, in the opinion of St Mary Mead, were largely imaginary. Only Miss Lavinia believed devoutly in her sister's martyrdom and patience under affliction, and willingly ran errands and trotted up and down to the village for things that 'my sister had suddenly fancied'.

It was the view of St Mary Mead that if Miss Emily suffered half as much as she said she did, she would have sent for Doctor Haydock long ago. But Miss Emily, when this was hinted to her, shut her eyes in a superior way and murmured that her case was not a simple one - the best specialists in London had been baffled by it - and that a wonderful new man had put her on a most revolutionary course of treatment and that she really hoped her health would improve under it. No humdrum GP could possibly understand her case.

'And it's my opinion,' said the outspoken Miss Hartnell, 'that she's very wise not to send for him. Dear Doctor Haydock, in that breezy manner of his, would tell her that there was nothing the matter with her and to get up and not make a fuss! Do her a lot of good!'

Failing such arbitrary treatment, however, Miss Emily continued to lie on sofas, to surround herself with strange little pill boxes, and to reject nearly everything that had been cooked for her and ask for something else - usually something difficult and inconvenient to get.

The door was opened to Miss Marple by 'Gladdie', looking more depressed than Miss Marple had ever thought possible. In the sitting-room (a quarter of the late drawing-room, which had been partitioned into a dining-room, drawing-room, bathroom, and housemaid's cupboard), Miss Lavinia rose to greet Miss Marple.

Lavinia Skinner was a tall, gaunt, bony female of fifty. She had a gruff voice and an abrupt manner.

'Nice to see you,' she said. 'Emily's lying down - feeling low today, poor dear. Hope she'll see you, it would cheer her up, but there are times when she doesn't feel up to seeing anybody. Poor dear, she's wonderfully patient.'

Miss Marple responded politely. Servants were the main topic of conversation in St Mary Mead, so it was not difficult to lead the conversation in that direction. Miss Marple said she had heard that that nice girl, Gladys Holmes, was leaving.

Miss Lavinia nodded. 'Wednesday week. Broke things, you know. Can't have that.'

Miss Marple sighed and said we all had to put up with things nowadays. It was so difficult to get girls to come to the country. Did Miss Skinner really think it was wise to part with Gladys?

'Know it's difficult to get servants,' admitted Miss Lavinia. 'The Devereuxs haven't got anybody - but then, I don't wonder - always quarrelling, jazz on all night - meals any time - that girl knows nothing of housekeeping. I pity her husband! Then the Larkins have just lost their maid. Of course, what with the judge's Indian temper and his wanting chota hazri, as he calls it, at six in the morning and Mrs

Larkin always fussing I don't wonder at that, either. Mrs Carmichael's Janet is a fixture of course - though in my opinion she's the most disagreeable woman, and absolutely bullies the old lady.'

'Then don't you think you might reconsider your decision about Gladys? She really is a nice girl. I know all her family; very honest and superior.'

Miss Lavinia shook her head.

'I've got my reasons,' she said importantly.

Miss Marple murmured, 'You missed a brooch, I understand - '

'Now, who has been talking? I suppose the girl has. Quite frankly, I'm almost certain she took it. And then got frightened and put it back - but, of course, one can't say anything unless one is sure.' She changed the subject. 'Do come and see Emily, Miss Marple. I'm sure it would do her good.'

Miss Marple followed meekly to where Miss Lavinia knocked on a door, was bidden enter, and ushered her guest into the best room in the flat, most of the light of which was excluded by half-drawn blinds. Miss Emily was lying in bed, apparently enjoying the half-gloom and her own indefinite sufferings.

The dim light showed her to be a thin, indecisive-looking creature, with a good deal of greyish-yellow hair untidily wound around her head and erupting into curls, the whole thing looking like a bird's nest of which no self-respecting bird could be proud. There was a smell in the room of Eau de Cologne, stale biscuits, and camphor.

With half-closed eyes and a thin, weak voice, Emily Skinner explained that this was 'one of her bad days'.

'The worst of ill health is,' said Miss Emily in a melancholy tone, 'that one knows what a burden one is to everyone around one.

'Lavinia is very good to me. Lavvie dear, I do so hate giving trouble but if my hot water bottle could only be filled in the way I like it - too full it weighs on me so - on the other hand, if it is not sufficiently filled, it gets cold immediately!'

'I'm sorry, dear. Give it to me. I will empty a little out.'

'Perhaps, if you're doing that, it might be refilled. There are no rusks in the house, I suppose - no, no, it doesn't matter. I can do without. Some weak tea and a slice of lemon - no lemons? No, really, I couldn't drink tea without lemon. I think the milk was slightly turned this morning. It has put me against milk in my tea. It doesn't matter. I can do without my tea. Only I do feel so weak. Oysters, they say, are nourishing. I wonder if I could fancy a few? No, no, too much bother to get hold of them so late in the day. I can fast until tomorrow.'

Lavinia left the room murmuring something incoherent about bicycling down to the village.

Miss Emily smiled feebly at her guest and remarked that she did hate giving anyone any trouble.

Miss Marple told Edna that evening that she was afraid her embassy had met with no success. She was rather troubled to find that rumours as to Gladys's dishonesty were already going around the village.

In the post office, Miss Wetherby tackled her. 'My dear Jane, they gave her a written reference saying she was willing and sober and respectable, but saying nothing about honesty. That seems to me most significant! I hear there was some trouble about a brooch. I think there must be something in it, you know, because one doesn't let a servant go nowadays unless it's something rather grave. They'll find it most difficult to get anyone else. Girls simply will not go to Old Hall. They're nervous coming home on their days out. You'll see, the Skinners won't find anyone else, and then, perhaps, that dreadful hypochondriac sister will have to get up and do something!'

Great was the chagrin of the village when it was made known that the Misses Skinner had engaged, from an agency, a new maid who, by all accounts, was a perfect paragon.

'A three years' reference recommending her most warmly, she prefers the country, and actually asks less wages than Gladys. I really feel we have been most fortunate.'

'Well, really,' said Miss Marple, to whom these details were imparted by Miss Lavinia in the fishmonger's shop. 'It does seem too good to be true.'

It then became the opinion of St Mary Mead that the paragon would cry off at the last minute and fail to arrive.

None of these prognostications came true, however, and the village was able to observe the domestic treasure, by name, Mary Higgins, driving through the village in Reed's taxi to Old Hall. It had to be admitted that her appearance was good. A most respectable-looking woman, very neatly dressed.

When Miss Marple next visited Old Hall, on the occasion of recruiting stall-holders for the vicarage fete, Mary Higgins opened the door. She was certainly a most superior-looking maid, at a guess forty years of age, with neat black hair, rosy cheeks, a plump figure discreetly arrayed in black with a white apron and cap - 'quite the good, old-fashioned type of servant,' as Miss Marple explained afterwards, and with the proper, inaudible respectful voice, so different from the loud but adenoidal accents of Gladys.

Miss Lavinia was looking far less harassed than usual and, although she regretted that she could not take a stall owing to her preoccupation with her sister, she nevertheless tendered a handsome monetary contribution, and promised to produce a consignment of pen-wipers and babies' socks.

Miss Marple commented on her air of well-being.

'I really feel I owe a great deal to Mary, I am so thankful I had the resolution to get rid of that other girl. Mary is really invaluable. Cooks nicely and waits beautifully and keeps our little flat scrupulously clean - mattresses turned over every day. And she is really wonderful with Emily!'

Miss Marple hastily enquired after Emily.

'Oh, poor dear, she has been very much under the weather lately. She can't help it, of course, but it really makes things a little difficult sometimes. Wanting certain things cooked and then, when they come, saying she can't eat now - and then wanting them again half an hour later and everything spoiled and having to be done again. It makes, of course, a lot of work - but fortunately Mary does not seem

to mind at all. She's used to waiting on invalids, she says, and understands them. It is such a comfort.'

'Dear me,' said Miss Marple. 'You are fortunate.'

'Yes, indeed. I really feel Mary has been sent to us as an answer to prayer.'

'She sounds to me,' said Miss Marple, 'almost too good to be true. I should - well, I should be a little careful if I were you.'

Lavinia Skinner failed to perceive the point of this remark. She said, 'Oh! I assure you I do all I can to make her comfortable. I don't know what I should do if she left.'

'I don't expect she'll leave until she's ready to leave,' said Miss Marple and stared very hard at her hostess.

Miss Lavinia said, 'If one has no domestic worries, it takes such a load off one's mind, doesn't it? How is your little Edna shaping?'

'She's doing quite nicely. Not much ahead, of course. Not like your Mary. Still, I do know all about Edna because she's a village girl.'

As she went out into the hall she heard the invalid's voice fretfully raised. 'This compress has been allowed to get quite dry - Doctor Allerton particularly said moisture continually renewed. There, there, leave it. I want a cup of tea and a boiled egg - boiled only three minutes and a half, remember, and send Miss Lavinia to me.'

The efficient Mary emerged from the bedroom and, saying to Lavinia, 'Miss Emily is asking for you, madam,' proceeded to open the door for Miss Marple, helping her into her coat and handing her her umbrella in the most irreproachable fashion.

Miss Marple took the umbrella, dropped it, tried to pick it up, and dropped her bag, which flew open. Mary politely retrieved various odds and ends - a handkerchief, an engagement book, an old-fashioned leather purse, two shillings, three pennies, and a striped piece of peppermint rock.

Miss Marple received the last with some signs of confusion.

'Oh, dear, that must have been Mrs Clement's little boy. He was sucking it, I remember, and he took my bag to play with. He must have put it inside. It's terribly sticky, isn't it?'

'Shall I take it, madam?'

'Oh, would you? Thank you so much.'

Mary stooped to retrieve the last item, a small mirror, upon recovering which Miss Marple exclaimed fervently, 'How lucky, now, that that isn't broken.'

She thereupon departed, Mary standing politely by the door holding a piece of striped rock with a completely expressionless face.

For ten days longer St Mary Mead had to endure hearing of the excellencies of Miss Lavinia and Miss Emily's treasure.

On the eleventh day, the village awoke to its big thrill.

Mary, the paragon, was missing! Her bed had not been slept in, and the front door was found ajar. She had slipped out quietly during the night.

And not Mary alone was missing! Two brooches and five rings of Miss Lavinia's; three rings, a pendant, a bracelet, and four brooches of Miss Emily's were missing, also!

It was the beginning of a chapter of catastrophe.

Young Mrs Devereux had lost her diamonds which she kept in a unlocked drawer and also some valuable furs given to her as a wedding present. The judge and his wife also had had jewellery taken and a certain amount of money. Mrs Carmichael was the greatest sufferer. Not only had she some very valuable jewels but she also kept in the flat a large sum of money which had gone. It had been Janet's evening out, and her mistress was in the habit of walking round the gardens at dusk calling to the birds and scattering crumbs. It seemed clear that Mary, the perfect maid, had had keys to fit all the flats!

There was, it must be confessed, a certain amount of ill-natured pleasure in St Mary Mead. Miss Lavinia had boasted so much of her marvellous Mary.

'And all the time, my dear, just a common thief!'

Interesting revelations followed. Not only had Mary disappeared into the blue, but the agency who had provided her and vouched for her credentials was alarmed to find that the Mary Higgins who had applied to them and whose references they had taken up had, to all intents and purposes, never existed. It was the name of a bona fide servant who had lived with the bona fide sister of a dean, but the real Mary Higgins was existing peacefully in a place in Cornwall.

'Damned clever, the whole thing,' Inspector Slack was forced to admit. 'And, if you ask me, that woman works with a gang. There was a case of much the same kind in Northumberland a year ago. Stuff was never traced, and they never caught her. However, we'll do better than that in Much Benham!'

Inspector Slack was always a confident man.

Nevertheless, weeks passed, and Mary Higgins remained triumphantly at large. In vain Inspector Slack redoubled that energy that so belied his name.

Miss Lavinia remained tearful. Miss Emily was so upset, and felt so alarmed by her condition that she actually sent for Doctor Haydock.

The whole of the village was terribly anxious to know what he thought of Miss Emily's claims to ill health, but naturally could not ask him. Satisfactory data came to hand on the subject, however, through Mr Meek, the chemist's assistant, who was walking out with Clara, Mrs Price-Ridley's maid. It was then known that Doctor Haydock had prescribed a mixture of asafoetida and valerian which, according to Mr Meek, was the stock remedy for malingerers in the army!

Soon afterwards it was learned that Miss Emily, not relishing the medical attention she had had, was declaring that in the state of her health she felt it her duty to be near the specialist in London who understood her case. It was, she said, only fair to Lavinia.

The flat was put up for subletting.

It was a few days after that that Miss Marple, rather pink and flustered, called at the police station in Much Benham and asked for Inspector Slack.

Inspector Slack did not like Miss Marple. But he was aware that the chief constable, Colonel Melchett, did not share that opinion. Rather grudgingly, therefore, he received her.

'Good afternoon, Miss Marple, what can I do for you?'

'Oh, dear,' said Miss Marple, 'I'm afraid you're in a hurry.'

'Lots of work on,' said Inspector Stack, 'but I can spare a few moments.'

'Oh dear,' said Miss Marple. 'I hope I shall be able to put what I say properly. So difficult, you know, to explain oneself, don't you think? No, perhaps you don't. But you see, not having been educated in the modern style - just a governess, you know, who taught one the dates of the kings of England and general knowledge - Doctor Brewer - three kinds of diseases of wheat - blight, mildew - now what was the third - was it smut?'

'Do you want to talk about smut?' asked Inspector Slack and then blushed.

'Oh, no, no.' Miss Marple hastily disclaimed any wish to talk about smut. 'Just an illustration, you know. And how needles are made, and all that. Discursive, you know, but not teaching one to keep to the point. Which is what I want to do. It's about Miss Skinner's maid, Gladys, you know.'

'Mary Higgins,' said Inspector Slack.

'Oh, yes, the second maid. But it's Gladys Holmes I mean - rather an impertinent girl and far too pleased with herself but really strictly honest, and it's so important that that should be recognized.'

'No charge against her so far as I know,' said the inspector.

'No, I know there isn't a charge - but that makes it worse. Because, you see, people go on thinking things. Oh, dear - I knew I should explain things badly. What I really mean is that the important thing is to find Mary Higgins - '

'Certainly,' said Inspector Slack. 'Have you any ideas on the subject?'

'Well, as a matter of fact, I have,' said Miss Marple. 'May I ask you a question? Are fingerprints of no use to you?'

'Ah,' said Inspector Slack, 'that's where she was a bit too artful for us. Did most of her work in rubber gloves or housemaid's gloves, it seems. And she'd been careful - wiped off everything in her bedroom and on the sink. Couldn't find a single fingerprint in the place!'

'If you did have fingerprints, would it help?'

'It might, madam. They may be known at the Yard. This isn't her first job, I'd say!'

Miss Marple nodded brightly. She opened her bag and extracted a small cardboard box. Inside it, wedged in cotton wool, was a small mirror.

'From my handbag,' said Miss Marple. 'The maid's prints are on it. I think they should be satisfactory - she touched an extremely sticky substance a moment previously.'

Inspector Slack stared. 'Did you get her fingerprints on purpose?'

'Of course.'

'You suspected her then?'

'Well, you know, it did strike me that she was a little too good to be true. I practically told Miss Lavinia so. But she simply wouldn't take the hint! I'm afraid, you know, Inspector, that I don't believe in paragons. Most of us have our faults - and domestic service shows them up very quickly!'

'Well,' said Inspector Slack, recovering his balance, 'I'm obliged to you, I'm sure. We'll send these up to the Yard and see what they have to say.'

He stopped. Miss Marple had put her head a little on one side and was regarding him with a good deal of meaning.

'You wouldn't consider, I suppose, Inspector, looking a little nearer home?'

'What do you mean. Miss Marple?'

'It's very difficult to explain, but when you come across a peculiar thing you notice it. Although, often, peculiar things may be the merest trifles. I've felt that all along, you know; I mean about Gladys and the brooch. She's an honest girl; she didn't take that brooch. Then why did Miss Skinner think she did? Miss Skinner's not a fool; far from it! Why was she so anxious to let a girl go who was a good servant when servants are hard to get? It was peculiar, you know. So I wondered. I wondered a good deal. And I noticed another peculiar thing! Miss Emily's a hypochondriac, but she's the first

hypochondriac who hasn't sent for some doctor or other at once. Hypochondriacs love doctors. Miss Emily didn't!'

'What are you suggesting. Miss Marple?'

'Well, I'm suggesting, you know, that Miss Lavinia and Miss Emily are peculiar people. Miss Emily spends nearly all her time in a dark room. And if that hair of hers isn't a wig I - I'll eat my own back switch! And what I say is this - it's perfectly possible for a thin, pale, grey-haired, whining woman to be the same as a black-haired, rosy-cheeked, plump woman. And nobody that I can find ever saw Miss Emily and Mary Higgins at one and the same rime.

'Plenty of time to get impressions of all the keys, plenty of time to find out all about the other tenants, and then - get rid of the local girl. Miss Emily takes a brisk walk across country one night and arrives at the station as Mary Higgins next day. And then, at the right moment, Mary Higgins disappears, and off goes the hue and cry after her. I'll tell you where you'll find her, Inspector. On Miss Emily Skinner's sofa! Get her fingerprints if you don't believe me, but you'll find I'm right! A couple of clever thieves, that's what the Skinners are - and no doubt in league with a clever post and rails or fence or whatever you call it. But they won't get away with it this time! I'm not going to have one of our village girls' character for honesty taken away like that! Gladys Holmes is as honest as the day, and everybody's going to know it! Good afternoon!'

Miss Marple had stalked out before Inspector Slack had recovered.

'Whew!' he muttered. 'I wonder if she's right?'

He soon found out that Miss Marple was right again.

Colonel Melchett congratulated Slack on his efficiency, and Miss Marple had Gladys come to tea with Edna and spoke to her seriously on settling down in a good situation when she got one.

MISS MARPLE TELLS A STORY

I don't think I've ever told you, my dears - you, Raymond, and you, Joan, about the rather curious little business that happened some years ago now. I don't want to seem vain in any way - of course I know that in comparison with you young people I'm not clever at all - Raymond writes those very modern books all about rather unpleasant young men and women - and Joan paints those very remarkable pictures of square people with curious bulges on them - very clever of you, my dear, but as Raymond always says (only quite kindly, because he is the kindest of nephews) I am hopelessly Victorian. I admire Mr Alma-Tadema and Mr Frederic Leighton and I suppose to you they seem hopelessly vieux jeu. Now let me see, what was I saying? Oh, yes - that I didn't want to appear vain - but I couldn't help being just a teeny weeny bit pleased with myself, because, just by applying a little common sense, I believe I really did solve a problem that had baffled cleverer heads than mine. Though really I should have thought the whole thing was obvious from the beginning...

Well, I'll tell you my little story, and if you think I'm inclined to be conceited about it, you must remember that I did at least help a fellow creature who was in very grave distress.

The first I knew of this business was one evening about nine o'clock when Gwen - (you remember Gwen? My little maid with red hair) well - Gwen came in and told me that Mr Petherick and a gentleman had called to see me. Gwen had shown them into the drawing-room quite rightly. I was sitting in the dining-room because in early spring I think it is so wasteful to have two fires going.

I directed Gwen to bring in the cherry brandy and some glasses and I hurried into the drawing-room. I don't know whether you remember Mr Petherick? He died two years ago, but he had been a friend of mine for many years as well as attending to all my legal business. A very shrewd man and a really clever solicitor. His son does my business for me now - a very nice lad and very up to date - bur somehow I don't feel quite the confidence I had with Mr Petherick.

I explained to Mr Petherick about the fires and he said at once that he and his friend would come into the dining-room - and then he introduced his friend - a Mr Rhodes. He was a youngish man - not much over forty - and I saw at once there was something very wrong. His manner was most peculiar. One might have called it rude if one hadn't realised that the poor fellow was suffering from strain.

When we were settled in the dining-room and Gwen had brought the cherry brandy, Mr Petherick explained the reason for his visit.

'Miss Marple,' he said, 'you must forgive an old friend for taking a liberty. What I have come here for is a consultation.'

I couldn't understand at all what he meant, and he went on:

'In a case of illness one likes two points of view - that of the specialist and that of the family physician. It is the fashion to regard the former as of more value, but I am not sure that I agree. The specialist has experience only in his own subject - the family doctor has, perhaps, less knowledge - but a wider experience.'

I knew just what he meant, because a young niece of mine not long before had hurried her child off to a very well-known specialist in skin diseases without consulting her own doctor whom she considered an old dodderer, and the specialist had ordered some very expensive treatment, and later found that all the child was suffering from was a rather unusual form of measles.

I just mention this - though I have a horror of digressing - to show that I appreciate Mr Petherick's point - but I still hadn't any idea what he was driving at.

'If Mr Rhodes is ill - ' I said, and stopped - because the poor man gave a most dreadful laugh.

He said: 'I expect to die of a broken neck in a few months' time.'

And then it all came out. There had been a case of murder lately in Barnchester - a town about twenty miles away. I'm afraid I hadn't paid much attention to it at the time, because we had been having a lot of excitement in the village about our district nurse, and outside occurrences like an earthquake in India and a murder in Barnchester, although of course far more important really - had given way to our own little local excitements. I'm afraid villages are like that. Still, I did remember having read about a woman having

been stabbed in a hotel, though I hadn't remembered her name. But now it seemed that this woman had been Mr Rhodes's wife - and as if that wasn't bad enough - he was actually under suspicion of having murdered her himself.

All this Mr Petherick explained to me very clearly, saying that, although the Coroner's jury had brought in a verdict of murder by a person or persons unknown, Mr Rhodes had reason to believe that he would probably be arrested within a day or two, and that he had come to Mr Petherick and placed himself in his hands. Mr Petherick went on to say that they had that afternoon consulted Sir Malcolm Olde, K.C., and that in the event of the case coming to trial Sir Malcolm had been briefed to defend Mr Rhodes.

Sir Malcolm was a young man, Mr Petherick said, very up to date in his methods, and he had indicated a certain line of defence. But with that line of defence Mr Petherick was not entirely satisfied.

'You see, my dear lady,' he said, 'it is tainted with what I call the specialist's point of view. Give Sir Malcolm a case and he sees only one point - the most likely line of defence. But even the best line of defence may ignore completely what is, to my mind, the vital point. It takes no account of what actually happened.'

Then he went on to say some very kind and flattering things about my acumen and judgement and my knowledge of human nature, and asked permission to tell me the story of the case in the hopes that I might be able to suggest some explanation.

I could see that Mr Rhodes was highly sceptical of my being of any use and he was annoyed at being brought here. But Mr Petherick

took no notice and proceeded to give me the facts of what occurred on the night of March 8th.

Mr and Mrs Rhodes had been staying at the Crown Hotel in Barnchester. Mrs Rhodes who (so I gathered from Mr Petherick's careful language) was perhaps just a shade of a hypochondriac, had retired to bed immediately after dinner. She and her husband occupied adjoining rooms with a connecting door. Mr Rhodes, who is writing a book on prehistoric flints, settled down to work in the adjoining room. At eleven o'clock he tidied up his papers and prepared to go to bed. Before doing so, he just glanced into his wife's room to make sure that there was nothing she wanted. He discovered the electric light on and his wife lying in bed stabbed through the heart. She had been dead at least an hour - probably longer. The following were the points made. There was another door in Mrs Rhodes's room leading into the corridor. This door was locked and bolted on the inside. The only window in the room was closed and latched. According to Rhodes nobody had passed through the room in which he was sitting except a chambermaid bringing hot water bottles. The weapon found in the wound was a stiletto dagger which had been lying on Mrs Rhodes's dressing-table. She was in the habit of using it as a paper knife. There were no fingerprints on it.

The situation boiled down to this - no one but Mr Rhodes and the chambermaid had entered the victim's room.

I enquired about the chambermaid.

'That was our first line of enquiry,' said Mr Petherick. 'Mary Hill is a local woman. She had been chambermaid at the Crown for ten years. There seems absolutely no reason why she should commit a sudden assault on a guest. She is, in any case, extraordinarily stupid, almost

half-witted. Her story has never varied. She brought Mrs Rhodes her hot water bottle and says the lady was drowsy - just dropping off to sleep. Frankly, I cannot believe, and I am sure no jury would believe, that she committed the crime.'

Mr Petherick went on to mention a few additional details. At the head of the staircase in the Crown Hotel is a kind of miniature lounge where people sometimes sit and have coffee. A passage goes off to the right and the last door in it is the door into the room occupied by Mr Rhodes. The passage then turns sharply to the right again and the first door round the corner is the door into Mrs Rhodes's room. As it happened, both these doors could be seen by witnesses. The first door - that into Mr Rhodes's room, which I will call A, could be seen by four people, two commercial travellers and an elderly married couple who were having coffee. According to them nobody went in or out of door A except Mr Rhodes and the chambermaid. As to the other door in the passage B, there was an electrician at work there and he also swears that nobody entered or left door B except the chambermaid.

It was certainly a very curious and interesting case. On the face of it, it looked as though Mr Rhodes must have murdered his wife. But I could see that Mr Petherick was quite convinced of his client's innocence and Mr Petherick was a very shrewd man.

At the inquest Mr Rhodes had told a hesitating and rambling story about some woman who had written threatening letters to his wife. His story, I gathered, had been unconvincing in the extreme. Appealed to by Mr Petherick, he explained himself.

'Frankly,' he said, 'I never believed it. I thought Amy had made most of it up.'

Mrs Rhodes, I gathered, was one of those romantic liars who go through life embroidering everything that happens to them. The amount of adventures that, according to her own account, happened to her in a year was simply incredible. If she slipped on a bit of banana peel it was a case of near escape from death. If a lampshade caught fire she was rescued from a burning building at the hazard of her life. Her husband got into the habit of discounting her statements. Her tale as to some woman whose child she had injured in a motor accident and who had vowed vengeance on her - well - Mr Rhodes had simply not taken any notice of it. The incident had happened before he married his wife and although she had read him letters couched in crazy language, he had suspected her of composing them herself. She had actually done such a thing once or twice before. She was a woman of hysterical tendencies who craved ceaselessly for excitement.

Now, all that seemed to me very natural - indeed, we have a young woman in the village who does much the same thing. The danger with such people is that when anything at all extraordinary really does happen to them, nobody believes they are speaking the truth. It seemed to me that that was what had happened in this case. The police, I gathered, merely believed that Mr Rhodes was making up this unconvincing tale in order to avert suspicion from himself.

I asked if there had been any women staying by themselves in the hotel. It seemed there were two - a Mrs Granby, an Anglo-Indian widow, and a Miss Carruthers, rather a horsey spinster who dropped her g's. Mr Petherick added that the most minute enquiries had failed to elicit anyone who had seen either of them near the scene of the crime and there was nothing to connect either of them with it in any way. I asked him to describe their personal appearance. He said that

Mrs Granby had reddish hair rather untidily done, was sallow-faced and about fifty years of age. Her clothes were rather picturesque, being made mostly of native silk, etc. Miss Carruthers was about forty, wore pince-nez, had close cropped hair like a man and wore mannish coats and skirts.

'Dear me,' I said, 'that makes it very difficult.'

Mr Petherick looked enquiringly at me, but I didn't want to say any more just then, so I asked what Sir Malcolm Olde had said.

Sir Malcolm was confident of being able to call conflicting medical testimony and to suggest some way of getting over the fingerprint difficulty. I asked Mr Rhodes what he thought and he said all doctors were fools but he himself couldn't really believe that his wife had killed herself. 'She wasn't that kind of woman,' he said simply - and I believed him. Hysterical people don't usually commit suicide.

I thought a minute and then I asked if the door from Mrs Rhodes's room led straight into the corridor. Mr Rhodes said no - there was a little hallway with bathroom and lavatory. It was the door from the bedroom to the hallway that was locked and bolted on the inside.

'In that case,' I said, 'the whole thing seems remarkably simple.' And really, you know, it did... the simplest thing in the world. And yet no one seemed to have seen it that way.

Both Mr Petherick and Mr Rhodes were staring at me so that I felt quite embarrassed.

'Perhaps,' said Mr Rhodes, 'Miss Marple hasn't quite appreciated the difficulties.'

'Yes,' I said, 'I think I have. There are four possibilities. Either Mrs Rhodes was killed by her husband, or by the chambermaid, or she committed suicide, or she was killed by an outsider whom nobody saw enter or leave.'

'And that's impossible,' Mr Rhodes broke in. 'Nobody could come in or go out through my room without my seeing them, and even if anyone did managed to come in through my wife's room without the electrician seeing them, how the devil could they get out again leaving the door locked and bolted on the inside?'

Mr Petherick looked at me and said: 'Well, Miss Marple?' in an encouraging manner.

'I should like,' I said, 'to ask a question. Mr Rhodes, what did the chambermaid look like?'

He said he wasn't sure - she was tallish, he thought - he didn't remember if she was fair or dark. I turned to Mr Petherick and asked the same question.

He said she was of medium height, had fairish hair and blue eyes and rather a high colour.

Mr Rhodes said: 'You are a better observer than I am, Petherick.'

I ventured to disagree. I then asked Mr Rhodes if he could describe the maid in my house. Neither he nor Mr Petherick could do so.

'Don't you see what that means?' I said, 'You both came here full of your own affairs and the person who let you in was only a parlourmaid. The same applies to Mr Rhodes at the hotel. He saw her uniform and her apron. He was engrossed by his work. But Mr

Petherick has interviewed the same woman in a different capacity. He has looked at her as a person.

'That's what the woman who did the murder counted upon.'

As they still didn't see, I had to explain.

'I think,' I said, 'that this is how it went. The chambermaid came in by door A, passed through Mr Rhodes's room into Mrs Rhodes's room with the hot water bottle and went out through the hallway into passage B, X - as I will call our murderess - came in by door B into the little hallway, concealed herself in - well in a certain apartment, ahem- and waited until the chambermaid had passed out. Then she entered Mr Rhodes's room, took the stiletto from the dressing table (she had doubtless explored the room earlier in the day) went up to the bed, stabbed the dozing woman, wiped the handle of the stiletto, locked and bolted the door by which she had entered, and then passed out through the room where Mrs Rhodes had been working.'

Mr Rhodes cried out: 'But I should have seen her. The electrician would have seen her go in.'

'No,' I said. 'That's where you're wrong. You wouldn't see her - not if she were dressed as a chambermaid. ' I let it sink in, then I went on, 'You were engrossed in your work - out of the tail of your eye you saw a chambermaid come in, go into your wife's room, come back and go out. It was the same dress - but not the same woman. That's what the people having coffee saw - a chambermaid go in and a chambermaid come out. The electrician did the same. I dare say if a chambermaid were very pretty a gentleman might notice her face - human nature being what it is - but if she were just an ordinary middle-aged woman

- well - it would be the chambermaid's dress you would see - not the woman herself.'

Mr Rhodes cried: 'Who was she?'

'Well,' I said, 'that is going to be a little difficult. It must be either Mrs Granby or Miss Carruthers. Mrs Granby sounds as though she might wear a wig normally - so she could wear her own hair as a chambermaid. On the other hand, Miss Carruthers with her close-cropped mannish head might easily put on a wig to play her part. I dare say you will find out easily enough which of them it is. Personally, I incline myself to think it will be Miss Carruthers.'

And really, my dears, that is the end of the story. Carruthers was a false name, but she was the woman all right. There was insanity in her family. Mrs Rhodes, who was a most reckless and dangerous driver, had run over her little girl, and it had driven the poor woman off her head. She concealed her madness very cunningly except for writing distinctly insane letters to her intended victim. She had been following her about for some time, and she laid her plans very cleverly. The false hair and maid's dress she posted in a parcel first thing the next morning. When taxed with the truth she broke down and confessed at once. The poor thing is in Broadmoor now. Completely unbalanced of course, but a very cleverly planned crime.

Mr Petherick came to me afterwards and brought me a very nice letter from Mr Rhodes - really, it made me blush. Then my old friend said to me: 'Just one thing - why did you think it was more likely to be Carruthers than Granby? You'd never seen either of them.'

'Well,' I said. 'It was the g's. You said she dropped her g's. Now, that's done by a lot of hunting people in books, but I don't know many

people who do it in reality - and certainly no one under sixty. You said this woman was forty. Those dropped g's sounded to me like a woman who was playing a part and over-doing it.'

I shan't tell you what Mr Petherick said to that - but he was very complimentary - and I really couldn't help feeling just a teeny weeny bit pleased with myself.

And it's extraordinary how things turn out for the best in this world. Mr Rhodes has married again - such a nice, sensible girl - and they've got a dear little baby - what do you think? - they asked me to be godmother. Wasn't it nice of them?

Now I do hope you don't think I've been running on too long...

THE DRESSMAKER'S DOLL

The doll lay in the big velvet-covered chair. There was not much light in the room; the London skies were dark. In the gentle, greyish-green gloom, the sage-green coverings and the curtains and the rugs all blended with each other. The doll blended, too. She lay long and limp and sprawled in her green-velvet clothes and her velvet cap and the painted mask of her face. She was the Puppet Doll, the whim of Rich Women, the doll who lolls beside the telephone, or among the cushions of the divan. She sprawled there, eternally limp and yet strangely alive. She looked a decadent product of the twentieth century.

Sybil Fox, hurrying in with some patterns and a sketch, looked at the doll with a faint feeling of surprise and bewilderment. She wondered - but whatever she wondered did not get to the front of her mind. Instead, she thought to herself, 'Now, what's happened to the pattern of the blue velvet? Wherever have I put it? I'm sure I had it here Just now.' She went out on the landing and called up to the workroom.

'Elspeth, Elspeth, have you the blue pattern up there? Mrs Fellows-Brown will be here any minute now.'

She went in again, switching on the lights. Again she glanced at the doll. 'Now where on earth - ah, there it is.' She picked the pattern up from where it had fallen from her hand. There was the usual creak outside on the landing as the elevator came to a halt and in a minute or two Mrs Fellows-Brown, accompanied by her Pekinese came puffing into the room rather like a fussy local train arriving at a wayside station.

'It's going to pour,' she said, 'simply pour!'

She threw off her gloves and a fur. Alicia Coombe came in. She didn't always come in nowadays, only when special customers arrived, and Mrs Fellows-Brown was such a customer.

Elspeth, the forewoman of the workroom, came down with the frock and Sybil pulled it over Mrs Fellows-Brown's head.

'There,' she said, 'I think it's good. Yes, it's definitely a success.'

Mrs Fellows-Brown turned sideways and looked in the mirror.

'I must say,' she said, 'your clothes do do something to my behind.'

'You're much thinner than you were three months ago,' Sybil assured her.

'I'm really not,' said Mrs Fellows-Brown, 'though I must say I look it in this. There's something about the way you cut, it really does minimise my behind. I almost look as though I hadn't got one - I mean only the usual kind that most people have.' She sighed and gingerly smoothed the troublesome portion of her anatomy. 'It's always been a bit of a trial to me,' she said. 'Of course, for years I could pull it in, you know, by sticking out my front. Well, I can't do that any longer because I've got a stomach now as well as a behind. And I mean - well, you can't pull it in both ways, can you?'

Alicia Coombe said, 'You should see some of my customers!'

Mrs Fellows-Brown experimented to and fro.

'A stomach is worse than a behind,' she said. 'It shows more. Or perhaps you think it does, because, I mean, when you're talking to people you're facing them and that's the moment they can't see your behind but they can notice your stomach. Anyway, I've made it a rule to pull in my stomach and let my behind look after itself.' She craned her neck round still farther, then said suddenly, 'Oh, that doll of yours'. She gives me the creeps. How long have you had her?'

Sybil glanced uncertainly at Alicia Coombe, who looked puzzled but vaguely distressed.

'I don't know exactly... some time I think - I never can remember things. It's awful nowadays - I simply cannot remember. Sybil, how long have we had her?'

Sybil said shortly, 'I don't know.'

'Well,' said Mrs Fellows-Brown, 'she gives me the creeps. Uncanny! She looks, you know, as though she was watching us all, and perhaps laughing in that velvet sleeve of hers. I'd get rid of her if I were you.' She gave a little shiver, then she plunged once more into dressmaking details. Should she or should she not have the sleeves an inch shorter? And what about the length? When all these important points were settled satisfactorily, Mrs Fellow-Brown resumed her own garments and prepared to leave. As she passed the doll, she turned her head again.

'No,' she said, 'I don't like that doll. She looks too much as though she belonged here. It isn't healthy.'

'Now what did she mean by that?' demanded Sybil, as Mrs Fellows-Brown departed down the stairs.

Before Alicia Coombe could answer, Mrs Fellows-Brown returned, poking her head round the door.

'Good gracious, I forgot all about Fou-Ling. Where are you, ducksie? Well, I never!'

She stared and the other two women stared, too. The Pekinese was sitting by the green-velvet chair, staring up at the limp doll sprawled on it. There was no expression, either of pleasure or resentment, on his small, pop-eyed face. He was merely looking.

'Come along, mum's darling,' said Mrs Fellows-Brown.

Mum's darling paid no attention whatever.

'He gets more disobedient every day,' said Mrs Fellows-Brown, with the air of one cataloguing a virtue. 'Come on, Fou-Ling. Dindins. Luffly liver.'

Fou-Ling turned his head about an inch and a half towards his mistress, then with disdain resumed his appraisal of the doll.

'She's certainly made an impression on him,' said Mrs Fellows-Brown. 'I don't think he's ever noticed her before. I haven't either. Was she here last time I came?'

The other two women looked at each other. Sybil now had a frown on her face, and Alicia Coombe said, wrinkling up her forehead, 'I told you - I simply can't remember anything nowadays. How long have we had her, Sybil?'

'Where did she come from?' demanded Mrs Fellows-Brown. 'Did you buy her?'

'Oh no.' Somehow Alicia Coombe was shocked at the idea. 'Oh no. I suppose - I suppose someone gave her to me.' She shook her head. 'Maddening!' she exclaimed. 'Absolutely maddening, when everything goes out of your head the very moment after it's happened.'

'Now don't be stupid, Fou-Ling,' said Mrs Fellows-Brown sharply. 'Come on. I'll have to pick you up.'

She picked him up. Fou-Ling uttered a short bark of agonised protest. They went out of the room with Fou-Ling's pop-eyed face turned over his fluffy shoulder, still staring with enormous attention at the doll on the chair...

'That there doll,' said Mrs Groves, 'fair gives me the creeps, it does.'

Mrs Groves was the cleaner. She had just finished a crablike progress backwards along the floor. Now she was standing up and working slowly round the room with a duster.

'Funny thing,' said Mrs Groves, 'never noticed it really until yesterday. And then it hit me all of a sudden, as you might say.'

'You don't like it?' asked Sybil.

'I tell you, Mrs Fox, it gives me the creeps,' said the cleaning woman. 'It ain't natural, if you know what I mean. All those long hanging legs and the way she's slouched down there and the cunning look she has in her eye. It doesn't look healthy, that's what I say.'

'You've never said anything about her before,' said Sybil.

'I tell you, I never noticed her - not till this morning... Of course I know she's been here some time but - ' She stopped and a puzzled expression flitted across her face. 'Sort of thing you might dream of at night,' she said, and gathering up various cleaning implements she departed from the fitting-room and walked across the landing to the room on the other side.

Sybil stared at the relaxed doll. An expression of bewilderment was growing on her face. Alicia Coombe entered and Sybil turned sharply.

'Miss Coombe, how long have you had this creature?'

'What, the doll? My dear, you know I can't remember things. Yesterday - why, it's too silly! - I was going out to that lecture and I hadn't gone halfway down the street when I suddenly found I couldn't

remember where I was going. I thought and I thought. Finally I told myself it must be Fortnums. I knew there was something I wanted to get at Fortnums. Well, you won't believe me, it wasn't till I actually got home and was having some tea that I remembered about the lecture. Of course, I've always heard that people go gaga as they get on in life, but it's happening to me much too fast. I've forgotten now where I've put my handbag - and my spectacles, too. Where did I put those spectacles? I had them just now. I was reading something in The Times.'

'The spectacles are on the mantelpiece here,' said Sybil, handing them to her. 'How did you get the doll? Who gave her to you?'

'That's a blank, too,' said Alicia Coombe. 'Somebody gave her to me or sent her to me, I suppose... However, she does seem to match the room very well, doesn't she?'

'Rather too well, I think,' said Sybil. 'Funny thing is, I can't remember when I first noticed her here.'

'Now don't you get the same way as I am,' Alicia Coombe admonished her. 'After all, you're young still.'

'But really, Miss Coombe, I don't remember. I mean, I looked at her yesterday and thought there was something - well, Mrs Groves is quite right - something creepy about her. And then I thought I'd already thought so, and then I tried to remember when I first thought so, and - well, I just couldn't remember anything! In a way, it was as if I'd never seen her before - only it didn't feel like that. It felt as though she'd been here a long time but I'd only just noticed her.'

'Perhaps she flew in through the window one day on a broomstick,' said Alicia Coombe. 'Anyway, she belongs here now all right.' She looked round. 'You could hardly imagine the room without her, could you?'

'No,' said Sybil, with a slight shiver, 'but I rather wish I could.'

'Could what?'

'Imagine the room without her.'

'Are we all going barmy about this doll?' demanded Alicia Coombe impatiently. 'What's wrong with the poor thing? Looks like a decayed cabbage to me, but perhaps,' she added, 'that's because I haven't got spectacles on.' She put them on her nose and looked firmly at the doll. 'Yes,' she said, 'I see what you mean. She is a little creepy... sad-looking but - well, sly and rather determined, too.'

'Funny,' said Sybil, 'Mrs Fellows-Brown taking such a violent dislike to her.'

'She's one who never minds speaking her mind,' said Alicia Coombe.

'But it's odd.' persisted Sybil, 'that this doll should make such an impression on her.'

'Well, people do take dislikes very suddenly sometimes.'

'Perhaps,' said Sybil with a little laugh, 'that doll never was here until yesterday... Perhaps she just - flew in through the window, as you say, and settled herself here.'

'No,' said Alicia Coombe, 'I'm sure she's been here some time. Perhaps she only became visible yesterday.'

'Thai's what I feel, too,' said Sybil, 'that she's been here some time... but all the same I don't remember really seeing her till yesterday.'

'Now, dear,' said Alicia Coombe briskly, 'do stop it. You're making me feel quite peculiar with shivers running up and down my spine. You're not going to work up a great deal of supernatural hoo-hah about that creature, are you?' She picked up the doll, shook it out, rearranged its shoulders, and sat it down again on another chair. Immediately the doll flopped slightly and relaxed.

'It's not a bit lifelike,' said Alicia Coombe, staring at the doll. 'And yet, in a funny way, she does seem alive, doesn't she?'

'Oo, it did give me a turn,' said Mrs Groves, as she went round the showroom, dusting. 'Such a turn as I hardly like to go into the fitting-room any more.'

'What's given you a turn?' demanded Miss Coombe who was sitting at a writing-table in the corner, busy with various accounts. 'This woman,' she added more for her own benefit than that of Mrs Groves, 'thinks she can have two evening dresses, three cocktail dresses, and a suit every year without ever paying me a penny for them! Really, some people!'

'It's that doll,' said Mrs Groves.

'What, our doll again?'

'Yes, sitting up there at the desk, like a human. Oo, it didn't half give me a turn!'

'What are you talking about?'

Alicia Coombe got up, strode across the room, across the landing outside, and into the room opposite - the fitting-room. There was a small Sheraton desk in one corner of it, and there, sitting in a chair drawn up to it, her long floppy arms on the desk, sat the doll.

'Somebody seems to have been having fun,' said Alicia Coombe. 'Fancy sitting her up like that. Really, she looks quite natural.'

Sybil Fox came down the stairs at this moment, carrying a dress that was to be tried on that morning.

'Come here, Sybil. Look at our doll sitting at my private desk and writing letters now.'

The two women looked.

'Really,' said Alicia Coombe, 'it's too ridiculous! I wonder who propped her up there. Did you?'

'No, I didn't,' said Sybil. 'It must have been one of the girls from upstairs.'

'A silly sort of joke, really,' said Alicia Coombe. She picked up the doll from the desk and threw her back on the sofa.

Sybil laid the dress over a chair carefully, then she went out and up the stairs to the workroom.

'You know the doll,' she said, 'the velvet doll in Miss Coombe's room downstairs - in the fitting room?'

The forewoman and three girls looked up.

'Yes, miss, of course we know.'

'Who sat her up at the desk this morning for a joke?'

The three girls looked at her, then Elspeth, the forewoman, said, 'Sat her up at the desk? I didn't.'

'Nor did I,' said one of the girls. 'Did you, Marlene?'

Marlene shook her head.

This your bit of fun, Elspeth?'

'No, indeed,' said Elspeth, a stern woman who looked as though her mouth should always be filled with pins. 'I've more to do than going about playing with dolls and sitting them up at desks.'

'Look here,' said Sybil, and to her surprise her voice shook slightly. 'It was - it was quite a good joke, only I'd just like to know who did it.'

The three girls bristled.

'We've told you, Mrs Fox. None of us did it, did we, Marlene?'

'I didn't,' said Marlene, 'and if Nellie and Margaret say they didn't, well then, none of us did.'

'You've heard what I had to say,' said Elspeth. 'What's this all about anyway, Mrs Fox?'

'Perhaps it was Mrs Groves?' said Marlene.

Sybil shook her head. 'It wouldn't be Mrs Groves. It gave her quite a turn.'

'I'll come down and see for myself,' said Elspeth.

'She's not there now,' said Sybil. 'Miss Coombe took her away from the desk and threw her back on the sofa. Well - ' she paused - 'what I mean is, someone must have stuck her up there in the chair at the writing-desk - thinking it was funny. I suppose. And - and I don't see why they won't say so.'

'I've told you twice, Mrs Fox,' said Margaret. 'I don't see why you should go on accusing us of telling lies. None of us would do a silly thing like that.'

'I'm sorry,' said Sybil, 'I didn't mean to upset you. But - but who else could possibly have done it?'

'Perhaps she got up and walked there herself,' said Marlene, and giggled.

For some reason Sybil didn't like the suggestion.

'Oh, it's all a lot of nonsense, anyway,' she said, and went down the stairs again.

Alicia Coombe was humming quite cheerfully. She looked round the room.

'I've lost my spectacles again,' she said, 'but it doesn't really matter. I don't want to see anything this moment. The trouble is, of course, when you're as blind as I am, that when you have lost your spectacles, unless you've got another pair to put on and find them with, well, then you can't find them because you can't see to find them.'

'I'll look round for you,' said Sybil. 'You had them just now.'

'I went into the other room when you went upstairs. I expect I took them back in there.'

She went across to the other room.

'It's such a bother,' said Alicia Coombe. 'I want to get on with these accounts. How can I if I haven't my spectacles?'

'I'll go up and get your second pair from the bedroom,' said Sybil.

'I haven't a second pair at present,' said Alicia Coombe.

'Why, what's happened to them?'

'Well, I think I left them yesterday when I was out at lunch. I've rung up there, and I've rung up the two shops I went into, too.'

'Oh, dear,' said Sybil, 'you'll have to get three pairs, I suppose.'

'If I had three pairs of spectacles,' said Alicia Coombe, 'I should spend my whole life looking for one or the other of them. I really think it's best to have only one. Then you've got to look till you find it.'

'Well, they must be somewhere,' said Sybil. 'You haven't been out of these two rooms. They're certainly not here, so you must have laid them down in the fitting-room.'

She went back, walking round, looking quite closely. Finally, as a last idea, she took up the doll from the sofa.

'I've got them,' she called.

'Oh, where were they, Sybil?'

'Under our precious doll. I suppose you must have thrown them down when you put her back on the sofa.'

'I didn't. I'm sure I didn't.'

'Oh,' said Sybil with exasperation. 'Then I suppose the doll took them and was hiding them from you!'

'Really, you know,' said Alicia, looking thoughtfully at the doll, 'I wouldn't put it past her. She looks very intelligent, don't you think, Sybil?'

'I don't think I like her face,' said Sybil. 'She looks as though she knew something that we didn't.'

'You don't think she looks sort of sad and sweet?' said Alicia Coombe pleadingly, but without conviction.

'I don't think she's in the least sweet,' said Sybil.

'No... perhaps you're right... Oh, well, let's get on with things. Lady Lee will be here in another ten minutes. I just want to get these invoices done and posted.'

'Mrs Fox. Mrs Fox?'

'Yes, Margaret?' said Sybil. 'What is it?'

Sybil was busy leaning over a table, cutting a piece of satin material.

'Oh, Mrs Fox, it's that doll again. I took down the brown dress like you said, and there's that doll sitting up at the desk again. And it wasn't

me - it wasn't any of us. Please, Mrs Fox, we really wouldn't do such a thing.'

Sybil's scissors slid a little.

'There,' she said angrily, 'look what you've made me do. Oh, well, it'll be all right, I suppose. Now, what's this about the doll?'

'She's sitting at the desk again.'

Sybil went down and walked into the fitting-room.

The doll was sitting at the desk exactly as she had sat there before.

'You're very determined, aren't you?' said Sybil, speaking to the doll.

She picked her up unceremoniously and put her back on the sofa.

'That's your place, my girl,' she said. 'You stay there.'

She walked across to the other room.

'Miss Coombe.'

'Yes, Sybil?'

'Somebody is having a game with us, you know. That doll was sitting at the desk again.'

'Who do you think it is?'

'It must be one of those three upstairs,' said Sybil. 'Thinks it's funny, I suppose. Of course they all swear to high heaven it wasn't them.'

'Who do you think it is - Margaret?'

'No, I don't think it's Margaret. She looked quite queer when she came in and told me. I expect it's that giggling Marlene.'

'Anyway, it's a very silly thing to do.'

'Of course it is - idiotic,' said Sybil. 'However,' she added grimly, 'I'm going to put a stop to it.'

'What are you going to do?'

'You'll see,' said Sybil.

That night when she left, she locked the fitting-room from the outside.

I'm locking this door,' she said, 'and I'm taking the key with me.'

'Oh, I see,' said Alicia Coombe, with a faint air of amusement. 'You're beginning to think it's me, are you? You think I'm so absent-minded that I go in there and think I'll write at the desk, but instead I pick the doll up and put her there to write for me. Is that the idea? And then I forget all about it?'

'Well, it's a possibility,' Sybil admitted. 'Anyway, I'm going to be quite sure that no silly practical joke is played tonight.'

The following morning, her lips set grimly, the first thing Sybil did on arrival was to unlock the door of the fitting-room and march in. Mrs Groves, with an aggrieved expression and mop and duster in hand, had been waiting on the landing.

'Now we'll see!' said Sybil.

Then she drew back with a slight gasp.

The doll was sitting at the desk.

'Coo!' said Mrs Groves behind her. 'It's uncanny! That's what it is. Oh, there, Mrs Fox, you look quite pale, as though you've come over queer. You need a little drop of something. Has Miss Coombe got a drop upstairs, do you know?'

'I'm quite all right,' said Sybil.

She walked over to the doll, lifted her carefully, and crossed the room with her.

'Somebody's been playing a trick on you again,' said Mrs Groves.

'I don't see how they could have played a trick on me this time,' said Sybil slowly. 'I locked that door last night. You know yourself that no one could get in.'

'Somebody's got another key, maybe,' said Mrs Groves helpfully.

'I don't think so,' said Sybil. 'We've never bothered to lock this door before. It's one of those old-fashioned keys and there's only one of them.'

'Perhaps the other key fits it - the one to the door opposite.'

In due course they tried all the keys in the shop, but none fitted the door of the fitting-room.

'It is odd, Miss Coombe,' said Sybil later, as they were having lunch together.

Alicia Coombe was looking rather pleased.

'My dear,' she said. 'I think it's simply extraordinary. I think we ought to write to the psychical research people about it. You know, they might send an investigator - a medium or someone - to see if there's anything peculiar about the room.'

'You don't seem to mind at all,' said Sybil.

'Well, I rather enjoy it in a way,' said Alicia Coombe. 'I mean, at my age, it's rather fun when things happen! All the same - no,' she added thoughtfully. 'I don't think I do quite like it. I mean, that doll's getting rather above herself, isn't she?'

On that evening Sybil and Alicia Coombe locked the door once more on the outside.

'I still think,' said Sybil, 'that somebody might be playing a practical joke, though, really, I don't see why...'

'Do you think she'll be at the desk again tomorrow morning?' demanded Alicia.

'Yes,' said Sybil, 'I do.'

But they were wrong. The doll was not at the desk. Instead, she was on the window sill, looking out into the street. And again there was an extraordinary naturalness about her position.

'It's all frightfully silly, isn't it?' said Alicia Coombe, as they were snatching a quick cup of tea that afternoon. By common consent they were not having it in the fitting-room, as they usually did, but in Alicia Coombe's own room opposite.

'Silly in what way?'

'Well, I mean, there's nothing you can get hold of. Just a doll that's always in a different place.'

As day followed day it seemed a more and more apt observation. It was not only at night that the doll now moved. At any moment when they came into the fitting-room, after they had been absent even a few minutes, they might find the doll in a different place. They could have left her on the sofa and find her on a chair. Then she'd be on a different chair. Sometimes she'd be in the window seat, sometimes at the desk again.

'She just moves about as she likes,' said Alicia Coombe. 'And I Think, Sybil, I think it's amusing her.'

The two women stood looking down at the inert sprawling figure in its limp, soft velvet, with its painted silk face.

'Some old bits of velvet and silk and a lick of paint, that's all it is,' said Alicia Coombe. Her voice was strained. 'I suppose, you know, we could - er - we could dispose of her.'

'What do you mean, dispose of her?' asked Sybil. Her voice sounded almost shocked.

'Well,' said Alicia Coombe, 'we could put her in the fire, if there was a fire. Burn her, I mean, like a witch... Or of course,' she added matter-of-factly, 'we could just put her in the dustbin.'

'I don't think that would do,' said Sybil. 'Somebody would probably take her out of the dustbin and bring her back to us.'

'Or we could send her somewhere,' said Alicia Coombe. 'You know, to one of those societies who are always writing and asking for something - for a sale or a bazaar. I think that's the best idea.'

'I don't know... ' said Sybil. 'I'd be almost afraid to do that.'

'Afraid?'

'Well, I think she'd come back,' said Sybil.

'You mean, she'd come back here?'

'Yes.'

'Like a homing pigeon?'

'Yes, that's what I mean.'

'I suppose we're not going off our heads, are we?' said Alicia Coombe. Perhaps I've really gone gaga and perhaps you're just humouring me, is that it?'

'No,' said Sybil. 'But. I've got a nasty frightening feeling - a horrid feeling that she's too strong for us.'

'What? That mess of rags?'

'Yes, that horrible limp mess of rags. Because, you see, she's so determined.'

'Determined?'

'To have her own way! I mean, this is her room now!'

'Yes,' said Alicia Coombe, looking round, 'it is, isn't it? Of course, it always was, when you come to think of it - the colours and

everything... I thought she fitted in here, but it's the room that fits her. I must say,' added the dressmaker, with a touch of briskness in her voice, 'it's rather absurd when a doll comes and takes possession of things like this. You know, Mrs Groves won't come in here any longer and clean.'

'Does she say she's frightened of the doll?'

'No. She just makes excuses of some kind or other.' Then Alicia added with a hint of panic, 'What are we going to do, Sybil? It's getting me down, you know. I haven't been able to design anything for weeks.'

'I can't keep my mind on cutting out properly,' Sybil confessed. 'I make all sorts of silly mistakes. Perhaps,' she said uncertainly, your idea of writing to the psychical research people might do some good.'

'Just make us look like a couple of fools,' said Alicia Coombe. 'I didn't seriously mean it. No, I suppose we'll just have to go on until - '

'Until what?'

'Oh, I don't know,' said Alicia, and she laughed uncertainly.

On the following day Sybil, when she arrived, found the door of the fitting-room locked.

'Miss Coombe, have you got the key? Did you lock this last night?'

'Yes,' said Alicia Coombe, 'I locked it and it's going to stay locked.'

'What do you mean?'

'I just mean I've given up the room. The doll can have it. We don't need two rooms. We can fit in here.'

'But it's your own private sitting-room.'

'Well, I don't want it any more. I've got a very nice bedroom. I can make a bed-sitting room out of that, can't I?'

'Do you mean you're really not going into that fitting-room ever again?' said Sybil incredulously.

'That's exactly what I mean.'

'But - what about cleaning? It'll get in a terrible state.'

'Let it!' said Alicia Coombe. 'If this place is suffering from some kind of possession by a doll, all right - let her keep possession. And clean the room herself.' And she added, 'She hates us, you know.'

'What do you mean?' said Sybil. 'The doll hates us?'

'Yes,' said Alicia. 'Didn't you know? You must have known. You must have seen it when you looked at her.'

'Yes,' said Sybil thoughtfully, 'I suppose I did. I suppose I felt that all along - that she hated us and wanted to get us out of there.'

'She's a malicious little thing,' said Alicia Coombe. 'Anyway, she ought to be satisfied now.'

Things went on rather more peacefully after that. Alicia Coombe announced to her staff that she was giving up the use of the fitting-room for the present - it made too many rooms to dust and clean, she explained.

But it hardly helped her to overhear one of the work girls saying to another on the evening of the same day, 'She really is batty. Miss Coombe is now. I always thought she was a bit queer - the way she lost things and forgot things. But it's really beyond anything now, isn't it? She's got a sort of thing about that doll downstairs.'

'Ooo, you don't think she'll go really bats, do you?' said the other girl. 'That she might knife us or something?'

They passed, chartering, and Alicia sat up indignantly in her chair. Going bats indeed! Then she added ruefully, to herself, 'I suppose, if it wasn't for Sybil, I should think myself that I was going bats. But with me and Sybil and Mrs Groves too, well, it does look as though there was something in it. But what I don't see is, how is it going to end?'

Three weeks later, Sybil said to Alicia Coombe, 'We've got to go into that room sometimes.'

'Why?'

'Well, I mean, it must be in a filthy state. Moths will be getting into things, and all that. We ought just to dust and sweep it and then lock it up again.'

'I'd much rather keep it shut up and not go back in there,' said Alicia Coombe.

Sybil said, 'Really, you know, you're even more superstitious than I am.'

'I suppose I am,' said Alicia Coombe. 'I was much more ready to believe in all this than you were, but to begin with, you know - I - well,

I found it exciting in an odd sort of way. I don't know. I'm just scared, and I'd rather not go into that room again.'

'Well, I want to,' said Sybil, 'and I'm going to.'

'You know what's the matter with you?' said Alicia Coombe. 'You're simply curious, that's all.'

'All right, then I'm curious. I want to see what the doll's done.'

'I still think it's much better to leave her alone,' said Alicia. 'Now we've got out of that room, she's satisfied. You'd better leave her satisfied.' She gave an exasperated sigh. 'What nonsense we are talking!'

'Yes. I know we're talking nonsense, but if you tell me of any way of not talking nonsense - come on, now, give me the key.'

'All right, all right.'

'I believe you're afraid I'll let her out or something. I should think she was the kind that could pass through doors or windows.'

Sybil unlocked the door and went in.

'How terribly odd,' she said.

'What's odd?' said Alicia Coombe, peering over her shoulder.

'The room hardly seems dusty at all, does it? You'd think, after being shut up all this time - '

'Yes, it is odd.'

'There she is,' said Sybil

The doll was on the sofa. She was not lying in her usual limp position. She was sitting upright, a cushion behind her back. She had the air of the mistress of the house, waiting to receive people.

'Well,' said Alicia Coombe, 'she seems at home all right, doesn't she? I almost feel I ought to apologise for coming in.'

'Let's go,' said Sybil.

She backed out, pulling the door to, and locked it again.

The two women gazed at each other.

'I wish I knew,' said Alicia Coombe, 'why it scares us so much...'

'My goodness, who wouldn't be scared?'

'Well, I mean, what happens, after all? It's nothing really - just a kind of puppet that gets moved around the room. I expect it isn't the puppet itself - it's a poltergeist.'

'Now that is a good idea.'

'Yes, but I don't really believe it. I think it's - it's that doll.'

'Are you sure you don't know where she really came from?'

'I haven't the faintest idea,' said Alicia. 'And the more I think of it the more I'm perfectly certain that I didn't buy her, and that nobody gave her to me. I think she - well, she just came.'

'Do you think she'll - ever go?'

'Really,' said Alicia, 'I don't see why she should... She's got all she wants.'

But it seemed that the doll had not got all she wanted. The next day, when Sybil went into the showroom, she drew in her breath with a sudden gasp. Then she called up the stairs.

'Miss Coombe, Miss Coombe, come down here.'

'What's the matter?'

Alicia Coombe, who had got up late, came down the stairs, hobbling a little precariously for she had rheumatism in her right knee.

'What is the matter with you, Sybil?'

'Look. Look what's happened now.'

They stood in the doorway of the showroom. Sitting on a sofa, sprawled easily over the arm of it, was the doll.

'She's got out,' said Sybil, 'She's got out of that room! She wants this room as well.'

Alicia Coombe sat down by the door. 'In the end,' she said, 'I suppose she'll want the whole shop.'

'She might,' said Sybil.

'You nasty, sly, malicious brute,' said Alicia, addressing the doll. 'Why do you want to come and pester us so? We don't want you.'

It seemed to her, and to Sybil loo, that the doll moved very slightly. It was as though its limbs relaxed still further. A long limp arm was lying on the arm of the sofa and the half-hidden face looked as if it were peering from under the arm. And it was a sly, malicious look.

'Horrible creature,' said Alicia. 'I can't bear it! I can't bear it any longer.'

Suddenly, taking Sybil completely by surprise, she dashed across the room, picked up the doll, ran to the window, opened it, and flung the doll into the street. There was a gasp and a half cry of fear from Sybil.

'Oh, Alicia, you shouldn't have done that!'

'I had to do something,' said Alicia Coombe. 'I just couldn't stand it any more '

Sybil joined her at the window. Down below on the pavement the doll lay, loose-limbed, face down.

'You've killed her,' said Sybil.

'Don't be absurd... How can I kill something that's made of velvet and silk, bits and pieces. It's not real.'

'It's horribly real,' said Sybil.

Alicia caught her breath.

'Good heavens. That child - '

A small ragged girl was standing over the doll on the pavement. She looked up and down the street - a street that was not unduly crowded at this time of the morning though there was some automobile traffic; then, as though satisfied, the child bent, picked up the doll, and ran across the street.

'Stop, stop!' called Alicia.

She turned to Sybil.

'That child mustn't take the doll. She mustn't! That doll is dangerous - it's evil. We've got to stop her.'

It was not they who stopped her. It was the traffic. At that moment three taxis came down one way and two tradesmen's vans in the other direction. The child was marooned on an island in the middle of the road. Sybil rushed down the stairs, Alicia Coombe following her. Dodging between a tradesman's van and a private car, Sybil, with Alicia Coombe directly behind her, arrived on the island before the child could get through the traffic on the opposite side.

'You can't take that doll,' said Alicia Coombe. 'Give her back to me.'

The child looked at her. She was a skinny little girl about eight years old, with a slight squint. Her face was defiant.

'Why should I give 'er to you?' she said. 'Pitched her out of the window, you did - I saw you. If you pushed her out of the window you don't want her, so now she's mine.'

'I'll buy you another doll,' said Alicia frantically. 'We'll go to a toy shop - anywhere you like - and I'll buy you the best doll we can find. But give me back this one.'

'Shan't,' said the child.

Her arms went protectingly round the velvet doll.

'You must give her back,' said Sybil. 'She isn't yours.'

She stretched out to take the doll from the child and at that moment the child stamped her foot, turned, and screamed at them.

'Shan't! Shan't! Shan't! She's my very own. I love her. You don't love her. You hate her. If you didn't hate her you wouldn't have pushed her out of the window. I love her, I tell you, and that's what she wants. She wants to be loved.'

And then like an eel, sliding through the vehicles, the child ran across the street, down an alleyway, and out of sight before the two older women could decide to dodge the cars and follow.

'She's gone,' said Alicia.

'She said the doll wanted to be loved,' said Sybil.

'Perhaps,' said Alicia, 'perhaps that's what she wanted all along... to be loved...'

In the middle of the London traffic the two frightened women stared at each other.

IN A GLASS DARKLY

'I've no explanation for this story. I've no theories about the why and wherefore of it. It's just a thing that - happened.

All the same, I sometimes wonder how things would have gone if I'd noticed at the time just that one essential detail that I never appreciated until so many years afterwards. If I had noticed it - well, I suppose the course of three lives would have been entirely altered. Somehow - that's a very frightening thought.

For the beginning of it all, I've got to go back to the summer of 1914 - just before the war - when I went down to Badgeworthy with Neil Carslake. Neil was, I suppose, about my best friend. I'd known his brother Alan too, but not so well. Sylvia, their sister, I'd never met. She was two years younger than Alan and three years younger than Neil. Twice, while we were at school together, I'd been going to spend part of the holidays with Neil at Badgeworthy and twice something had intervened. So it came about that I was twenty-three when I first saw Neil and Alan's home.

We were to be quite a big party there. Neil's sister Sylvia had just got engaged to a fellow called Charles Crawley. He was, so Neil said, a good deal older than she was, but a thoroughly decent chap and quite reasonably well-off.

We arrived, I remember, about seven o'clock in the evening. Everyone had gone to his room to dress for dinner. Neil took me to mine. Badgeworthy was an attractive, rambling old house. It had been added to freely in the last three centuries and was full of little steps up and down, and unexpected staircases. It was the sort of house in which it's not easy to find your way about. I remember Neil promised to come and fetch me on his way down to dinner. I was feeling a little shy at the prospect of meeting his people for the first time. I remember saying with a laugh that it was the kind of house one expected to meet ghosts in the passages, and he said carelessly that he believed the place was said to be haunted but that none of them had ever seen anything, and he didn't even know what form the ghost was supposed to take.

Then he hurried away and I set to work to dive into my suitcases for my evening clothes. The Carslakes weren't well-off; they clung on to

their old home, but there were no menservants to unpack for you or valet you.

Well, I'd just got to the stage of tying my tie. I was standing in front of the glass. I could see my own face and shoulders and behind them the wall of the room - a plain stretch of wall just broken in the middle by a door - and just as I finally settled my tie I noticed that the door was opening.

I don't know why I didn't turn around - I think that would have been the natural thing to do; anyway, I didn't. I just watched the door swing slowly open - and as it swung I saw into the room beyond.

It was a bedroom - a larger room than mine - with two bedsteads in it, and suddenly I caught my breath.

For at the foot of one of those beds was a girl and round her neck were a pair of man's hands and the man was slowly forcing her backwards and squeezing her throat as he did so, so that the girl was being slowly suffocated.

There wasn't the least possibility of a mistake. What I saw was perfectly clear. What was being done was murder.

I could see the girl's face clearly, her vivid golden hair, the agonised terror of her beautiful face, slowly suffusing with blood. Of the man I could see his back, his hands, and a scar that ran down the left side of his face towards his neck.

It's taken some time to tell, but in reality only a moment or two passed while I stared dumbfounded. Then I reeled round to the rescue ...

And on the wall behind me, the wall reflected in the glass, there was only a Victorian mahogany wardrobe. No door open - no scene of violence. I swung back to the mirror. The mirror reflected only the wardrobe ...

I passed my hands across my eyes. Then I sprang across the room and tried to pull forward the wardrobe and at that moment Neil entered by the other door from the passage and asked me what the hell I was trying to do.

He must have thought me slightly barmy as I turned on him and demanded whether there was a door behind the wardrobe. He said, yes, there was a door, it led into the next room. I asked him who was occupying the next room and he said people called Oldham - a Major Oldham and his wife. I asked him then if Mrs Oldham had very fair hair and when he replied dryly that she was dark I began to realise that I was probably making a fool of myself. I pulled myself together, made some lame explanation and we went downstairs together. I told myself that I must have had some kind of hallucination - and felt generally rather ashamed and a bit of an ass.

And then - and then - Neil said, 'My sister Sylvia,' and I was looking into the lovely face of the girl I had just seen suffocating to death ... and I was introduced to her fiancй, a tall dark man with a scar running down the left side of his face.

Well - that's that. I'd like you to think and say what you'd have done in my place. Here was the girl - the identical girl - and here was the man I'd seen throttling her - and they were to be married in about a month's time ...

Had I - or had I not - had a prophetic vision of the future? Would Sylvia and her husband come down here to stay some time in the future, and be given that room (the best spare room) and would that scene I'd witnessed take place in grim reality?

What was I to do about it? Could I do anything? Would anyone - Neil - or the girl herself - would they believe me?

I turned the whole business over and over in my mind the week I was down there. To speak or not to speak? And almost at once another complication set in. You see, I fell in love with Sylvia Carslake the first moment I saw her ... I wanted her more than anything on earth ... And in a way that tied my hands.

And yet, if I didn't say anything, Sylvia would marry Charles Crawley and Crawley would kill her ...

And so, the day before I left, I blurted it all out to her. I said I expect she'd think me touched in the intellect or something, but I swore solemnly that I'd seen the thing just as I told it to her and that I felt if she was determined to marry Crawley, I ought to tell her my strange experience.

She listened very quietly. There was something in her eyes I didn't understand. She wasn't angry at all. When I'd finished, she just thanked me gravely. I kept repeating like an idiot, 'I did see it. I really did see it,' and she said, 'I'm sure you did if you say so. I believe you.'

Well, the upshot was that I went off not knowing whether I'd done right or been a fool, and a week later Sylvia broke off her engagement to Charles Crawley.

After that the war happened, and there wasn't much leisure for thinking of anything else. Once or twice when I was on leave, I came across Sylvia, but as far as possible I avoided her.

I loved her and wanted her just as badly as ever, but I felt somehow that it wouldn't be playing the game. It was owing to me that she'd broken off her engagement to Crawley, and I kept saying to myself that I could only justify the action I had taken by making my attitude a purely disinterested one.

Then, in 1916, Neil was killed and it fell to me to tell Sylvia about his last moments. We couldn't remain on formal footing after that. Sylvia had adored Neil and he had been my best friend. She was sweet - adorably sweet in her grief. I just managed to hold my tongue and went out again praying that a bullet might end the whole miserable business. Life without Sylvia wasn't worth living.

But there was no bullet with my name on it. One nearly got me below the right ear and one was deflected by a cigarette case in my pocket, but I came through unscathed. Charles Crawley was killed in action at the beginning of 1918.

Somehow that made a difference. I came home in the autumn of 1918 just before the Armistice and I went straight to Sylvia and told her that I loved her. I hadn't much hope that she'd care for me straight away, and you could have knocked me down with a feather when she asked me why I hadn't told her sooner. I stammered out something about Crawley and she said, 'But why did you think I broke it off with him?' and then she told me that she'd fallen in love with me just as I'd done with her - from the very first minute.

I said I thought she'd broken off her engagement because of the story I told her and she laughed scornfully and said that if you loved a man you wouldn't be as cowardly as that, and we went over that old vision of mine again and agreed that it was queer, but nothing more.

'Well, there's nothing much to tell for some time after that. Sylvia and I were married and we were very happy. But I realised, as soon as she was really mine, that I wasn't cut out for the best kind of husband. I loved Sylvia devotedly, but I was jealous, absurdly jealous of anyone she so much as smiled at. It amused her at first, I think she even rather liked it. It proved, at least, how devoted I was.

As for me, I realised quite fully and unmistakably that I was not only making a fool of myself, but that I was endangering all the peace and happiness of our life together. I knew, I say, but I couldn't change. Every time Sylvia got a letter she didn't show to me I wondered who it was from. If she laughed and talked with any man, I found myself getting sulky and watchful.

At first, as I say, Sylvia laughed at me. She thought it a huge joke. Then she didn't think the joke so funny. Finally she didn't think it a joke at all -

And slowly, she began to draw away from me. Not in any physical sense, but she withdrew her secret mind from me. I no longer knew what her thoughts were. She was kind - but sadly, as though from a long distance.

Little by little I realised that she no longer loved me. Her love had died and it was I who had killed it ...

The next step was inevitable, I found myself waiting for it - dreading it ...

Then Derek Wainwright came into our lives. He had everything that I hadn't. He had brains and a witty tongue. He was good-looking, too, and - I'm forced to admit it - a thoroughly good chap. As soon as I saw him I said to myself, 'This is just the man for Sylvia ... '

She fought against it. I know she struggled ... but gave her no help. I couldn't. I was entrenched in my gloomy, sullen reserve. I was suffering like hell - and I couldn't stretch out a finger to save myself. I didn't help her. I made things worse. I let loose at her one day - a string of savage, unwarranted abuse. I was nearly mad with jealousy and misery. The things I said were cruel and untrue and I knew while I was saying them how cruel and untrue they were. And yet I took a savage pleasure I saying them ...

I remember how Sylvia flushed and shrank ...

I drove her to the edge of endurance.

I remember she said, 'This can't go on ... '

When I came home that night the house was empty - empty. There was a note - quite in the traditional fashion.

In it she said that she was leaving me - for good. She was going down to Badgeworthy for a day or two. After that she was going to the one person who loved her and needed her. I was to take that as final.

I suppose that up to then I hadn't really believed my own suspicions. This confirmation in black and white of my worst fears sent me

raving mad. I went down to Badgeworthy after her as fast as the car would take me.

She had just changed her frock for dinner, I remember, when I burst into the room. I can see her face - startled - beautiful - afraid.

I said, 'No one but me shall ever have you. No one.'

And I caught her throat in my hands and gripped it and bent her backwards.

Suddenly I saw our reflection in the mirror. Sylvia choking and myself strangling her, and the scar on my cheek where the bullet grazed it under the right ear.

No - I didn't kill her. That sudden revelation paralysed me and I loosened my grasp and let her slip on to the floor ...

And then I broke down - and she comforted me ... Yes, she comforted me.

I told her everything and she told me that by the phrase 'the one person who loved and needed her' she had meant her brother Alan ... We saw into each other's hearts that night, and I don't think, from that moment, that we ever drifted away from each other again...

It's a sobering thought to go through life with - that, but for the grace of God and a mirror, one might be a murderer...

One thing did die that night - the devil of jealousy that had possessed me so long...

But I wonder sometimes - suppose I hadn't made that initial mistake - the scar on the left cheek - when really it was the right - reversed by

the mirror ... Should I have been so sure the man was Charles Crawley? Would I have warned Sylvia? Would she be married to me - or to him?

Or are the past and the future all one?

I'm a simple fellow - and I can't pretend to understand these things - but I saw what I saw - and because of what I saw, Sylvia and I are together in the old-fashioned words - till death do us part. And perhaps beyond...

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PROBLEM AT POLLENSA BAY

The steamer from Barcelona to Majorca landed Mr Parker Pyne at Palma in the early hours of the morning - and straightaway he met with disillusionment.

The hotels were full! The best that could be done for him was an airless cupboard overlooking an inner court in a hotel in the center of the town - and with that Mr Parker Pyne was not prepared to put up. The proprietor of the hotel was indifferent to his disappointment.

"What will you?" he observed with a shrug. Palma was popular now! The exchange was favorable! Everyone - the English, the Americans - they all came to Majorca in the winter. The whole place was crowded. It was doubtful if the English gentleman would be able to get in anywhere - except perhaps at Formentor

where the prices were so ruinous that even foreigners blenched at them.

Mr Parker Pyne partook of some coffee and a roll and went out to view the cathedral, but found himself in no mood for appreciating beauties of architecture. He next had a conference with a taxi-driver in inadequate French interspersed with native Spanish, and they discussed the possibilities of Soller, Alcudia, Pollensa and Formentor - where there were fine hotels, but they were expensive.

Mr Parker Pyne was goaded to inquire how expensive.

They asked, said the taxi driver, a price that it would be absurd and ridiculous to consider, since it was well known that the English came to the island because the prices were cheap and reasonable.

Mr Parker Pyne said that that was true, but all the same what sums did they charge at the Formentor?

A price quite incredible!

Perfectly - but WHAT PRICE EXACTLY?

The driver consented at last to name exact figures. Fresh from the exactions of hotels in Jerusalem and Egypt, the figure did not stagger Mr Parker Pyne unduly.

Mr Parker Pine's cases were loaded on the taxi in a haphazard manner, and they started by the coast, round the island, trying to find a cheaper lodging en route but with the final objective of reaching the Formentor.

But they never reached that nest of plutocracy, for after they had passed the narrow streets of Pollensa and were on the curved line of the seashore, they came by the Hotel Pino d'Oro - a small hotel standing by the sea looking out over a view that in the misty haze of a fine morning had the exquisite vagueness of a Japanese print. At once Mr Parker Pyne knew that this, and this only, was what he was looking for. He stopped the taxi, passed through the painted gate with the hope that he would find a resting place.

The elderly couple to whom the hotel belonged knew no English or French. Nevertheless the matter was concluded satisfactorily. Mr Parker Pyne was allotted a room overlooking the sea, the suitcases were unloaded, the driver congratulated his passenger upon avoiding the monstrous exigencies of "these new hotels," received his fare and departed with a cheerful Spanish salutation.

Mr Parker Pyne glanced at his watch and perceiving that it was, even now, but a quarter to ten, he went out onto the small terrace now bathed in a dazzling morning light and ordered, for the second time that morning, coffee and rolls.

There were four tables there, his own, one from which breakfast was being cleared away and two occupied ones. At the one nearest him sat a family of father and mother and two elderly

daughters - Germans. Beyond them, at the corner of the terrace, sat what were clearly an English mother and son.

The woman was about fifty-five. She had gray hair of a pretty tone - was sensibly but not fashionably dressed in a tweed coat and skirt - and had that comfortable self-possession which marks an Englishwoman used to much traveling abroad.

The young man who sat opposite her might have been twenty-five and he too was typical of his class and age. He was neither good-looking nor plain, tall nor short. He was clearly on the best of terms with his mother - they made little jokes together - and he was assiduous in passing her things.

As they talked, her eye met that of Mr Parker Pyne. It passed over him with well-bred nonchalance, but he knew that he had been assimilated and labeled.

He had been recognized as English and doubtless, in due course, some pleasant noncommittal remark would be addressed to him.

Mr Parker Pyne had no particular objection. His own countrymen and women abroad were inclined to bore him slightly, but he was quite willing to pass the time of day in an amiable manner. In a small hotel it caused constraint if one did not do so. This particular woman, he felt sure, had excellent "hotel manners," as he put it.

The English boy rose from his seat, made some laughing remark and passed into the hotel. The woman took her letters and bag

and settled herself in a chair facing the sea. She unfolded a copy of the Continental Daily Mail. Her back was to Mr Parker Pyne.

As he drank the last drop of his coffee, Mr Parker Pyne glanced in her direction, and instantly he stiffened. He was alarmed - alarmed for the peaceful continuance of his holiday! That back was horribly expressive. In his time he had classified many such backs. Its rigidity - the tenseness of its poise - without seeing her face he knew well enough that the eyes were bright with unshed tears - that the woman was keeping herself in hand by a rigid effort.

Moving warily, like a much-hunted animal, Mr Parker Pyne retreated into the hotel. Not half an hour before he had been invited to sign his name in the book lying on the desk. There it was - a neat signature - C. Parker Pyne, London.

A few lines above Mr Parker Pyne noticed the entries: Mrs R. Chester, Mr Basil Chester - Holm Park, Devon.

Seizing a pen, Mr Parker Pyne wrote rapidly over his signature. It now read (with difficulty) Christopher Pyne.

If Mrs R. Chester was unhappy in Pollensa Bay, it was not going to be made easy for her to consult Mr Parker Pyne.

Already it had been a source of abiding wonder to that gentleman that so many people he had come across abroad should know his name and have noted his advertisements. In England many thousands of people read the Times every day and could have

answered quite truthfully that they had never heard such a name in their lives. Abroad, he reflected, they read their newspapers more thoroughly. No item, not even the advertisement columns, escaped them.

Already his holidays had been interrupted on several occasions. He had dealt with a whole series of problems from murder to attempted blackmail. He was determined in Majorca to have peace. He felt instinctively that a distressed mother might trouble that peace considerably.

Mr Parker Pyne settled down at the Pino d'Oro very happily. There was a larger hotel not far off, the Mariposa, where a good many English people stayed. There was also quite an artist colony living all round. You could walk along by the sea to the fishing village where there was a cocktail bar where people met - there were a few shops. It was all very peaceful and pleasant. Girls strolled about in trousers with brightly colored handkerchiefs tied round the upper halves of their bodies. Young men in berets with rather long hair held forth in "Mac's Bar" on such subjects as plastic values and abstraction in art.

On the day after Mr Parker Pyne's arrival, Mrs Chester made a few conventional remarks to him on the subject of the view and the likelihood of the weather keeping fine. She then chatted a little with the German lady about knitting, and had a few pleasant words about the sadness of the political situation with two Danish gentlemen who spent their time rising at dawn and walking for eleven hours.

Mr Parker Pyne found Basil Chester a most likeable young man. He called Mr Parker Pyne "sir" and listened most politely to anything the older man said. Sometimes the three English people had coffee together after dinner in the evening. After the third day, Basil left the party after ten minutes or so and Mr Parker Pyne was left tête-à-tête with Mrs Chester.

They talked about flowers and the growing of them, of the lamentable state of the English pound and of how expensive France had become, and of the difficulty of getting good afternoon tea. Every evening when her son departed, Mr Parker Pyne saw the quickly concealed tremor of her lips. Immediately she recovered and discoursed pleasantly on the above-mentioned subjects. Little by little she began to talk of Basil - of how well he had done at school - "he was in the First XI, you know" - of how everyone liked him, of how proud his father would have been of the boy had he lived, of how thankful she had been that Basil had never been "wild." "Of course I always urge him to be with young people, but he really seems to prefer being with me." She said it with a kind of nice modest pleasure in the fact.

But for once Mr Parker Pyne did not make the usual tactful response he could usually achieve so easily. He said instead:

"Oh! well, there seem to be plenty of young people here - not in the hotel, but roundabout."

At that, he noticed, Mrs Chester stiffened. She said: Of course there were a lot of Artists. Perhaps she was very old-fashioned - real art, of course, was different, but a lot of young people just

made that sort of thing an excuse for lounging about and doing nothing - and the girls drank a lot too much.

On the following day Basil said to Mr Parker Pyne:

"I'm awfully glad you turned up here, sir - especially for my mother's sake. She likes having you to talk to in the evenings."

"What did you do when you were first here?"

"As a matter of fact we used to play piquet."

"I see."

"Of course one gets rather tired of piquet. As a matter of fact I've got some friends here - frightfully cheery crowd. I don't really think my mother approves of them -" He laughed as though he felt this ought to be amusing. "The mater's very old-fashioned. Even girls in trousers shock her!"

"Quite so," said Mr Parker Pyne.

"What I tell her is one has got to move with the times. The girls at home round us are frightfully dull."

"I see," said Mr Parker Pyne.

All this interested him well enough. He was a spectator of a miniature drama, but he was not called upon to take part in it.

And then the worst - from Mr Parker Pyne's point of view - happened. A gushing lady of his acquaintance came to stay at the Mariposa. They met in the tea shop in the presence of Mrs Chester.

The newcomer screamed:

"Why - if it isn't Mr Parker Pyne - the one and only Mr Parker Pyne! And Adela Chester! Do you know each other? Oh, you do? You're staying at the same hotel? He's the one and only original wizard, Adela - the marvel of the century - all your troubles smoothed out while you wait! What? Didn't you know? You must have heard about him? Haven't you read his advertisements? 'Are you in trouble? Consult Mr Parker Pyne.' There's just nothing he can't do. Husbands and wives flying at each other's throats and he brings 'em together - if you've lost interest in life he gives you the most thrilling adventures. As I say the man's just a wizard!"

It went on a good deal longer - Mr Parker Pyne at intervals making modest disclaimers. He disliked the look that Mrs Chester turned upon him. He disliked even more seeing her return along the beach in close confabulation with the garrulous singer of his praises.

The climax came quicker than he expected. That evening, after coffee, Mrs Chester said abruptly,

"Will you come into the little salon, Mr Pyne. There is something I want to say to you."

He could but bow and submit.

Mrs Chester's self-control had been wearing thin - as the door of the little salon closed behind them, it snapped. She sat down and burst into tears.

"My boy, Mr Parker Pyne. You must save him. We must save him. It's breaking my heart!"

"My dear lady, as a mere outsider -"

"Nina Wycherley says you can do anything. She said I was to have the utmost confidence in you. She advised me to tell you everything - and that you'd put the whole thing right."

Inwardly Mr Parker Pyne cursed the obtrusive Mrs Wycherley.

Resigning himself he said:

"Well, let us thrash the matter out. A girl, I suppose?"

"Did he tell you about her?"

"Only indirectly."

Words poured in a vehement stream from Mrs Chester. The girl was dreadful. She drank, she swore - she wore no clothes to speak of. Her sister lived out here - was married to an artist - a Dutchman. The whole set was most undesirable. Half of them were living together without being married. Basil was completely

changed. He had always been so quiet, so interested in serious subjects. He had thought at one time of taking up archaeology -"

"Well, well," said Mr Parker Pyne. "Nature will have her revenge."

"What do you mean?"

"It isn't healthy for a young man to be interested in serious subjects. He ought to be making an idiot of himself over one girl after another."

"Please be serious, Mr Pyne."

"I'm perfectly serious. Is the young lady, by any chance, the one who had tea with you yesterday?"

He had noticed her - her gray flannel trousers - the scarlet handkerchief tied loosely around her breast - the vermilion mouth and the fact that she had chosen a cocktail in preference to tea.

"You saw her? Terrible! Not the kind of girl Basil has ever admired."

"You haven't given him much chance to admire a girl, have you?"

"I?"

"He's been too fond of your company! Bad! However, I daresay he'll get over this - if you don't precipitate matters."

"You don't understand. He wants to marry this girl - Betty Gregg - they're engaged."

"It's gone as far as that?"

"Yes. Mr Parker Pyne, you must do something. You must get my boy out of this disastrous marriage! His whole life will be ruined."

"Nobody's life can be ruined except by themselves."

"Basil's will be," said Mrs Chester positively.

"I'm not worrying about Basil."

"You're not worrying about the girl?"

"No, I'm worrying about you. You've been squandering your birthright."

Mrs Chester looked at him, slightly taken aback.

"What are the years from twenty to forty? Fettered and bound by personal and emotional relationships. That's bound to be. That's living. But later there's a new stage. You can think, observe life, discover something about other people and the truth about yourself. Life becomes real - significant. You see it as a whole. Not just one scene - the scene you, as an actor, are playing. No man or woman is actually himself (or herself) till after forty-five. That's when individuality has a chance."

Mrs Chester said:

"I've been wrapped up in Basil. He's been everything to me."

"Well, he shouldn't have been. That's what you're paying for now. Love him as much as you like - but you're Adela Chester, remember, a person - not just Basil's mother."

"It will break my heart if Basil's life is ruined," said Basil's mother.

He looked at the delicate lines of her face, the wistful droop of her mouth. She was, somehow, a lovable woman. He did not want her to be hurt.

He said:

"I'll see what I can do."

He found Basil Chester only too ready to talk, eager to urge his point of view.

"This business is being just hellish. Mother's hopeless - prejudiced, narrow-minded. If only she'd let herself, she'd see how fine Betty is."

"And Betty?"

He sighed.

"Betty's being damned difficult! If she'd just conform a bit - I mean leave off the lipstick for a day - it might make all the difference. She seems to go out of her way to be - well - modern - when Mother's about."

Mr Parker Pyne smiled.

"Betty and Mother are two of the dearest people in the world, I should have thought they would have taken to each other like hot cakes."

"You have a lot to learn, young man," said Mr Parker Pyne.

"I wish you'd come along and see Betty and have a good talk about it all."

Mr Parker Pyne accepted the invitation readily.

Betty and her sister and her husband lived in a small dilapidated villa a little way back from the sea. Their life was of a refreshing simplicity. Their furniture comprised three chairs, a table and beds. There was a cupboard in the wall that held the bare requirements of cups and plates. Hans was an excitable young man with wild blond hair that stood up all over his head. He spoke very odd English with incredible rapidity, walking up and down as he did so. Stella, his wife, was small and fair. Betty Gregg had red hair and freckles and a mischievous eye. She was, he noticed, not nearly so made up as she had been the previous day at the Pino d'Oro.

She gave him a cocktail and said with a twinkle:

"You're in on the big bust-up?"

Mr Parker Pyne nodded.

"And whose side are you on, big boy? The young lovers - or the disapproving dame?"

"May I ask you a question?"

"Certainly."

"Have you been very tactful over all this?"

"Not at all," said Miss Gregg frankly. "But the old cat put my back up." (she glanced round to make sure that Basil was out of earshot). "That woman just makes me feel mad. She's kept Basil tied to her apron strings all these years - that sort of thing makes a man look a fool. Basil isn't a fool really. Then she's so terribly pukka sahib."

"That's not really such a bad thing. It's merely 'unfashionable' just at present."

Betty Gregg gave a sudden twinkle.

"You mean it's like putting Chippendale chairs in the attic in Victorian days? Later you get them down again and say, 'Aren't they marvelous?'"

"Something of the kind."

Betty Gregg considered.

"Perhaps you're right. I'll be honest. It was Basil who put my back up - being so anxious about what impression I'd make on his mother. It drove me to extremes. Even now I believe he might give me up - if his mother worked on him good and hard."

"He might," said Mr Parker Pyne. "If she went about it the right way."

"Are you going to tell her the right way? She won't think of it herself, you know. She'll just go on disapproving and that won't do the trick. But if you prompted her -"

She bit her lip - raised frank blue eyes to his.

"I've heard about you, Mr Parker Pyne. You're supposed to know something about human nature. Do you think Basil and I could make a go of it - or not?"

"I should like an answer to three questions."

"Suitability test? All right, go ahead."

"Do you sleep with your window open or shut?"

"Open. I like lots of air."

"Do you and Basil enjoy the same kind of food?"

"Yes."

"Do you like going to bed early or late?"

"Really, under the rose, early. At half-past ten I yawn - and I secretly feel rather hearty in the mornings - but of course I daren't admit it."

"You ought to suit each other very well," said Mr Parker Pyne.

"Rather a superficial test."

"Not at all. I have known seven marriages at least, entirely wrecked, because the husband liked sitting up till midnight and the wife fell asleep at half-past nine and vice versa."

"It's a pity," said Betty, "that everybody can't be happy. Basil and I, and his mother giving us her blessing."

Mr Parker Pyne coughed.

"I think," he said, "that that could possibly be managed."

She looked at him doubtfully.

"Now I wonder," she said, "if you're double crossing me?"

Mr Parker Pyne's face told nothing.

To Mrs Chester he was soothing, but vague.

An engagement was not marriage. He himself was going to Soller for a week. He suggested that her line of action should be noncommittal. Let her appear to acquiesce.

He spent a very enjoyable week at Soller.

On his return he found that a totally unexpected development had arisen.

As he entered the Pino d'Oro the first thing he saw was Mrs Chester and Betty Gregg having tea together. Basil was not there. Mrs Chester looked haggard. Betty, too, was looking off color. She was hardly made up at all, and her eyelids looked as though she had been crying.

They greeted him in a friendly fashion, but neither of them mentioned Basil.

Suddenly he heard the girl beside him draw in her breath sharply as though something had hurt her. Mr Parker Pyne turned his head.

Basil Chester was coming up the steps from the sea front. With him was a girl so exotically beautiful that it quite took your breath away. She was dark and her figure was marvelous. No one could

fail to notice the fact since she wore nothing but a single garment of pale blue crêpe. She was heavily made up with ochre powder and an orange scarlet mouth - but the unguents only displayed her remarkable beauty in a more pronounced fashion.

As for young Basil, he seemed unable to take his eyes from her face.

"You're very late, Basil," said his mother. "You were to have taken Betty to Mac's."

"My fault," drawled the beautiful unknown. "We just drifted." She turned to Basil. "Angel - get me something with a kick in it!"

She tossed off her shoe and stretched out her manicured toenails which were done emerald green to match her fingernails.

She paid no attention to the two women, but she leaned a little towards Mr Parker Pyne.

"Terrible island this," she said. "I was just dying with boredom before I met Basil. He is rather a pet!"

"Mr Parker Pyne - Miss Ramona," said Mrs Chester.

The girl acknowledged the introduction with a lazy smile.

"I guess I'll call you Parker almost at once," she murmured. "My name's Dolores."

Basil returned with the drinks. Miss Ramona divided her conversation (what there was of it - it was mostly glances) between Basil and Mr Parker Pyne. Of the two women she took no notice whatever. Betty attempted once or twice to join in the conversation but the other girl merely stared at her and yawned.

Suddenly Dolores rose.

"Guess I'll be going along now. I'm at the other hotel. Anyone coming to see me home?"

Basil sprang up.

"I'll come with you."

Mrs Chester said: "Basil, my dear -"

"I'll be back presently, Mother."

"Isn't he the mother's boy?" Miss Ramona asked of the world at large. "Just toots 'round after her, don't you?"

Basil flushed and looked awkward. Miss Ramona gave a nod in Mrs Chester's direction, a dazzling smile to Mr Parker Pyne and she and Basil moved off together.

After they had gone there was rather an awkward silence. Mr Parker Pyne did not like to speak first. Betty Gregg was twisting her fingers and looking out to sea. Mrs Chester looked flushed and angry.

Betty said: "Well, what do you think of our new acquisition in Pollensa Bay?" Her voice was not quite steady.

Mr Parker Pyne said cautiously:

"A little - er - exotic."

"Exotic?" Betty gave a short bitter laugh.

Mrs Chester said: "She's terrible - terrible. Basil must be quite mad."

Betty said sharply: "Basil's all right."

"Her toenails," said Mrs Chester with a shiver of nausea.

Betty rose suddenly.

"I think, Mrs Chester, I'll go home and not stay to dinner after all."

"Oh, my dear - Basil will be so disappointed."

"Will he?" asked Betty with a short laugh. "Anyway, I think I will. I've got rather a headache."

She smiled at them both and went off. Mrs Chester turned to Mr Parker Pyne.

"I wish we had never come to this place - never!"

Mr Parker Pyne shook his head sadly.

"You shouldn't have gone away," said Mrs Chester. "If you'd been here this wouldn't have happened."

Mr Parker Pyne was stung to respond,

"My dear lady, I can assure you that when it comes to a question of a beautiful young woman, I should have no influence over your son whatever. He - er - seems to be of a very susceptible nature."

"He never used to be," said Mrs Chester tearfully.

"Well," said Mr Parker Pyne with an attempt at cheerfulness, "this new attraction seems to have broken the back of his infatuation for Miss Gregg. That must be some satisfaction to you."

"I don't know what you mean," said Mrs Chester. "Betty is a dear child and devoted to Basil. She is behaving extremely well over this. I think my boy must be mad."

Mr Parker Pyne received this startling change of face without wincing. He had met inconsistency in women before. He said mildly:

"Not exactly mad - just bewitched."

"The creature's a Dago. She's impossible."

"But extremely good-looking."

Mrs Chester snorted.

Basil ran up the steps from the sea front.

"Hullo, Mater, here I am. Where's Betty?"

"Betty's gone home with a headache. I don't wonder."

"Sulking, you mean."

"I consider, Basil, that you are being extremely unkind to Betty."

"For God's sake, Mother, don't jaw. If Betty is going to make this fuss every time I speak to another girl a nice sort of life we'll lead together."

"You are engaged."

"Oh, we're engaged all right. That doesn't mean that we're not going to have any friends of our own. Nowadays people have to lead their own lives and try to cut out jealousy."

He paused.

"Look here, if Betty isn't going to dine with us - I think I'll go back to the Mariposa. They did ask me to dine -"

"Oh, Basil -"

The boy gave her an exasperated look, then ran off down the steps.

Mrs Chester looked eloquently at Mr Parker Pyne.

"You see," she said.

He saw.

Matters came to a head a couple of days later. Betty and Basil were to have gone for a long walk, taking a picnic lunch with them. Betty arrived at the Pino d'Oro to find that Basil had forgotten the plan and gone over to Formentor for the day with Dolores Ramona's party.

Beyond a tightening of the lips the girl made no sign. Presently, however, she got up and stood in front of Mrs Chester (the two women were alone on the terrace).

"It's quite all right," she said. "It doesn't matter. But I think - all the same - that we'd better call the whole thing off."

She slipped from her finger the signet ring that Basil had given her - he would buy the real engagement ring later.

"Will you give him back this, Mrs Chester? And tell him it's all right - not to worry..."

"Betty dear, don't! He does love you - really."

"It looks like it, doesn't it?" said the girl with a short laugh. "No - I've got some pride. Tell him everything's all right and that I - I wish him luck."

When Basil returned at sunset he was greeted by a storm.

He flushed a little at the sight of his ring.

"So that's how she feels, is it? Well, I daresay it's the best thing."

"Basil!"

"Well, frankly, Mother, we don't seem to have been hitting it off lately."

"Whose fault was that?"

"I don't see that it was mine particularly. Jealousy's beastly and I really don't see why you should get all worked up about it. You begged me yourself not to marry Betty."

"That was before I knew her. Basil - my dear - you're not thinking of marrying this other creature."

Basil Chester said soberly:

"I'd marry her like a shot if she'd have me - but I'm afraid she won't."

Cold chills went down Mrs Chester's spine. She sought and found Mr Parker Pyne, placidly reading a book in a sheltered corner.

"You must do something! You must do something! My boy's life will be ruined."

Mr Parker Pyne was getting a little tired of Basil Chester's life being ruined.

"What can I do?"

"Go and see this terrible creature. If necessary buy her off."

"That may come very expensive."

"I don't care."

"It seems a pity. Still there are, possibly, other ways."

She looked a question. He shook his head.

"I'll make no promises - but I'll see what I can do. I have handled that kind before. By the way, not a word to Basil - that would be fatal."

"Of course not."

Mr Parker Pyne returned from the Mariposa at midnight. Mrs Chester was sitting up for him.

"Well?" she demanded breathlessly.

His eyes twinkled.

"The Señorita Dolores Ramona will leave Pollensa tomorrow morning and the island tomorrow night."

"Oh, Mr Parker Pyne! How did you manage it?"

"It won't cost a cent," said Mr Parker Pyne. Again his eyes twinkled. "I rather fancied I might have a hold over her - and I was right."

"You are wonderful. Nina Wycherley was quite right. You must let me know - er - your fees -"

Mr Parker Pyne held up a well-manicured hand.

"Not a penny. It has been a pleasure. I hope all will go well. Of course the boy will be very upset at first when he finds she's disappeared and left no address. Just go easy with him for a week or two."

"If only Betty will forgive him -"

"She'll forgive him all right. They're a nice couple. By the way, I'm leaving tomorrow, too."

"Oh, Mr Parker Pyne, we shall miss you."

"Perhaps it's just as well I should go before that boy of yours gets infatuated with yet a third girl."

Mr Parker Pyne leaned over the rail of the steamer and looked at the lights of Palma. Beside him stood Dolores Ramona. He was saying appreciatively:

"A very nice piece of work, Madeleine. I'm glad I wired you to come out. It's odd when you're such a quiet stay-at-home girl really."

Madeleine de Sara, alias Dolores Ramona, alias Maggie Sayers, said primly: "I'm glad you're pleased, Mr Parker Pyne. It's been a nice little change. I think I'll go below now and get to bed before the boat starts. I'm such a bad sailor."

A few minutes later a hand fell on Mr Parker Pyne's shoulder. He turned to see Basil Chester.

"Had to come and see you off, Mr Parker Pyne, and give you Betty's love and her and my best thanks. It was a grand stunt of yours. Betty and Mother are as thick as thieves. Seemed a shame to deceive the old darling - but she was being difficult. Anyway it's all right now. I must just be careful to keep up the annoyance stuff a couple of days longer. We're no end grateful to you, Betty and I."

"I wish you every happiness," said Mr Parker Pyne.

"Thanks."

There was a pause, then Basil said with somewhat overdone carelessness:

"Is Miss - Miss de Sara - anywhere about? I'd like to thank her, too."

Mr Parker Pyne shot a keen glance at him.

He said:

"I'm afraid Miss de Sara's gone to bed."

"Oh, too bad - well, perhaps I'll see her in London sometime."

"As a matter of fact she is going to America on business for me almost at once."

"Oh!" Basil's tone was blank. "Well," he said. "I'll be getting along..."

Mr Parker Pyne smiled. On his way to his cabin he tapped on the door of Madeleine's.

"How are you, my dear? All right? Our young friend has been along. The usual slight attack of Madeleinitis. He'll get over it in a day or two, but you are rather distracting."

THE SECOND GONG

Joan Ashby came out of her bedroom and stood a moment on the landing outside her door. She was half turning as if to go back into the room when, below her feet as it seemed, a gong boomed out.

Immediately Joan started forward almost at a run. So great was her hurry that at the top of the big staircase she collided with a young man arriving from the opposite direction.

'Hullo, Joan! Why the wild hurry?'

'Sorry, Harry. I didn't see you.'

'So I gathered,' said Harry Dalehouse dryly. 'But as I say, why the wild haste?'

'It was the gong.'

'I know. But it's only the first gong.'

'No, it's the second.'

'First.'

'Second.'

Thus arguing they had been descending the stairs. They were now in the hall, where the butler, having replaced the gongstick, was advancing toward them at a grave and dignified pace.

'It is the second,' persisted Joan. 'I know it is. Well, for one thing, look at the time.'

Harry Dalehouse glanced up at the grandfather clock.

'Just twelve minutes past eight,' he remarked. 'Joan, I believe you're right, but I never heard the first one. Digby,' he addressed the butler, 'is this the first gong or the second?'

'The first, sir.'

'At twelve minutes past eight? Digby, somebody will get the sack for this.'

A faint smile showed for a minute on the butler's face.

'Dinner is being served ten minutes later tonight, sir. The master's orders.'

'Incredible!' cried Harry Dalehouse. 'Tut, tut! Upon my word, things are coming to a pretty pass! Wonders will never cease. What ails my revered uncle?'

'The seven o'clock train, sir, was half an hour late, and as -' The butler broke off, as a sound like the crack of a whip was heard.

'What on earth -' said Harry. 'Why, that sounded exactly like a shot.'

A dark, handsome man of thirty-five came out of the drawing room on their left.

'What was that?' he asked. 'It sounded exactly like a shot.'

'It must have been a car backfiring, sir,' said the butler. 'The road runs quite close to the house this side and the upstairs windows are open.'

'Perhaps,' said Joan doubtfully. 'But that would be over there.' She waved a hand to the right. 'And I thought the sound came from here.' She pointed to the left.

The dark man shook his head.

'I don't think so. I was in the drawing room. I came out here because I thought the sound came from this direction.' He nodded his head in front of him in the direction of the gong and the front door.

'East, west, and south, eh?' said the irrepressible Harry. 'Well, I'll make it complete, Keene. North for me. I thought it came from behind us. Any solutions offered?'

'Well, there's always murder,' said Geoffrey Keene, smiling. 'I beg your pardon, Miss Ashby.'

'Only a shiver,' said Joan. 'It's nothing. A what-do-you-call-it walking over my grave.'

'A good thought - murder,' said Harry. 'But, alas! No groans, no blood. I fear the solution is a poacher after a rabbit.'

'Seems tame, but I suppose that's it,' agreed the other. 'But it sounded so near. However, let's come into the drawing room.'

'Thank goodness, we're not late,' said Joan fervently. 'I was simply haring it down the stairs thinking that was the second gong.'

All laughing, they went into the big drawing room.

Lytcham Close was one of the most famous old houses in England. Its owner, Hubert Lytcham-Roche, was the last of a long line, and his more distant relatives were apt to remark that 'Old Hubert, you know, really ought to be certified. Mad as a hatter, poor old bird.'

Allowing for the exaggeration natural to friends and relatives, some truth remained. Hubert Lytcham-Roche was certainly eccentric. Though a very fine musician, he was a man of ungovernable temper and had an almost abnormal sense of his own importance. People staying in the house had to respect his prejudices or else they were never asked again.

One such prejudice was his music. If he played to his guests, as he often did in the evening, absolute silence must obtain. A whispered comment, a rustle of a dress, a movement even - and

he would turn round scowling fiercely, and goodbye to the unlucky guest's chances of being asked again.

Another point was absolute punctuality for the crowning meal of the day. Breakfast was immaterial - you might come down at noon if you wished. Lunch also - a simple meal of cold meats and stewed fruit. But dinner was a rite, a festival, prepared by a cordon bleu whom he had tempted from a big hotel by the payment of a fabulous salary.

A first gong was sounded at five minutes past eight. At a quarter past eight a second gong was heard, and immediately after the door was flung open, dinner announced to the assembled guests, and a solemn procession wended its way to the dining room. Anyone who had the temerity to be late for the second gong was henceforth excommunicated - and Lytcham Close shut to the unlucky diner forever.

Hence the anxiety of Joan Ashby, and also the astonishment of Harry Dalehouse, at hearing that the sacred function was to be delayed ten minutes on this particular evening. Though not very intimate with his uncle, he had been to Lytcham Close often enough to know what a very unusual occurrence that was.

Geoffrey Keene, who was Lytcham-Roche's secretary, was also very much surprised.

'Extraordinary,' he commented. 'I've never known such a thing to happen. Are you sure?'

'Digby said so.'

'He said something about a train,' said Joan Ashby. 'At least I think so.'

'Queer,' said Keene thoughtfully. 'We shall hear all about it in due course, I suppose. But it's very odd.'

Both men were silent for a moment or two, watching the girl. Joan Ashby was a charming creature, blue-eyed and golden-haired, with an impish glance. This was her first visit to Lytcham Close and her invitation was at Harry's prompting.

The door opened and Diana Cleves, the Lytcham-Roches' adopted daughter, came into the room.

There was a daredevil grace about Diana, a witchery in her dark eyes and her mocking tongue. Nearly all men fell for Diana and she enjoyed her conquests. A strange creature, with her alluring suggestion of warmth and her complete coldness.

'Beaten the Old Man for once,' she remarked. 'First time for weeks he hasn't been here first, looking at his watch and tramping up and down like a tiger at feeding time.'

The young men had sprung forward. She smiled entrancingly at them both - they turned to Harry. Geoffrey Keene's dark cheek flushed as he dropped back.

He recovered himself, however, a moment as Mrs Lytcham-Roche came in. She was a tall, dark woman, naturally vague in manner, wearing floating draperies of an indeterminate shade of green. With her was a middle-aged man with a beaklike nose and a determined chin - Gregory Barling. He was a somewhat prominent figure in the financial world, well-bred on his mother's side, he had for some years been an intimate friend of Hubert Lytcham-Roche.

Boom!

The gong resounded imposingly. As it died away, the door was flung open and Digby announced:

'Dinner is served.'

Then, well-trained servant that he was, a look of complete astonishment flashed over his impassive face. For the first time in his memory, his master was not in the room!

That his astonishment was shared by everybody was evident. Mrs Lytcham-Roche gave a little nervous laugh.

'Most amazing. Really - I don't know what to do.'

Everybody was taken aback. The whole tradition of Lytcham Close was undermined. What could have happened? Conversation ceased. There was a strained sense of waiting.

At last the door opened once more; a sigh of relief went round only tempered by a slight anxiety as to how to treat the situation.

Nothing must be said to emphasize the fact that the host himself transgressed the stringent rule of the house.

But the newcomer was not Lytcham-Roche. Instead of the big, bearded, viking-like figure, there advanced into the long drawing room a very small man, palpably a foreigner, with an egg-shaped head, a flamboyant moustache, and most irreproachable evening clothes.

His eyes twinkling, the newcomer advanced toward Mrs Lytcham-Roche.

'My apologies, madame,' he said. 'I am, I fear, a few minutes late.'

'Oh, not at all!' murmured Mrs Lytcham-Roche vaguely. 'Not at all, Mr -' She paused.

'Poirot, madame. Hercule Poirot.'

He heard behind him a very soft 'Oh' - a gasp rather than an articulate word - a woman's ejaculation. Perhaps he was flattered.

'You knew I was coming?' he murmured gently. 'N'est ce pas, madame? Your husband told you.'

'Oh - oh, yes,' said Mrs Lytcham-Roche, her manner unconvincing in the extreme. 'I mean, I suppose so. I am so terribly unpractical, M. Poirot. I never remember anything. But fortunately Digby sees to everything.'

'My train, I fear, was late,' said M. Poirot. 'An accident on the line in front of us.'

'Oh,' cried Joan, 'so that's why dinner was put off.'

His eye came quickly round to her - a most uncannily discerning eye.

'That is something out of the usual - eh?'

'I really can't think -' began Mrs Lytcham-Roche, and then stopped. 'I mean,' she went on confusedly, 'it's so odd. Hubert never -'

Poirot's eyes swept rapidly round the group.

'M. Lytcham-Roche is not down yet?'

'No, and it's so extraordinary -' She looked appealingly at Geoffrey Keene.

'Mr Lytcham-Roche is the soul of punctuality,' explained Keene. 'He has not been late for dinner for - well, I don't know that he was ever late before.'

To a stranger the situation must have been ludicrous - the perturbed faces and the general consternation.

'I know,' said Mrs Lytcham-Roche with the air of one solving a problem. 'I shall ring for Digby.'

She suited the action to the word.

The butler came promptly.

'Digby,' said Mrs Lytcham-Roche, 'Your master. Is he -'

As was customary with her, she did not finish her sentence. It was clear that the butler did not expect her to do so. He replied promptly and with understanding.

'Mr Lytcham-Roche came down at five minutes to eight and went into the study, madam.'

'Oh!' she paused. 'You don't think - I mean - he heard the gong?'

'I think he must have - the gong is immediately outside the study door.'

'Yes, of course, of course,' aid Mrs Lytcham-Roche more vaguely than ever. 'Shall I inform him, madam, that dinner is ready?'

'Oh, thank you, Digby. Yes, I think - yes, yes, I should.'

'I don't know,' said Mrs Lytcham-Roche to her guests as the butler withdrew, 'what I would do without Digby!'

A pause followed.

Then Digby re-entered the room. His breath was coming a little faster than is considered good form in a butler.

'Excuse me, madam - the study door is locked.'

It was then that M. Hercule Poirot took command of the situation.

'I think,' he said, 'that we had better go to the study.'

He led the way and everyone followed. His assumption of authority seemed perfectly natural. He was no longer a rather comic-looking guest. He was a personality and master of the situation.

He led the way out into the hall, past the staircase, past the great clock, past the recess in which stood the gong. Exactly opposite that recess was a closed door.

He tapped on it, first gently, then with increasing violence. But there was no reply. Very nimbly he dropped to his knees and applied his eye to the keyhole. He rose and looked round.

'Messieurs,' he said, 'we must break open this door. Immediately!'

As before no one questioned his authority. Geoffrey Keene and Gregory Barling were the two biggest men. They attacked the door under Poirot's directions. It was no easy matter. The doors of Lytcham Close were solid affairs - no modern jerry-building here. It resisted the attack valiantly, but at last it gave before the united attack of the men and crashed inward.

The house party hesitated in the doorway. They saw what they had subconsciously feared to see. Facing them was the window. On

the left, between the door and the window, was a big writing table. Sitting, not at the table, but sideways to it, was a man - a big man - slouched forward in his chair. His back was to them and his face to the window, but his position told the tale. His right hand hung limply down and below it, on the carpet was a small shining pistol.

Poirot spoke sharply to Gregory Barling.

'Take Mrs Lytcham-Roche away - and the other two ladies.'

The other nodded comprehendingly. He laid a hand on his hostess's arm. She shivered.

'He has shot himself,' she murmured. 'Horrible!' With another shiver she permitted him to lead her away. The two girls followed.

Poirot came forward into the room, the two young men behind him.

He knelt down by the body, motioning them to keep back a little.

He found the bullet hole on the right side of the head. It had passed out the other side and evidently struck a mirror hanging on the left-hand wall, since this was shivered. On the writing table was a sheet of paper, blank save for the word Sorry scrawled across it in hesitating shaky writing.

Poirot's eyes darted back to the door.

'The key is not on the lock,' he said. 'I wonder -'

His hand slid into the dead man's pocket.

'Here it is,' he said. 'At least I think so. Have the goodness to try it, monsieur?'

Geoffrey Keene took it from him and tried it in the lock.

'That's it, all right.'

'And the window?'

Harry Dalehouse strode across to it.

'Shut.'

'You permit?' Very swiftly, Poirot scrambled to his feet and joined the other at the window. It was a long French window. Poirot opened it, stood a minute scrutinizing the grass just on front of it, then closed it again.

'My friends,' he said, 'we must telephone for the police. Until they have come and satisfied themselves that it is truly suicide nothing must be touched. Death can only have occurred about a quarter of an hour ago.'

'I know,' said Harry hoarsely. 'We heard the shot.'

'Comment? What is that you say?'

Harry explained with the help of Geoffrey Keene. As he finished speaking, Barling reappeared.

Poirot repeated what he had said before, and while Keene went off to telephone, Poirot requested Barling to give him a few minutes' interview.

They went into a small morning room, leaving Digby on guard outside the study door, while Harry went off to find the ladies.

'You were, I understood, an intimate friend of M. Lytcham-Roche,' began Poirot. 'It is for that reason that I address myself to you primarily. In etiquette, perhaps, I should have spoken first to madame, but at the moment I do not think that is pratique.'

He paused.

'I am, see you, in a delicate situation. I will lay the facts plainly before you. I am, by profession, a private detective.'

The financier smiled a little.

'It is not necessary to tell me that, M. Poirot. Your name is, by now, a household word.'

'Monsieur is too amiable,' said Poirot, bowing. 'Let us, then, proceed. I receive, at my London address, a letter from this M. Lytcham-Roche. In it he says that he has reason to believe that he is being swindled of large sums of money. For family reasons, so he puts it, he does not want to call in the police, but he desires

that I should come down and look into the matter for him. Well, I agree. I come. Not quite so soon as M. Lytcham-Roche wishes - for after all I have other affairs, and M. Lytcham-Roche, he is not quite the King of England, though he seems to think he is.'

Barling gave a wry smile.

'He did think of himself that way.'

'Exactly. Oh, you comprehend - his letter showed plainly enough that he was what one calls an eccentric. He was not insane, but he was unbalanced, n'est-ce pas?'

'What he's just done ought to show that.'

'Oh, monsieur, but suicide is not always the act of the unbalanced. The coroner's jury, they say so, but that is to spare the feelings of those left behind.'

'Hubert was not a normal individual,' said Barling decisively. 'He was given to ungovernable rages, was a monomaniac on the subject of family pride, and had a bee in his bonnet in more ways than one. But for all that he was a shrewd man.'

'Precisely. He was sufficiently shrewd to discover that he was being robbed.'

'Does a man commit suicide because he's being robbed?' Barling asked.

'As you say, monsieur. Ridiculous. And that brings me to the need for haste in the matter. For family reasons - that was the phrase he used in the letter. Eh bien, monsieur, you are a man of the world, you know that it is for precisely that - family reasons - that a man does commit suicide.'

'You mean?'

'That it looks - on the face of it - as if ce pauvre monsieur had found out something further - and was unable to face what he had found out. But you perceive, I have a duty. I am already employed - commissioned - I have accepted the task. This 'family reason', the dead man did not want it to get to the police. So I must act quickly. I must learn the truth.'

'And when you have learned it?'

'Then - I must use discretion. I must do what I can.'

'I see,' said Barling. He smoked for a minute or too in silence, then he said, 'All the same, I'm afraid I can't help you. Hubert never confided anything to me. I know nothing.'

'But tell me, monsieur, who, should you say, had a chance of robbing this poor gentleman?'

'Difficult to say. Of course, there's the agent for the estate. He's a new man.'

'The agent?'

'Yes. Marshall. Captain Marshall. Very nice fellow, lost an arm in the war. He came here a year ago. But Hubert liked him, I know, and trusted him, too.'

'If it were Captain Marshall who was playing him false, there would be no family reasons for silence.'

'N-no.'

The hesitation did not escape Poirot.

'Speak, monsieur. Speak plainly, I beg of you.'

'It may be gossip.'

'I implore you, speak.'

'Very well, then, I will. Did you notice a very attractive looking woman in the drawing room?'

'I noticed two very attractive looking women.'

'Oh, yes, Miss Ashby. Pretty little thing. Her first visit. Harry Dalehouse got Mrs Lytcham-Roche to ask her. No, I mean a dark girl - Diana Cleves.'

'I noticed her,' said Poirot. 'She is one that all men would notice, I think.'

'She's a little devil,' burst out Barling. 'She's played fast and loose with every man for twenty miles round. Someone will murder her one of these days.'

He wiped his brow with a handkerchief, oblivious of the keen interest with which the other was regarding him.

'And this young lady is -'

'She's Lytcham-Roche's adopted daughter. A great disappointment when he and his wife had no children. They adopted Diana Cleves - she was some kind of cousin. Hubert was devoted to her, simply worshipped her.'

'Doubtless he would dislike the idea of her marrying?' suggested Poirot.

'Not if she married the right person.'

'And the right person was - you, monsieur?'

Barling started and flushed.

'I never said -'

'Mais, non, mais, non! You said nothing. But it was so, was it not?'

'I fell in love with her - yes. Lytcham-Roche was pleased about it. It fitted in with his ideas for her.'

'And mademoiselle herself?'

'I told you - she's the devil incarnate.'

'I comprehend. She has her own ideas of amusement, is it not so? But Captain Marshall, where does he come in?'

'Well, she's been seeing a lot of him. People talked. Not that I think there's anything in it. Another scalp, that's all.'

Poirot nodded.

'But supposing there had been something in it - well, then, it might explain why M. Lytcham-Roche wanted to proceed cautiously.'

'You do understand, don't you, that there's no earthly reason for suspecting Marshall of defalcation.'

'Oh, parfaitement, parfaitement! It might be an affair of a forged cheque with someone in the household involved. This young Mr Dalehouse, who is he?'

'A nephew.'

'He will inherit, yes?'

'He's a sister's son. Of course he might take the name - there's not a Lytcham-Roche left.'

'I see.'

'The place isn't exactly entailed, though it's always gone from father to son. I've always imagined that he'd leave the place to his wife for her lifetime and then perhaps to Diana if he approved of her marriage. You see, her husband could take the name.'

'I comprehend,' said Poirot. 'You have been most kind and helpful to me, monsieur. May I ask you one thing further - to explain to Madame Lytcham-Roche all that I have told you, and beg of her that she accord me a minute?'

Sooner than he had thought likely, the door opened and Mrs Lytcham-Roche entered. She floated to a chair.

'Mr Barling has explained everything to me,' she said. 'We mustn't have any scandal, of course. Though I do feel really it's fate, don't you? I mean with the mirror and everything.'

'Comment - the mirror?'

'The moment I saw it - it seemed a symbol. Of Hubert! A curse, you know. I think old families have a curse very often. Hubert was always very strange. Lately he has been stranger than ever.'

'You will forgive me for asking, madame, but you are not in any way short of money?'

'Money? I never think of money.'

'Do you know what they say, madame? Those who never think of money need a great deal of it.'

He ventured a tiny laugh. She did not respond. Her eyes were far away.

'I thank you, madame,' he said, and the interview came to an end.

Poirot rang, and Digby answered.

'I shall require you to answer a few questions,' said Poirot. 'I am a private detective sent for by your master before he died.'

'A detective!' the butler gasped. 'Why?'

'You will please answer my questions. As to the shot now -'

He listened to the butler's account.

'So there were four of you in the hall?'

'Yes, sir; Mr Dalehouse and Miss Ashby and Mr Keene came from the drawing room.'

'Where were the others?'

'The others, sir?'

'Yes, Mrs Lytcham-Roche, Miss Cleves and Mr Barling.'

'Mrs Lytcham-Roche and Mr Barling came down later, sir.'

'And Miss Cleves?'

'I think Miss Cleves was in the drawing room, sir.'

Poirot asked a few more questions, then dismissed the butler with the command to request Miss Cleves to come to him.

She came immediately, and he studied her attentively in view of Barling's revelations. She was certainly beautiful in her white satin frock with the rosebud on the shoulder.

He explained the circumstances which had brought him to Lytcham Close, eyeing her very closely, but she showed only what seemed to be genuine astonishment, with no signs of uneasiness. She spoke of Marshall indifferently with tepid approval. Only at mention of Barling did she approach animation.

'That man's a crook,' she said sharply. 'I told the Old Man so, but he wouldn't listen - went on putting money into his rotten concerns.'

'Are you sorry, mademoiselle, that your - father is dead?'

She stared at him.

'Of course. I'm modern, you know, M. Poirot. I don't indulge in sob stuff. I was fond of the Old Man. Though, of course, it's best for him.'

'Best for him?'

'Yes. One of these days he would have had to be locked up. It was growing on him - this belief that the last Lytcham-Roche of Lytcham Close was omnipotent.'

Poirot nodded thoughtfully.

'I see, I see - yes, decided signs of mental trouble. By the way, you permit that I examine your little bag? It is charming - all these silk rosebuds. What was I saying? Oh, yes, did you hear the shot?'

'Oh, yes! But I thought it was a car or a poacher, or something.'

'You were in the drawing room?'

'No. I was out in the garden.'

'I see. Thank you, mademoiselle. Next I would like to see M. Keene, is it not?'

'Geoffrey? I'll sent him along.'

Keene came in, alert and interested.

'Mr Barling has been telling me of the reason for your being down here. I don't know if there's anything I can tell you, but if I can -'

Poirot interrupted him. 'I only want to know one thing, Monsieur Keene. What was it that you stooped and picked up just before we got to the study door this evening?'

'I -' Keene half sprang up from his chair, then subsided again. 'I don't know what you mean,' he said lightly.

'Oh, I think you do, monsieur. You were behind me, I know, but a friend of mine he says I have eyes in the back of my head. You picked up something and you put it in the right hand pocket of your dinner jacket.'

There was a pause. Indecision was written plainly on Keene's handsome face. At last he made up his mind.

'Take your choice, M. Poirot,' he said, and leaning forward he turned his pocket inside out. There was a cigarette holder, a handkerchief, a tiny silk rosebud, and a little gold match box.

A moment's silence and then Keene said, 'As a matter of fact it was this.' He picked up the match box.

'I must have dropped it earlier in the evening.'

'I think not,' said Poirot.

'What do you mean?'

'What I say. I, monsieur, am a man of tidiness, of method, of order. A match box on the ground, I should see it and pick it up - a match

box of this size, assuredly I should see it! No, monsieur, I think it was something very much smaller - such as this, perhaps.'

He picked up the little silk rosebud.

'From Miss Cleve's bag, I think?'

There was a moments pause, then Keene admitted it with a laugh.

'Yes, that's so. She - gave it to me last night.'

'I see,' said Poirot, and at the moment the door opened and a tall fair-haired man in a lounge suit strode into the room.

'Keene - what's all this? Lytcham-Roche shot himself? Man, I can't believe it. It's incredible.'

'Let me introduce you,' said Keene, 'to M. Hercule Poirot.' The other started. 'He will tell you all about it.' And he left the room, banging the door.

'M. Poirot -' John Marshall was all eagerness - 'I'm most awfully pleased to meet you. It is a bit of luck your being down here. Lytcham-Roche never told me you were coming. I'm a most frightful admirer of yours, sir.'

A disarming young man, thought Poirot - not so young, either, for there was grey hair at the temples and lines in the forehead. It was the voice and manner that gave the impression of boyishness.

'The police -'

'They are here now, sir. I came up with them on hearing the news. They don't seem to be particularly surprised. Of course, he was mad as a hatter, but even then -'

'Even then you are surprised at his committing suicide?'

'Frankly, yes. I shouldn't have thought that - well, that Lytcham-Roche could have imagined the world getting on without him.'

'He has had no money troubles of late, I understand?'

Marshall nodded.

'He speculated. Wildcat schemes of Barling's.'

Poirot said quietly, 'I will be very frank. Had you any reason to suppose that M. Lytcham-Roche suspected you of tampering with your accounts?'

Marshall stared at Poirot in a kind of ludicrous bewilderment. So ludicrous was it that Poirot was forced to smile.

'I see that you are utterly taken aback, Captain Marshall.'

'Yes, indeed. The idea's ridiculous.'

'Ah! Another question. He did not suspect you of robbing him of his adopted daughter?'

'Oh, so you know about me and Di?' He laughed in an embarrassed fashion.

'It is so, then?'

Marshall nodded.

'But the old man didn't know anything about it. Di wouldn't have told him. I suppose she was right. He would have gone up like a - like a basketful of rockets. I should have been chucked out of a job, and that would have been that.'

'And instead what was your plan?'

'Well, upon my word, sir, I hardly know. I left things to Di. She said she'd fix it. As a matter of fact I was looking out for a job. If I could have got one I would have chucked this up.'

'And mademoiselle would have married you? But M. Lytcham-Roche would have stopped her allowance. Mademoiselle Diana is, I should say, fond of money.'

Marshall looked rather uncomfortable.

'I'd have tried to make it up to her, sir.'

Geoffrey Keene came into the room. 'The police are just going and would like to see you, M. Poirot.'

'Merci. I will come.'

In the study were a stalwart inspector and the police surgeon.

'Mr Poirot?' said the inspector. 'We've heard of you, sir. I'm Inspector Reeves.'

'You are most amiable,' said Poirot, shaking hands. 'You do not need my co-operation, no?' He gave a little laugh.

'Not this time, sir. All plain sailing.'

'The case is perfectly straightforward, then?' demanded Poirot.

'Absolutely. Door and window locked, key of door in dead man's pocket. Manner very strange the past few days. No doubt about it.'

'Everything quite - natural?'

The doctor grunted.

'Must have been sitting at a damned queer angle for the bullet to have hit that mirror. But suicide's a queer business.'

'You found the bullet?'

'Yes, here.' The doctor held it out. 'Near the wall below the mirror. Pistol was Mr Roche's own. Kept it in the drawer of the desk always. Something behind it all, I daresay, but what that is we shall never know.'

Poirot nodded.

The body had been carried to a bedroom. The police now took their leave. Poirot stood at the front door looking after them. A sound made him turn. Harry Dalehouse was close behind him.

'Have you, by any chance, a strong flashlight, my friend?'

'Yes, I'll get it for you.'

When he returned with it Joan Ashby was with him.

'You may accompany me if you like,' said Poirot graciously.

He stepped out of the front door and turned to the right, stopping before the study window. About six feet of grass separated it from the path. Poirot bent down, playing the flashlight on the grass. He straightened himself and shook his head.

'No,' he said, 'not there.'

Then he paused and slowly his figure stiffened. On either side of the grass was a deep flower border. Poirot's attention was focused on the right hand border, full of Michaelmas daisies and dahlias. His torch was directed on the front of the border. Distinct on the soft mould were footprints.

'Four of them,' murmured Poirot. 'Two going toward the window, two coming from it.'

'A gardener,' suggested Joan.

'But no, mademoiselle, but no. Employ your eyes. These shoes are small, dainty, high-heeled, the shoes of a woman. Mademoiselle Diana mentioned having been out in the garden. Do you know if she went downstairs before you did, mademoiselle?'

Joan shook her head.

'I can't remember. I was in such a hurry because the gong went, and I thought I'd heard the first one. I do seem to remember that her room door was open as I went past, but I'm not sure. Mrs Lytcham-Roche's was shut, I know.'

'I see,' said Poirot.

Something in his voice made Harry look up sharply, but Poirot was merely frowning gently to himself.

In the doorway they met Diana Cleves.

'The police have gone,' she said. 'It's all - over.'

She gave a deep sigh.

'May I request one little word with you, mademoiselle?'

She led the way into the morning room, and Poirot followed, shutting the door.

'Well?' She looked a little surprised.

'One little question, mademoiselle. Were you tonight at any time in the flower border outside the study window?'

'Yes.' She nodded. 'About seven o'clock and again just before dinner.'

'I do not understand,' he said.

'I can't see that here is anything to "understand", as you call it,' she said coldly. 'I was picking Michaelmas daisies - for the table. I always to the flowers. That was about seven o'clock.'

'And afterward - later?'

'Oh, that! As a matter of fact I dropped a spot of hair oil in my dress - just on the shoulder here. It was just as I was ready to come down. I didn't want to change the dress. I remembered I'd seen a late rose in bud in the border. I ran out and picked it and pinned it in. See -' She came close to him and lifted the head of the rose. Poirot saw the minute grease spot. She remained close to him, her shoulder almost brushing his.

'And what time was this?'

'Oh, about ten minutes past eight, I suppose.'

'You did not - try the window?'

'I believe I did. Yes, I thought it would be quicker to go in that way. But it was fastened.'

'I see.' Poirot drew a deep breath. 'And the shot,' he said, 'where were you when you heard that? Still in the flower border?'

'Oh, no; it was two or three minutes later, just before I came in by the side door.'

'Do you know what this is, mademoiselle?'

On the palm of his hand he held out the tiny silk rosebud. She examined it coolly.

'It looks like a rosebud off my little evening bag. Where did you find it?'

'It was in Mr Keene's pocket,' said Poirot dryly. 'Did you give it to him, mademoiselle?'

'Did he tell you I gave it to him?'

Poirot smiled.

'When did you give it to him, mademoiselle?'

'Last night.'

'Did he warn you to say that, mademoiselle?'

'What do you mean?' she asked angrily.

But Poirot did not answer. He strode out of the room and into the drawing room. Barling, Keene, and Marshall were there. He went straight up to them.

'Messieurs,' he said brusquely, 'will you follow me to the study?'

He passed out into the hall and addressed Joan and Harry.

'You, too, I pray of you. And will somebody request madame to come? I thank you. Ah! And here is the excellent Digby. Digby, a little question, a very important little question. Did Miss Cleves arrange some Michaelmas daisies before dinner?'

The butler looked bewildered.

'Yes, sir, she did.'

'You are sure?'

'Quite sure, sir.'

'Très bien. Now - come, all of you.'

Inside the study he faced them.

'I have asked you to come here for a reason. The case is over, the police have come and gone. They say Mr Lytcham-Roche has shot

himself. All is finished.' He paused. 'But I, Hercule Poirot, say that it is not finished.'

As startled eyes turned to him the door opened and Mrs Lytcham-Roche floated into the room.

'I was saying, madame, that this case is not finished. It is a matter of the psychology. Mr Lytcham-Roche, he had the manie grandeur, he was a king. Such a man does not kill himself. No, no, he may go mad, but he does not kill himself. Mr Lytcham-Roche did not kill himself.' He paused. 'He was killed.'

'Killed?' Marshall gave a short laugh. 'Alone in the room with the door and window locked?'

'All the same,' said Poirot stubbornly, 'he was killed.'

'And got up and locked the door or shut the window afterward, I suppose,' said Diana cuttingly.

'I will show you something,' said Poirot, going to the window. He turned the handle of the French windows and then pulled gently.

'See, they are open. Now I close them, but without turning the handle. Now the window is closed but not fastened. Now!'

He gave a short jarring blow and the handle turned, shooting the bolt down into its socket.

'You see?' said Poirot softly. 'It is very loose, this mechanism. It could be done from outside quite easily.'

He turned, his manner grim.

'When that shot was fired at twelve minutes past eight, there were four people in the hall. Four people have an alibi. Where were the other three? You, madame? In your room. You, monsieur Barling. Were you, too, in your room?'

'I was.'

'And you, mademoiselle, were in the garden. So you have admitted.'

'I don't see -' began Diana.

'Wait.' He turned to Mrs Lytcham-Roche. 'Tell me, madame, have you any idea of how your husband left his money?'

'Hubert read his will. He said I ought to know. He left me three thousand a year chargeable on the estate, and the dower house or the town house, whichever I preferred. Everything else he left to Diana, on condition that if she married her husband must take the name.'

'Ah!'

'But then he made a codicil thing - a few weeks ago, that was.'

'Yes, madame?'

'He still left it all to Diana, but on condition that she married Mr Barling. If she married anyone else, it was all to go to his nephew, Harry Dalehouse.'

'But the codicil was only made a few weeks ago,' purred Poirot. 'Mademoiselle may not have known of that.' He stepped forward accusingly. 'Mademoiselle Diana, you want to marry Captain Marshall, do you not? Or is it Mr Keene?'

She walked across the room and put her arm through Marshall's sound one.

'Go on,' she said.

'I will put the case against you, mademoiselle. You loved Captain Marshall. You also loved money. Your adopted father he would never have consented to you marrying Captain Marshall, but if he dies you are fairly sure that you get everything. So you go out, step over the flower border to the window which is open, you have with you the pistol which you have taken from the writing table drawer. You go up to your victim talking amiably. You fire. You drop the pistol by his hand, having wiped it and pressed his fingers on it. You go out again, shaking the window till the bolt drops. You come into the house. Is that how it happened? I am asking you, mademoiselle.'

'No,' Diana screamed. 'No - no!'

He looked at her, then he smiled.

'No,' he said, 'it was not like that. It might have been so - it is plausible - it is possible - but it cannot have been like that for two reasons. The first is that you picked Michaelmas daisies at seven o'clock, the second arises from something that mademoiselle here told me.' He turned to Joan, who stared at him in bewilderment. He nodded encouragement.

'But yes, mademoiselle. You told me that you hurried downstairs because you thought it was the second gong sounding, having already heard the first.'

He shot a rapid glance around the room.

'You do not see what that means?' he cried. 'You do not see. Look! Look!' He sprang forward to the chair where the victim sat. 'Did you notice how the body was? Not sitting square to the desk - no, sitting sideways to the desk, facing the window. Is that a natural way to commit suicide? Jamais, jamais! You write your apologia "sorry" on a piece of paper - you open the drawer, you take out the pistol, you hold it to your head and you fire. That is the way of suicide. But now consider murder! The victim sits at his desk, the murderer stands beside him - talking. And talking still - fires. Where does the bullet go then?' He paused. 'Straight through the head, through the door if it is open, and so - hits the gong.

'Ah! you begin to see? This was the first gong - heard only by mademoiselle, since her room is above.

'What does our murderer do next? Shuts the door, locks it, puts the key in the dead man's pocket, then turns the body sideways in the chair, presses the dead man's fingers on the pistol and then drops it by his side, cracks the mirror on the wall as a final spectacular touch - in short, "arranges" his suicide. Then out through the window, the bolt is shaken home, the murderer steps not on the grass, where footprints must show, but on the flower bed, where they can be smoothed out behind him, leaving no trace. Then back into the house, and at twelve minutes past eight, when he is alone in the drawing room, he fires a service revolver out of the drawing room window and dashes out into the hall. Is that how you did it, Mr Geoffrey Keene?'

Fascinated, the secretary stared at the accusing figure drawing nearer to him. Then, with a gurgling cry, he fell to the ground.

'I think I am answered,' said Poirot. 'Captain Marshall, will you ring up the police?' He bent over the prostrate form. 'I fancy he will be still unconscious when they come.'

'Geoffrey Keene,' murmured Diana. 'But what motive had he?'

'I fancy that as secretary he had certain opportunities - accounts - cheques. Something awakened Mr Lytcham-Roche's suspicions. He sent for me.'

'Why for you? Why not for the police?'

'I think, mademoiselle, you can answer that question. Monsieur suspected there was something between you and that young man.

To divert his mind from Captain Marshall, you had flirted shamelessly with Mr Keene. But yes, you need not deny! Mr Keene gets wind of my coming and acts promptly. The essence of his scheme is that the crime must seem to take place at 8:12, when he has an alibi. His one danger is the bullet, which must be lying somewhere near the gong and which he has not had time to retrieve. When we are all on our way to the study he picks that up. At such a tense moment he thinks no one will notice. But me, I notice everything! I question him. He reflects a little minute and then he plays the comedy! He insinuates that what he picked up was the silk rosebud, he plays the part of the young man in love shielding the lady he loves. Oh, it was very clever, and if you had not picked Michaelmas daisies -'

'I don't understand what they have to do with it.'

'You do not? Listen - there were only four footprints in the bed, but when you were picking the flowers you must have made many more than that. So in between your picking the flowers and your coming to get the rosebud someone must have smoothed over the bed. Not a gardener - no gardener works after seven. Then it must be someone guilty - it must be the murderer - the murder was committed before the shot was heard.'

'But why did nobody hear the real shot?' asked Harry.

'A silencer. They will find that and the revolver thrown into the shrubbery.'

'What a risk!'

'Why a risk? Everyone was upstairs dressing for dinner. It was a very good moment. The bullet was the only contretemps, and even that, as he thought, passed off well.'

Poirot picked it up. 'He threw it under the mirror when I was examining the window with Mr Dalehouse.'

'Oh!' Diana wheeled on Marshall. 'Marry me, John, and take me away.'

Barling coughed. 'My dear Diana, under the terms of my friend's will -'

'I don't care,' the girl cried. 'We can draw pictures on pavements.'

'There's no need to do that,' said Harry. 'We'll go halves, Di. I'm not going to bag things because Uncle had a bee in his bonnet.'

Suddenly there was a cry. Mrs Lytcham-Roche had sprung to her feet.

'M. Poirot - the mirror - he must have deliberately smashed it.'

'Yes, madame.'

'Oh!' She stared at him. 'But it is unlucky to break a mirror.'

'It has proved very unlucky for Mr Geoffrey Keene,' said Poirot cheerfully.

YELLOW IRIS

Hercule Poirot stretched his feet towards the electric heater by the wall. The precise design made by the parallel glowing bars was pleasing to his orderly mind.

"The coal heaters were clumsy and disorderly. They never had this delicious symmetry..."

The phone rang. Poirot got up and consulted his watch. It was almost half past eleven. Who would phone him at this hour? But it could be a wrong number.

"Or maybe," he murmured to himself with a dreamy smile, "they have found a millionaire, owner of a newspaper chain, murdered in his library with a rare orchid crushed in his left hand and the page of a cooking book attached by a dagger to his chest..."

Smiling at the pleasing conceit, he lifted the receiver.

Immediately a voice spoke - a soft husky woman's voice with a kind of desperate urgency about it.

"Is that M. Hercule Poirot? Is that M. Hercule Poirot?"

"Hercule Poirot speaks."

"M. Poirot - can you come at once - at once - I'm in danger - in great danger - I know it -"

Poirot said sharply, "Who are you? Where are you speaking from?"

The voice came more faintly but with an even greater urgency.

"At once... it's life or death... The Jardin des Cygnes... at once... table with yellow irises..."

There was a pause - a queer kind of gasp - the line went dead.

Hercule Poirot hung up. His face was puzzled. He murmured between his teeth:

"There is something here very curious..."

In the doorway of the Jardin des Cygnes, fat Luigi hurried forward.

"Buona sera, M. Poirot. You desire a table - yes?"

"No, no, my good Luigi. I seek here for some friends. I will look round - perhaps they are not here yet. Ah, let me see, that table there in the corner with the yellow irises - a little question by the way, if it is not indiscreet. On all the other tables there are tulips - pink tulips - why on that one table do you have yellow irises?"

Luigi shrugged his expressive shoulders.

"A command, Monsieur! A special order! Without doubt, the favorite flowers of one of the ladies. That table, it is the table of Mr Barton Russell - an American - immensely rich."

"Aha, one must study the whims of the ladies, must one not, Luigi?"

"Monsieur has said it," said Luigi.

"I see at that table an acquaintance of mine. I must go and speak to him."

Poirot skirted his way delicately round the dancing floor on which couples were revolving. The table in question was set for six, but it had at the moment only one occupant, a young man who was thoughtfully, and it seemed pessimistically, drinking champagne.

He was not at all the person that Poirot had expected to see. It seemed impossible to associate the idea of danger or melodrama with any party of which Tony Chapell was a member.

Poirot paused delicately by the table.

"Ah, it is, is it not, my friend Anthony Chapell?"

"By all that's wonderful - Poirot the police hound!" cried the young man. "Not Anthony, my dear fellow - Tony to friends!"

He drew out a chair.

"Come, sit with me. Let us discourse of crime! Let us go further and drink to crime." He poured champagne into an empty glass. "But what are you doing in this haunt of song and dance and merriment, my dear Poirot? We have no bodies here, positively not a single body to offer you."

Poirot sipped the champagne.

"You seem very gay, mon cher?"

"Gay? I am steeped in misery - wallowing in gloom. Tell me, you hear this tune they are playing. You recognize it?"

Poirot hazarded cautiously:

"Something perhaps to do with your baby having left you?"

"Not a bad guess," said the young man, "but wrong for once. 'There's nothing like love for making you miserable!' That's what it's called."

"Aha?"

"My favorite tune," said Tony Chapell mournfully. "And my favorite restaurant and my favorite band - and my favorite girl's here and she's dancing it with somebody else."

"Hence the melancholy?" said Poirot.

"Exactly. Pauline and I, you see, have had what the vulgar call words. That is to say, she's had ninety-five words to five of mine out of every hundred. My five are: 'But darling - I can explain.' - Then she starts in on her ninety-five again and we get no further. I think," added Tony sadly, "that I shall poison myself."

"Pauline?" murmured Poirot.

"Pauline Weatherby. Barton Russell's young sister-in-law. Young, lovely, disgustingly rich. Tonight Barton Russell gives a party. You know him? Big Business, clean-shaven American - full of pep and personality. His wife was Pauline's sister."

"And who else is there at this party?"

"You'll meet 'em in a minute when the music stops. There's Lola Valdez - you know, the South American dancer in the new show at the Metropole, and there's Stephen Carter. D'you know Carter - he's in the diplomatic service. Very hush-hush. Known as silent Stephen. Sort of man who says, 'I am not at liberty to state, etc., etc.' Hullo, here they come."

Poirot rose. He was introduced to Barton Russell, to Stephen Carter, to Señora Lola Valdez, a dark and luscious creature, and to Pauline Weatherby, very young, very fair, with eyes like cornflowers.

Barton Russell said:

"What, is this the great M. Hercule Poirot? I am indeed pleased to meet you, sir. Won't you sit down and join us? That is, unless -"

Tony Chapell broke in.

"He's got an appointment with a body, I believe, or is it an absconding financier, or the Rajah of Borrioboolagah's great ruby?"

"Ah, my friend, do you think I am never off duty? Can I not, for once, seek only to amuse myself?"

"Perhaps you've got an appointment with Carter here. The latest from Geneva. International situation now acute. The stolen plans must be found or war will be declared tomorrow!"

Pauline Weatherby said cuttingly:

"Must you be so completely idiotic, Tony?"

"Sorry, Pauline."

Tony Chapell relapsed into crestfallen silence.

"How severe you are, Mademoiselle."

"I hate people who play the fool all the time."

"I must be careful, I see. I must converse only of serious matters."

"Excuse me, must just speak to a fellow I know over there. Fellow I was with at Eton."

Stephen Carter got up and walked to a table a few places away.

Tony said gloomily:

"Somebody ought to drown old Etonians at birth."

Hercule Poirot was still being gallant to the dark beauty beside him.

He murmured:

"I wonder, may I ask, what are the favorite flowers of Mademoiselle?"

"Ah, now, why ees eet you want to know?"

Lola was arch.

"Mademoiselle, if I send flowers to a lady, I am particular that they should be flowers she likes."

"That ees very charming of you, M. Poirot. I weel tell you - I adore the big dark red carnations - or the dark red roses."

"Superb - yes, superb! You do not, then, like yellow flowers - yellow irises?"

"Yellow flowers - no - they do not accord with my temperament."

"How wise... Tell me, Mademoiselle, did you ring up a friend tonight, since you arrived here?"

"I? Ring up a friend? No, what a curious question!"

"Ah, but I, I am a very curious man."

"I'm sure yoo are." She rolled her dark eyes at him. "A vairy dangerous man."

"No, no, not dangerous; say, a man who may be useful - in danger! You understand?"

Lola giggled. She showed white even teeth.

"No, no," she laughed. "You are dangerous."

Hercule Poirot sighed.

"I see that you do not understand. All this is very strange."

Tony came out of a fit of abstraction and said suddenly:

"Lola, what about a spot of swoop and dip? Come along."

"I weel come - yes. Since M. Poirot ees not brave enough!"

Tony put an arm round her and remarked over his shoulder to Poirot as they glided off:

"You can meditate on crime yet to come, old boy!"

Poirot said: "It is profound what you say there. Yes, it is profound..."

He sat meditatively for a minute or two, then he raised a finger. Luigi came promptly, his wide Italian face wreathed in smiles.

"Mon vieux," said Poirot. "I need some information."

"Always at your service, Monsieur."

"I desire to know how many of these people at this table here have used the telephone tonight?"

"I can tell you, Monsieur. The young lady, the one in white, she telephoned at once when she got here. Then she went to leave her cloak and while she was doing that the other lady came out of the cloakroom and went into the telephone box."

"So the Señora did telephone! Was that before she came into the restaurant?"

"Yes, Monsieur."

"Anyone else?"

"No, Monsieur."

"All this, Luigi, gives me furiously to think!"

"Indeed, Monsieur."

"Yes. I think, Luigi, that tonight of all nights, I must have my wits about me! Something is going to happen, Luigi, and I am not at all sure what it is."

"Anything I can do, Monsieur -"

Poirot made a sign. Luigi slipped discreetly away. Stephen Carter was returning to the table.

"We are still deserted, Mr Carter," said Poirot.

"Oh - er - quite," said the other.

"You know Mr Barton Russell well?"

"Yes, known him a good while."

"His sister-in-law, little Miss Weatherby, is very charming."

"Yes, pretty girl."

"You know her well, too?"

"Quite."

"Oh, quite, quite," said Poirot.

Carter stared at him.

The music stopped and the others returned.

Barton Russell said to a waiter:

"Another bottle of champagne - quickly."

Then he raised his glass.

"See here, folks. I'm going to ask you to drink a toast. To tell you the truth, there's an idea back of this little party tonight. As you know, I'd ordered a table for six. There were only five of us. That gave us an empty place. Then, by a very strange coincidence, M. Hercule Poirot happened to pass by and I asked him to join our party.

"You don't know yet what an apt coincidence that was. You see that empty seat tonight represents a lady - the lady in whose memory this party is being given. This party, ladies and gentlemen, is being held in memory of my dear wife - Iris - who died exactly four years ago on this very date!"

There was a startled movement round the table. Barton Russell, his face quietly impassive, raised his glass.

"I'll ask you to drink to her memory. Iris!"

"Iris?" said Poirot sharply.

He looked at the flowers. Barton Russell caught his glance and gently nodded his head.

There were little murmurs round the table.

"Iris - Iris -"

Everyone looked startled and uncomfortable. Barton Russell went on, speaking with his slow monotonous American intonation, each word coming out weightily.

"It may seem odd to you all that I should celebrate the anniversary of a death in this way - by a supper party in a fashionable restaurant. But I have a reason - yes, I have a reason. For M. Poirot's benefit, I'll explain."

He turned his head towards Poirot.

"Four years ago tonight, M. Poirot, there was a supper party held in New York. At it were my wife and myself, Mr Stephen Carter who was attached to the Embassy in Washington, Mr Anthony Chapell who had been a guest in our house for some weeks, and Señora Valdez who was at that time enchanting New York City with her dancing. Little Pauline here -" he patted her shoulder - "was only sixteen but she came to the supper party as a special treat. You remember, Pauline?"

"I remember - yes."

Her voice shook a little. "M. Poirot, on that night a tragedy happened. There was a roll of drums and the cabaret started. The lights went down - all but a spotlight in the middle of the floor. When the lights went up again, M. Poirot, my wife was seen to have fallen forward on the table. She was dead - stone dead. There was potassium cyanide found in the dregs of her wine-glass, and the remains of the packet was discovered in her handbag."

"She had committed suicide?" said Poirot.

"That was the accepted verdict... It broke me up, M. Poirot. There was, perhaps, a possible reason for such an action - the police thought so. I accepted their decision."

He pounded suddenly on the table.

"But I was not satisfied... No, for four years I've been thinking and brooding - and I'm not satisfied: I don't believe Iris killed herself. I believe, M. Poirot, that she was murdered - by one of those people at the table."

"Look here, sir -"

Tony Chapell half sprung to his feet.

"Be quiet, Tony," said Russell. "I haven't finished. One of them did it - I'm sure of that now. Someone who, under cover of the

darkness, slipped the half emptied packet of cyanide into her handbag. I think I know which of them it was. I mean to know the truth -"

Lola's voice rose sharply.

"You are mad - crazee - who would have harmed her? No, you are mad. Me, I will not stay -"

She broke off. There was a roll of drums.

Barton Russell said:

"The cabaret. Afterwards we will go on with this. Stay where you are, all of you. I've got to go and speak to the dance band. Little arrangement I've made with them."

He got up and left the table.

"Extraordinary business," commented Carter. "Man's mad."

"He ees crazee, yes," said Lola.

The lights were lowered.

"For two pins I'd clear out," said Tony.

"No!" Pauline spoke sharply. Then she murmured, "Oh, dear - oh, dear -"

"What is it, Mademoiselle?" murmured Poirot.

She answered almost in a whisper.

"It's horrible! It's just like it was that night -"

"Sh! Sh!" said several people.

Poirot lowered his voice.

"A little word in your ear." He whispered, then patted her shoulder. "All will be well," he assured her.

"My God, listen," cried Lola.

"What is it, Señora?"

"It's the same tune - the same song that they played that night in New York. Barton Russell must have fixed it. I don't like this."

"Courage - courage -"

There was a fresh hush.

A girl walked out into the middle of the floor, a coal black girl with rolling eyeballs and white glistening teeth. She began to sing in a deep hoarse voice - a voice that was curiously moving.

I've forgotten you

I never think of you
The way you walked
The way you talked
The things you used to say
I've forgotten you
I never think of you
I couldn't say
For sure today
Whether your eyes were blue or gray
I've forgotten you
I never think of you.

I'm through
Thinking of you
I tell you I'm through
Thinking of you...
You... you... you...

The sobbing tune, the deep golden negro voice had a powerful effect. It hypnotized - cast a spell. Even the waiters felt it. The whole room stared at her, hypnotized by the thick cloying emotion she distilled.

A waiter passed softly round the table filling up glasses, murmuring "champagne" in an undertone but all attention was on the one glowing spot of light - the black woman whose ancestors came from Africa, singing in her deep voice:

I've forgotten you
I never think of you
Oh, what a lie
I shall think of you, think of you, think of you...
Till I die...

The applause broke out frenziedly. The lights went up. Barton Russell came back and slipped into his seat.

"She's great, that girl -" cried Tony.

But his words were cut short by a low cry from Lola.

"Look - look..."

And then they all saw. Pauline Weatherby dropped forward onto the table.

Lola cried:

"She's dead - just like Iris - like Iris in New York."

Poirot sprang from his seat, signing to the others to keep back. He bent over the huddled form, very gently lifted a limp hand and felt for a pulse.

His face was white and stern. The others watched him. They were paralyzed, held in a trance.

Slowly, Poirot nodded his head.

"Yes, she is dead - la pauvre petite. And I sitting by her! Ah! but this time the murderer shall not escape."

Barton Russell, his face gray, muttered:

"Just like Iris... She saw something - Pauline saw something that night - Only she wasn't sure - she told me she wasn't sure... We must get the police... Oh, God, little Pauline."

Poirot said:

"Where is her glass?" He raised it to his nose. "Yes, I can smell the cyanide. A smell of bitter almonds... the same method, the same poison... "

He picked up her handbag.

"Let us look in her handbag."

Barton Russell cried out:

"You don't believe this is suicide, too? Not on your life."

"Wait," Poirot commanded. "No, there is nothing here. The lights went up, you see, too quickly, the murderer had not time. Therefore, the poison is still on him."

"Or her," said Carter.

He was looking at Lola Valdez.

She spat out:

"What do you mean - what do you say? That I killed her - eet is not true - not true - why should I do such a thing?"

"You had rather a fancy for Barton Russell yourself in New York. That's the gossip I heard. Argentine beauties are notoriously jealous."

"That ees a pack of lies. And I do not come from the Argentine. I come from Peru. Ah - I spit upon you. I -" She relapsed into Spanish.

"I demand silence," cried Poirot. "It is for me to speak."

Barton Russell said heavily:

"Everyone must be searched."

Poirot said calmly,

"Non, non, it is not necessary."

"What d'you mean, not necessary?"

"I, Hercule Poirot, know. I see with the eyes of the mind. And I will speak! M. Carter, will you show us the packet in your breast pocket?"

"There's nothing in my pocket. What the hell -"

"Tony, my good friend, if you will be so obliging."

Carter cried out:

"Damn you -"

Tony flipped the packet neatly out before Carter could defend himself.

"There you are, M. Poirot, just as you said!"

"It's a damned lie," cried Carter.

Poirot picked up the packet, read the label.

"Cyanide of potassium. The case is complete."

Barton Russell's voice came thickly.

"Carter! I always thought so. Iris was in love with you. She wanted to go away with you. You didn't want a scandal for the sake of your precious career so you poisoned her. You'll hang for this, you dirty dog."

"Silence!" Poirot's voice rang out, firm and authoritative. "This is not finished yet. I, Hercule Poirot, have something to say. My friend here, Tony Chapell, he says to me when I arrive, that I have come in search of crime. That, it is partly true. There was crime in my mind - but it was to prevent a crime that I came. And I have prevented it. The murderer, he planned well - but Hercule Poirot he was one move ahead. He had to think fast, and to whisper quickly in Mademoiselle's ear when the lights went down. She is very quick and clever, Mademoiselle Pauline, she played her part well. Mademoiselle, will you be so kind as to show us that you are not dead after all?"

Pauline sat up. She gave an unsteady laugh.

"Resurrection of Pauline," she said.

"Pauline - darling."

"Tony!"

"My sweet."

"Angel."

Barton Russell gasped.

"I - I don't understand..."

"I will help you to understand, Mr Barton Russell. Your plan has miscarried."

"My plan?"

"Yes, your plan. Who was the only man who had an alibi during the darkness? The man who left the table - you, Mr Barton Russell. But you returned to it under cover of the darkness, circling round it, with a champagne bottle, filling up glasses, putting cyanide in Pauline's glass and dropping the half empty packet in Carter's pocket as you bent over him to remove a glass. Oh, yes, it is easy to play the part of a waiter in darkness when the attention of everyone is elsewhere. That was the real reason for your party tonight. The safest place to commit a murder is in the middle of a crowd."

"What the - why the hell should I want to kill Pauline?"

"It might be, perhaps, a question of money. Your wife left you guardian to her sister. You mentioned that fact tonight. Pauline is twenty. At twenty-one or on her marriage you would have to render an account of your stewardship. I suggest that you could not do that. You have speculated with it. I do not know, Mr Barton Russell, whether you killed your wife in the same way, or whether her suicide suggested the idea of this crime to you, but I do know that tonight you have been guilty of attempted murder. It rests with Miss Pauline whether you are prosecuted for that."

"No," said Pauline. "He can get out of my sight and out of this country. I don't want a scandal."

"You had better go quickly, Mr Barton Russell, and I advise you to be careful in future."

Barton Russell got up, his face working.

"To hell with you, you interfering little Belgian jackanapes."

He strode out angrily.

Pauline sighed.

"M. Poirot, you've been wonderful... "

"You, Mademoiselle, you have been the marvelous one. To pour away the champagne, to act the dead body so prettily."

"Ugh," she shivered, "you give me the creeps."

He said gently:

"It was you who telephoned me, was it not?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"I don't know. I was worried and - frightened without knowing quite why I was frightened. Barton told me he was having this party to commemorate Iris' death. I realized he had some scheme on - but he wouldn't tell me what it was. He looked so - so queer

and so excited that I felt something terrible might happen - only of course I never dreamed that he meant to - to get rid of me."

"And so, Mademoiselle?"

"I'd heard people talking about you. I thought if I could only get you here perhaps it would stop anything happening. I thought that being foreigner - if I rang up and pretended to be in danger and - and made it sound mysterious -"

"You thought the melodrama, it would attract me? That is what puzzled me. The message itself - definitely it was what you call 'bogus' - it did not ring true. But the fear in the voice - that was real. Then I came - and you denied very categorically having sent me a message."

"I had to. Besides, I didn't want you to know it was me."

"Ah, but I was fairly sure of that! Not at first. But I soon realized that the only two people who could know about the yellow irises on the table were you or Mr Barton Russell."

Pauline nodded.

"I heard him ordering them to be put on the table," she explained. "That, and his ordering a table for six when I knew only five were coming, made me suspect -"

She stopped, biting her lip.

"What did you suspect, Mademoiselle?"

She said slowly:

"I was afraid - of something happening - to Mr Carter."

Stephen Carter cleared his throat. Unhurriedly but quite decisively he rose from the table.

"Er - h'm - I have to - er - thank you, Mr Poirot. I owe you a great deal. You'll excuse I'm sure, if I leave you. Tonight's happenings have been - rather upsetting."

Looking after his retreating figure, Pauline said violently:

"I hate him. I've always thought it was because of him that Iris killed herself. Or perhaps - Barton killed her. Oh, it's all so hateful - "

Poirot said gently:

"Forget, Mademoiselle... forget. Let the past go. Think only of the present -"

Pauline murmured, "Yes - you're right."

Poirot turned to Lola Valdez.

"Señora, as the evening advances I become more brave. If you would dance with me..."

"Oh, yes, indeed. You are - you are ze cat's whiskers, M. Poirot. I inseest on dancing with you."

"You are too kind, Señora."

Tony and Pauline were alone. They leant towards each other across the table.

"Darling Pauline."

"Tony, I've been a nasty spiteful little cat to you all evening. Can you ever forgive me?"

"My angel! They're playing our song again. Let's dance."

They danced off, smiling at each other and humming softly:

There's nothing like Love for making you miserable
There's nothing like Love for making you blue
Depressed
Possessed
Sentimental
Temperamental
There's nothing like Love,
To sweep you off your feet

There's nothing like Love for driving you crazy
There's nothing like Love for making you mad
Abusive

Allusive
Suicidal
Homicidal
There's nothing like Love...
There's nothing like Love...

THE HARLEQUIN TEA SET

Mr. Satterthwaite clucked twice in vexation. Whether right in his assumption or not, he was more and more convinced that cars nowadays broke down far more frequently than they used to do. The only cars he trusted were old friends who had survived the test of time. They had their little idiosyncrasies, but you knew about those, provided for them, fulfilled their wants before the demand became too acute. But new cars! Full of new gadgets, different kinds of windows, an instrument panel newly and differently arranged, handsome in its glistening wood, but being unfamiliar, your groping hand hovered uneasily over fog lights, windshield wipers, the choke, etcetera. All these things with knobs in a place where you didn't expect them. And when your gleaming new purchase failed in performance, your local garage uttered the intensely irritating words: "Teething troubles. Splendid car, sir, these roadsters Super Superbos. All the latest accessories. But bound to have their teething troubles, you know. Ha, ha." Just as though a car was a baby.

But Mr. Satterthwaite, being now of an advanced age, was strongly of the opinion that a new car ought to be fully adult. Tested, inspected, and its teething troubles already dealt with before it came into its purchaser's possession.

Mr. Satterthwaite was on his way to pay a weekend visit to friends in the country. His new car had already, on the way from London, given certain symptoms of discomfort, and was now drawn up in a garage waiting for the diagnosis, and how long it would take before he could resume progress towards his destination. His chauffeur was in consultation with a mechanic. Mr. Satterthwaite sat, striving for patience. He had assured his hosts, on the telephone the night before, that he would be arriving in good time for tea. He would reach Doverton Kingsbourne, he assured them, well before four o'clock.

He clucked again in irritation and tried to turn his thoughts to something pleasant. It was no good sitting here in a state of acute irritation, frequently consulting his wristwatch, clucking once more and giving, he had to realize, a very good imitation of a hen pleased with its prowess in laying an egg.

Yes. Something pleasant. Yes, now hadn't there been something - something he had noticed as they were driving along. Not very long ago. Something that he had seen through the window which had pleased and excited him. But before he had had time to think about it, the car's misbehaviour had become more pronounced and a rapid visit to the nearest service station had been inevitable.

What was it that he had seen? On the left - no, on the right. Yes, on the right as they drove slowly through the village street. Next door to a post office. Yes, he was quite sure of that. Next door to a post office because the sight of the post office had given him the idea of telephoning to the Addisons to break the news that he might be slightly late in his arrival. The post office. A village post office. And next to it - yes, definitely, next to it, next door or if not next door the door after. Something that had stirred old memories, and he had wanted - just what was it that he had wanted? Oh dear, it would come to him presently. It was mixed up with a colour. Several colours. Yes, a colour or colours. Or a word. Some definite word that had stirred memories, thoughts, pleasures gone by, excitement, recalling something that had been vivid and alive. Something in which he himself had not only seen but observed. No, he had done more. He had taken part. Taken part in what, and why, and where? All sorts of places. The answer came quickly at the last thought. All sorts of places.

On an island? In Corsica? At Monte Carlo watching the croupier spinning his roulette wheel? A house in the country? All sorts of places. And he had been there, and someone else. Yes, someone else. It all tied up with that. He was getting there at last. If he could just... He was interrupted at that moment by the chauffeur coming to the window with the garage mechanic in tow behind him.

"Won't be long now, sir," the chauffeur assured Mr. Satterthwaite cheerfully. "Matter of ten minutes or so. Not more."

"Nothing seriously wrong," said the mechanic, in a low, hoarse, country voice. "Teething troubles, as you might say."

Mr. Satterthwaite did not cluck this time. He gnashed his own teeth. A phrase he had often read in books and which in old age he seemed to have got into the habit of doing himself, due, perhaps, to the slight looseness of his upper plate. Really, teething trouble! Toothache. Teeth gnashing. False teeth. One's whole life centred, he thought, about teeth.

"Doverton Kingsbourne's only a few miles away," said the chauffeur, "and they've a taxi here. You could go on in that, sir, and I'd bring the car along later as soon as it's fixed up."

"No!" said Mr. Satterthwaite.

He said the word explosively, and both the chauffeur and the mechanic looked startled. Mr. Satterthwaite's eyes were sparkling. His voice was clear and decisive. Memory had come to him.

"I propose," he said, "to walk the road we have just come by. When the car is ready, you will pick me up there. The Harlequin Cafe, I think it is called."

"It's not very much of a place, sir," the mechanic advised.

"That is where I shall be," said Mr. Satterthwaite, speaking with a kind of regal autocracy.

He walked off briskly. The two men stared after him.

"Don't know what's got into him," said the chauffeur. "Never seen him like that before."

The village of Kingsbourne Ducis did not live up to the old world grandeur of its name. It was a smallish village consisting of one street. A few houses. Shops that were dotted rather unevenly, sometimes betraying the fact that they were houses which had been turned into shops or that they were shops which now existed as houses without any industrial intentions.

It was not particularly old world or beautiful. It was just simple and rather unobtrusive. Perhaps that was why, thought Mr. Satterthwaite, that a dash of brilliant colour had caught his eye. Ah, here he was at the post office. The post office was a simply functioning post office with a pillar box outside, a display of some newspapers and some postcards, and surely, next to it, yes, there was the sign up above. The Harlequin Cafe. A sudden qualm struck Mr. Satterthwaite. Really, he was getting too old. He had fancies. Why should that one word stir his heart? The Harlequin Cafe.

The mechanic at the service station had been quite right. It did not look like a place in which one would really be tempted to have a meal. A snack, perhaps. A morning coffee. Then why? But he suddenly realized why. Because the cafe, or perhaps one could better put it as the house that sheltered the cafe, was in two portions. One side of it had small tables with chairs round them arranged ready for patrons who came here to eat. But the other side was a shop. A shop that sold china. It was not an antique shop. It had no little shelves of glass vases or mugs. It was a shop

that sold modern goods, and the show window that gave on the street was at the present moment housing every shade of the rainbow. A tea set of largish cups and saucers, each one of a different colour. Blue, red, yellow, green, pink, purple. Really, Mr. Satterthwaite thought, a wonderful show of colour. No wonder it had struck his eye as the car had passed slowly beside the pavement, looking ahead for any sign of a garage or a service station. It was labelled with a large card as "A Harlequin Tea Set."

It was the word 'harlequin' of course which had remained fixed in Mr. Satterthwaite's mind, although just far enough back in his mind so that it had been difficult to recall it. The gay colours. The harlequin colours. And he had thought, wondered, had the absurd but exciting idea that in some way here was a call to him. To him specially. Here, perhaps, eating a meal or purchasing cups and saucers might be his own old friend, Mr. Harley Quin. How many years was it since he had last seen Mr. Quin? A large number of years. Was it the day he had seen Mr. Quin walking away from him down a country lane, Lovers' Lane they had called it? He had always expected to see Mr. Quin again, once a year at least. Possibly twice a year. But no. That had not happened.

And so today he had had the wonderful and surprising idea that here, in the village of Kingsbourne Ducis, he might once again find Mr. Harley Quin.

"Absurd of me," said Mr. Satterthwaite, "quite absurd of me. Really, the ideas one has as one gets old!"

He had missed Mr. Quin. Missed something that had been one of the most exciting things in the late years of his life. Someone who might turn up anywhere and who, if he did turn up, was always an announcement that something was going to happen. Something that was going to happen to him. No, that was not quite right. Not to him, but through him. That was the exciting part. Just from the words that Mr. Quin might utter. Words. Things he might show him, ideas would come to Mr. Satterthwaite. He would see things, he would imagine things, he would find out things. He would deal with something that needed to be dealt with. And opposite him would sit Mr. Quin, perhaps smiling approval. Something that Mr. Quin said would start the flow of ideas, the active person would be he himself. He - Mr. Satterthwaite. The man with so many old friends. A man among whose friends had been duchesses, an occasional bishop, people that counted. Especially, he had to admit, people who had counted in the social world. Because, after all, Mr. Satterthwaite had always been a snob. He had liked duchesses, he had liked knowing old families, families who had represented the landed gentry of England for several generations. And he had had, too, an interest in young people not necessarily socially important. Young people who were in trouble, who were in love, who were unhappy, who needed help. Because of Mr. Quin, Mr. Satterthwaite was enabled to give help.

And now, like an idiot, he was looking into an un-prepossessing village cafe and a shop for modern china and tea sets and casseroles, no doubt.

"All the same," said Mr. Satterthwaite to himself, "I must go in. Now I've been foolish enough to walk back here, I must go in just -

well, just in case. They'll be longer, I expect, doing the car than they say. It will be more than ten minutes. Just in case there is anything interesting inside."

He looked once more at the window full of china. He appreciated suddenly that it was good china. Well made. A good modern product. He looked back into the past, remembering. The Duchess of Leith, he remembered. What a wonderful lady she had been. How kind she had been to her maid on the occasion of a very rough sea voyage to the island of Corsica. She had ministered to her with the kindliness of a ministering angel and only on the next day had she resumed her autocratic, bullying manner, which the domestics of those days had seemed able to stand quite easily without any sign of rebellion.

Maria. Yes, that's what the Duchess's name had been. Dear old Maria Leith. Ah well. She had died some years ago. But she had had a harlequin breakfast set, he remembered. Yes. Big round cups in different colours. Black. Yellow, red, and a particularly pernicious shade of puce. Puce, he thought, must have been a favourite colour of hers. She had had a Rockingham tea set, he remembered, in which the predominating colour had been puce decorated with gold.

"Ah," sighed Mr. Satterthwaite, "those were the days. Well, I suppose I'd better go in. Perhaps order a cup of coffee or something. It will be very full of milk, I expect, and possibly already sweetened. But still, one has to pass the time."

He went in. The cafe side was practically empty. It was early, Mr. Satterthwaite supposed, for people to want cups of tea. And anyway, very few people did want cups of tea nowadays. Except, that is, occasionally elderly people in their own homes. There was a young couple in the far window and two women gossiping at a table against the back wall.

"I said to her," one of them was saying, "I said you can't do that sort of thing. No, it's not the sort of thing that I'll put up with, and I said the same to Henry and he agreed with me."

It shot through Mr. Satterthwaite's mind that Henry must have rather a hard life and that no doubt he had found it always wise to agree, whatever the proposition put up to him might be. A most unattractive woman with a most unattractive friend. He turned his attention to the other side of the building, murmuring, "May I just look round?"

There was quite a pleasant woman in charge and she said, "Oh yes, sir. We've got a good stock at present."

Mr. Satterthwaite looked at the coloured cups, picked up one or two of them, examined the milk jug, picked up a china zebra and considered it, examined some ashtrays of a fairly pleasing pattern. He heard chairs being pushed back and turning his head, noted that the two middle-aged women still discussing former grievances had paid their bill and were now leaving the shop. As they went out of the door, a tall man in a dark suit came in. He sat down at the table which they had just vacated. His back was to Mr. Satterthwaite, who thought that he had an attractive back. Lean,

strong, well-muscled but rather dark and sinister looking because there was very little light in the shop. Mr. Satterthwaite looked back again at the ashtrays. "I might buy an ashtray so as not to cause a disappointment to the shop owner," he thought. As he did so, the sun came out suddenly.

He had not realized that the shop had looked dim because of the lack of sunshine. The sun must have been under a cloud for some time. It had clouded over, he remembered, at about the time they had got to the service station. But now there was this sudden burst of sunlight. It caught up the colours of the china and through a coloured glass window of somewhat ecclesiastical pattern which must, Mr. Satterthwaite thought, have been left over from the original Victorian house. The sun came through the window and lit up the dingy cafe. In some curious way it lit up the back of the man who had just sat down there. Instead of a dark black silhouette, there was now a festoon of colours. Red and blue and yellow. And suddenly Mr. Satterthwaite realized that he was looking at exactly what he had hoped to find. His intuition had not played him false. He knew who it was who had just come in and sat down there. He knew so well that he had no need to wait until he could look at the face. He turned his back on the china, went back into the cafe, round the corner of the round table and sat down opposite the man who had just come in.

"Mr. Quin," said Mr. Satterthwaite. "I knew somehow it was going to be you."

Mr. Quin smiled.

"You always know so many things," he said.

"It's a long time since I've seen you," said Mr. Satterthwaite.

"Does time matter?" said Mr. Quin.

"Perhaps not. You may be right. Perhaps not."

"May I offer you some refreshment?"

"Is there any refreshment to be had?" said Mr. Satterthwaite doubtfully. "I suppose you must have come in for that purpose."

"One is never quite sure of one's purpose, is one?" said Mr. Quin.

"I am so pleased to see you again," said Mr. Satterthwaite. "I'd almost forgotten, you know. I mean forgotten the way you talk, the things you say. The things you make me think of, the things you make me do."

"I - make you do? You are so wrong. You have always known yourself just what you wanted to do and why you want to do it and why you know so well that they have to be done."

"I only feel that when you are here."

"Oh no," said Mr. Quin lightly. "I have nothing to do with it. I am just - as I've often told you - I am just passing by. That is all."

"Today you are passing by through Kingsbourne Ducis."

"And you are not passing by. You are going to a definite place. Am I right?"

"I am going to see a very old friend. A friend I have not seen for a good many years. He's old now. Somewhat crippled. He has had one stroke. He has recovered from it quite well, but one never knows."

"Does he live by himself?"

"Not now, I am glad to say. His family have come back from abroad, what is left of his family that is. They have been living with him now for some months. I am glad to be able to come and see them again all together. Those, that's to say, that I have seen before, and those that I have not seen."

"You mean children?"

"Children and grandchildren." Mr. Satterthwaite sighed. Just for a moment he was sad that he had had no children and no grandchildren and no great-grandchildren himself. He did not usually regret it at all.

"They have some special Turkish coffee here," said Mr. Quin. "Really good of its kind. Everything else is, as you have guessed, rather unpalatable. But one can always have a cup of Turkish coffee, can one not? Let us have one because I suppose you will soon have to get on with your pilgrimage, or whatever it is."

In the doorway came a small black dog. He came and sat down by the table and looked up at Mr. Quin.

"Your dog?" said Mr. Satterthwaite.

"Yes. Let me introduce you to Hermes." He stroked the black dog's head. "Coffee," he said. "Tell Ali."

The black dog walked from the table through a door at the back of the shop. They heard him give a short, incisive bark. Presently he reappeared and with him came a young man with a very dark complexion, wearing an emerald green pullover.

"Coffee, Ali," said Mr. Quin. "Two coffees."

"Turkish coffee. That's right, isn't it, sir?" He smiled and disappeared.

The dog sat down again.

"Tell me," said Mr. Satterthwaite, "tell me where you've been and what you have been doing and why I have not seen you for so long."

"I have just told you that time really means nothing. It is clear in my mind and I think it is clear in yours the occasion when we last met."

"A very tragic occasion," said Mr. Satterthwaite. "I do not really like to think of it."

"Because of death? But death is not always a tragedy. I have told you that before."

"No," said Mr. Satterthwaite, "perhaps that death - the one we are both thinking of - was not a tragedy. But all the same..."

"But all the same it is life that really matters. You are quite right, of course," said Mr. Quin. "Quite right. It is life that matters. We do not want someone young, someone who is happy, or could be happy, to die. Neither of us wants that, do we. That is the reason why we must always save a life when the command comes."

"Have you got a command for me?"

"Me - command for you?" Harley Quin's long, sad face brightened into its peculiarly charming smile. "I have no commands for you, Mr. Satterthwaite. I have never had commands. You yourself know things, see things, know what to do, do them. It has nothing to do with me."

"Oh yes, it has," said Mr. Satterthwaite. "You're not going to change my mind on that point. But tell me. Where have you been during what it is too short to call time?"

"Well, I have been here and there. In different countries, different climates, different adventures. But mostly, as usual, just passing by. I think it is more for you to tell me not only what you have been doing but what you are going to do now. More about where you

are going. Who you are going to meet. Your friends, what they are like."

"Of course I will tell you. I should enjoy telling you because I have been wondering, thinking you know about these friends I am going to. When you have not seen a family for a long time, when you have not been closely connected with them for many years, it is always a nervous moment when you are going to resume old friendships and old ties."

"You are so right," said Mr. Quin.

The Turkish coffee was brought in little cups of oriental pattern. Ali placed them with a smile and departed. Mr. Satterthwaite sipped approvingly.

"As sweet as love, as black as night and as hot as hell. That is the old Arab phrase, isn't it?"

Harley smiled over his shoulder and nodded.

"Yes," said Mr. Satterthwaite, "I must tell you where I am going, though what I am doing hardly matters. I am going to renew old friendships, to make acquaintance with the younger generation. Tom Addison, as I have said, is a very old friend of mine. We did many things together in our young days. Then, as often happens, life parted us. He was in the Diplomatic Service, went abroad for several foreign posts in turn. Some times I went and stayed with him, sometimes I saw him when he was home in England. One of

his early posts was in Spain. He married a Spanish girl, a very beautiful, dark girl called Pilar. He loved her very lunch."

"They had children?"

"Two daughters. A fair-haired baby like her father, called Lily, and a second daughter, Maria, who took after her Spanish mother. I was Lily's godfather. Naturally, I did not see either of the children very often. Two or three times a year I either gave a party for Lily or went to see her at her school. She was a sweet and lovely person. Very devoted to her father and he was very devoted to her. But in between these meetings, these revivals of friendship, we went through some difficult times. You will know about it as well as I do. I and my contemporaries had difficulties in meeting through the war years. Lily married a pilot in the Air Force. A fighter pilot. Until the other day I had even forgotten his name. Simon Gilliatt. Squadron Leader Gilliatt."

"He was killed in the war?"

"No, no. No. He came through safely. After the war he resigned from the Air Force and he and Lily went out to Kenya as so many did. They settled there and they lived very happily. They had a son, a little boy called Roland. Later when he was at school in England I saw him once or twice. The last time, I think, was when he was twelve years old. A nice boy. He had red hair like his father. I've not seen him since so I am looking forward to seeing him today. He is twenty-three - twenty-four now. Time goes on so."

"Is he married?"

"No. Well, not yet."

"Ah. Prospects of marriage?"

"Well, I wondered from something Tom Addison said in his letter. There is a girl cousin. The younger daughter, Maria, married the local doctor. I never knew her very well. It was rather sad. She died in childbirth. Her little girl was called Inez, a family name chosen by her Spanish grandmother. As it happens I have seen Inez only once since she grew up. A dark, Spanish type very much like her grandmother. God! I am boring you with all this."

"No. I want to hear it. It is very interesting to me."

"I wonder why," said Mr. Satterthwaite.

He looked at Mr. Quin with that flight air of suspicion which sometimes came to him.

"You want to know all about this family. Why?"

"So that I can picture it, perhaps, in my mind."

"Well, this house I am going to, Doverton Kingsbourne it is called. It is quite a beautiful old house. Not so spectacular as to invite tourists or to be open to visitors on special days. Just a quiet country house to live in by an Englishman who has served his country and comes back to enjoy a mellow life when the age of retirement comes. Tom was always fond of country life. He

enjoyed fishing. He was a good shot and we had very happy days together in his family home of his boyhood. I spent many of my own holidays as a boy at Doverton Kingsbourne. And all through my life I have had that image in my mind. No place like Doverton Kingsbourne. No other house to touch it. Every time I drove near it I would make a detour and just pass to see the view through a gap in the trees of the long lane that runs in front of the house, glimpses of the river where we used to fish, and of the house itself. And I would remember all the things that Tom and I did together. He has been a man of action. A man who has done things. And I - I have just been an old bachelor."

"You have been more than that," said Mr. Quin. "You have been a man who made friends, who had many friends and who has served his friends well."

"Well, if I can think that. Perhaps you are being too kind."

"Not at all. You are very good company besides. The stories you can tell, the things you've seen, the places you have visited. The curious things that have happened in your life. You could write a whole book on them," said Mr. Quin.

"I should make you the main character in it if I did."

"No, you would not," said Mr. Quin. "I am the one who passes by. That is all. But go on. Tell me more."

"Well, this is just a family chronicle that I'm telling you. As I say, there were long periods, years of time when I did not see any of

them. But they have been always my old friends. I saw Tom and Pilar until the time when Pilar died - she died rather young, unfortunately - Lily, my godchild, Inez, the quiet doctor's daughter, who lives in the village with her father... "

"How old is the daughter?"

"Inez is nineteen or twenty, I think. I shall be glad to make friends with her."

"So it is on the whole a happy chronicle?"

"Not entirely. Lily, my godchild - the one who went to Kenya with her husband - was killed there in an automobile accident. She was killed outright, leaving behind her a baby of barely a year old, little Roland. Simon, her husband, was quite broken-hearted. They were an unusually happy couple. However, the best thing happened to him that could happen, I suppose. He married again, a young woman who was the widow of a squadron leader, a friend of his and who also had been left with a baby the same age. Little Timothy and little Roland had only two or three months in age between them. Simon's marriage, I believe, has been quite happy enough though I've not seen them, of course, because they continued to live in Kenya. The boys were brought up like brothers. They went to the same school in England and spent their holidays usually in Kenya. I have not seen them, of course, for many years. Well, you know what has happened in Kenya. Some people have managed to stay on. Some people, friends of mine, have gone to Western Australia and have settled again happily there with their families. Some have come home to this country.

"Simon Gilliatt and his wife and their two children left Kenya. It was not the same to them and so they came home and accepted the invitation that has always been given them and renewed every year by old Tom Addison. They have come, his son-in-law, his son-in-law's second wife, and the two children, now grown-up boys, or rather, young men. They have come to live as a family there and they are happy. Tom's other grandchild, Inez Horton, as I told you, lives in the village with her father, the doctor, and she spends a good deal of her time, I gather, at Doverton Kingsbourne with Tom Addison, who is very devoted to his granddaughter. They sound all very happy together there. He has urged me several times to come there and see. Meet them all again. And so I accepted the invitation. Just for a weekend. It will be sad in some ways to see dear old Tom again, somewhat crippled, with perhaps not a very long expectation of life but still cheerful and gay, as far as I can make out. And to see also the old house again. Doverton Kingsbourne. Tied up with all my boyish memories. When one has not lived a very eventful life, when nothing has happened to one personally, and that is true of me, the things that remain with you are the friends, the houses, and the things you did as a child and a boy and a young man. There is only one thing that worries me."

"You should not be worried. What is it that worries you?"

"That I might be - disappointed. The house one remembers, one has dreams of, when one might come to see it again it would not be as you remembered it or dreamed it. A new wing would have been added, the garden would have been altered, all sorts of

things can have happened to it. It is a very long time, really, since I have been there."

"I think your memories will go with you," said Mr. Quin. "I am glad you are going there."

"I have an idea," said Mr. Satterthwaite. "Come with me. Come with me on this visit. You need not fear that you'll not be welcome. Dear Tom Addison is the most hospitable fellow in the world. Any friend of mine would immediately be a friend of his. Come with me. You must. I insist."

Making an impulsive gesture, Mr. Satterthwaite nearly knocked his coffee cup off the table. He caught it just in time.

At that moment the shop door was pushed open, ringing its old-fashioned bell as it did so. A middle-aged woman came in. She was slightly out of breath and looked somewhat hot. She was good-looking still, with a head of auburn hair only just touched here and there with grey. She had that clear ivory-coloured skin that so often goes with reddish hair and blue eyes, and she had kept her figure well. The newcomer swept a quick glance round the cafe and turned immediately into the china shop.

"Oh!" she exclaimed, "you've still got some of the Harlequin cups."

"Yes, Mrs. Gilliatt, we had a new stock arrive in yesterday."

"Oh, I'm so pleased. I really have been very worried. I rushed down here. I took one of the boys' motorbikes. They'd gone off

somewhere and I couldn't find either of them. But I really had to do something. There was an unfortunate accident this morning with some of the cups and we've got people arriving for tea and a party this afternoon. So if you can give me a blue and a green and perhaps I'd better have another red one as well in case. That's the worst of these different-coloured cups, isn't it?"

"Well, I know they do say as it's a disadvantage and you can't always replace the particular colour you want."

Mr. Satterthwaite's head had gone over his shoulder now and he was looking with some interest at what was going on. Mrs. Gilliatt, the shop woman had said. But of course. He realized it now. This must be - he rose from his seat, half hesitating, and then took a step or two into the shop.

"Excuse me," he said, "but are you - are you Mrs. Gilliatt from Doverton Kingsbourne?"

"Oh yes. I am Beryl Gilliatt. Do you - I mean...?"

She looked at him, wrinkling her brows a little. An attractive woman, Mr. Satterthwaite thought. Rather a hard face, perhaps, but competent. So this was Simon Gilliatt's second wife. She hadn't got the beauty of Lily, but she seemed an attractive woman, pleasant and efficient.

Suddenly a smile came to Mrs. Gilliatt's face.

"I do believe... yes, of course. My father-in-law, Tom has got a photograph of you and you must be the guest we are expecting this afternoon. You must be Mr. Satterthwaite."

"Exactly," said Mr. Satterthwaite. "That is who I am. But I shall have to apologize very much for being so much later in arriving than I said. But unfortunately my car has had a breakdown. It's in the garage now, being attended to."

"Oh, how miserable for you. But what a shame. But it's not tea time yet. Don't worry. We've put it off anyway. As you probably heard, I ran down to replace a few cups which unfortunately got swept off the table this morning. Whenever one has anyone to lunch or tea or dinner, something like that always happens."

"There you are, Mrs. Gilliatt," said the woman in the shop. I'll wrap them up in here. Shall I put them in a box for you?"

"No, if you'll just put some paper around them and put them in this shopping bag of mine, they'll be quite all right that way."

"If you are returning to Doverton Kingsbourne," said Mr. Satterthwaite, "I could give you a lift in my car. It will be arriving from the garage any moment now."

"That's very kind of you. I wish really I could accept. But I've simply got to take the motorbike back. The boys will be miserable without it. They're going somewhere this evening."

"Let me introduce you," said Mr. Satterthwaite. He turned towards Mr. Quin, who had risen to his feet and was now standing quite near. "This is an old friend of mine, Mr. Harley Quin, whom I have just happened to run across here. I've been trying to persuade him to come along to Doverton Kingsbourne. Would it be possible, do you think, for Tom to put up yet another guest for tonight?"

"Oh, I'm sure it would be quite all right," said Beryl Gilliatt. "I'm sure he'd be delighted to see another friend of yours. Perhaps it's a friend of his as well."

"No," said Mr. Quin, "I've never met Mr. Addison, though I've often heard my friend Mr. Satterthwaite speak of him."

"Well then, do let Mr. Satterthwaite bring you. We should be delighted."

"I am very sorry," said Mr. Quin. "Unfortunately, I have another engagement. Indeed" - he looked at his watch - "I must start for it immediately. I am late already, which is what comes of meeting old friends."

"Here you are, Mrs. Gilliatt," said the saleswoman. "It'll be quite all right, I think, in your bag."

Beryl Gilliatt put the parcel carefully into the bag she was carrying, then said to Mr. Satterthwaite:

"Well, see you presently. Tea isn't until quarter past five, so don't worry. I'm so pleased to meet you at last, having heard so much about you always, both from Simon and from my father-in-law."

She said a hurried good-bye to Mr. Quin and went out of the shop.

"Bit of a hurry she's in, isn't she?" said the shop woman, "but she's always like that. Gets through a lot in a day, I'd say."

The sound of the motor bicycle outside was heard as it revved up.

"Quite a character, isn't she?" said Mr. Satterthwaite.

"It would seem so," said Mr. Quin.

"And I really can't persuade you?"

"I'm only passing by," said Mr. Quin.

"And when shall I see you again? I wonder now."

"Oh, it will not be very long," said Mr. Quin. "I think you will recognize me when you do see me."

"Have you nothing more - nothing more to tell me? Nothing more to explain?"

"To explain what?"

"To explain why I have met you here."

"You are a man of considerable knowledge," said Mr. Quin. "One word might mean something to you. I think it would and it might come in useful."

"What word?"

"Daltonism," said Mr. Quin. He smiled.

"I don't think - " Mr. Satterthwaite frowned for a moment. "Yes. Yes, I do know, only just for the moment I can't remember..."

"Goodbye for the present," said Mr. Quin. "Here is your car."

At that moment the car was indeed pulling up by the post office door. Mr. Satterthwaite went out to it. He was anxious not to waste more time and keep his hosts waiting longer than need be. But he was sad all the same at saying good-bye to his friend.

"There is nothing I can do for you?" he said, and his tone was almost wistful.

"Nothing you can do for me."

"For someone else?"

"I think so. Very likely."

"I hope I know what you mean."

"I have the utmost faith in you," said Mr. Quin. "You always know things. You are very quick to observe and to know the meaning of things. You have not changed, I assure you."

His hand rested for a moment on Mr. Satterthwaite's shoulder, then he walked out and proceeded briskly down the village street in the opposite direction to Doverton Kingsbourne. Mr. Satterthwaite got into his car.

"I hope we shan't have any more trouble," he said.

His chauffeur reassured him. "It's no distance from here, sir. Three or four miles at most, and she's running beautifully now."

He ran the car a little way along the street and turned where the road widened so as to return the way he had just come. He said again, "Only three or four miles."

Mr. Satterthwaite said again, "Daltonism." It still didn't mean anything to him, but yet he felt it should. It was a word he'd heard used before.

"Doverton Kingsbourne," said Mr. Satterthwaite to himself. He said it very softly under his breath. The two words still meant to him what they had always meant. A place of joyous reunion, a place where he couldn't get there too quickly. A place where he was going to enjoy himself, even though so many of those whom he had known would not be there any longer. But Tom would be there. His old friend Tom, and he thought again of the grass and

the lake and the river and the things they had done together as boys.

Tea was set out upon the lawn. Steps led out from the French windows in the drawing room and down to where a big copper beech at one side and a cedar of Lebanon on the other made the setting for the afternoon scene. There were two painted and carved white tables and various garden chairs. Upright ones with coloured cushions, and lounging ones where you could lean back and stretch your feet out and sleep, if you wished to do so. Some of them had hoods over them to guard you from the sun.

It was a beautiful early evening and the green of the grass was a soft deep colour. The golden light came through the copper beech and the cedar showed the lines of its beauty against a soft pinkish-golden sky.

Tom Addison was waiting for his guest in a long basket chair, his feet up, Mr. Satterthwaite noted with some amusement what he remembered from many other occasions of meeting his host, he had comfortable bedroom slippers suited to his slightly swollen gouty feet, and the shoes were odd ones. One red and one green. Good old Tom, thought Mr. Satterthwaite, he hasn't changed. Just the same. And he thought, "What an idiot I am. Of course I know what the word meant. Why didn't I think of it at once?"

"Thought you were never going to turn up, you old devil," said Tom Addison.

He was still a handsome old man, a broad face with deep-set twinkling grey eyes, shoulders that were still square and gave him a look of power. Every line in his face seemed a line of good humour and affectionate welcome. "He never changes," thought Mr. Satterthwaite.

"Can't get up to greet you," said Tom Addison. "Takes two strong men and a stick to get me on my feet. Now, do you know our little crowd, or don't you? You know Simon, of course."

"Of course I do. It's a good few years since I've seen you, but you haven't changed much."

Squadron Leader Simon Gilliatt was a lean, handsome man with a mop of red hair.

"Sorry you never came to see us when we were in Kenya," he said. "You'd have enjoyed yourself. Lots of things we could have shown you. Ah well, one can't see what the future may bring. I thought I'd lay my bones in that country."

"We've got a very nice churchyard here," said Tom Addison. "Nobody's ruined our church yet by restoring it and we haven't very much new building round about so there's plenty of room in the churchyard still. We haven't had one of these terrible additions of a new intake of graves."

"What a gloomy conversation you're having," said Beryl Gilliatt, smiling. "These are our boys," she said, "but you know them already, don't you, Mr. Satterthwaite?"

"I don't think I'd have known them now," said Mr. Satterthwaite.

Indeed, the last time he had seen the two boys was on a day when he had taken them out from their prep school. Although there was no relationship between them - they had different fathers and mothers - the boys could have been, and often were, taken for brothers. They were about the same height and they both had red hair. Roland, presumably, having inherited it from his father and Timothy from his auburn-haired mother. There seemed also to be a kind of comradeship between them. Yet really, Mr. Satterthwaite thought, they were very different. The difference was clearer now when they were, he supposed, between twenty-two and twenty-five years old. He could see no resemblance in Roland to his grandfather. Nor apart from his red hair did he look like his father.

Mr. Satterthwaite had wondered sometimes whether the boy would look like Lily, his dead mother. But there again he could see little resemblance. If anything, Timothy looked more as a son of Lily's might have looked. The fair skin and the high forehead and a delicacy of bone structure. At his elbow, a soft deep voice said,

"I'm Inez. I don't expect you remember me. It was quite a long time ago when I saw you."

A beautiful girl, Mr. Satterthwaite thought at once. A dark type. He cast his mind back a long way to the days when he had come to be best man at Tom Addison's wedding to Pilar. She showed her Spanish blood, he thought, the carriage of her head and the dark aristocratic beauty. Her father, Dr. Horton, was standing just

behind her. He looked much older than when Mr. Satterthwaite had seen him last. A nice man and kindly. A good general practitioner, unambitious but reliable and devoted, Mr. Satterthwaite thought, to his daughter. He was obviously immensely proud of her.

Mr. Satterthwaite felt an enormous happiness creeping over him. All these people, he thought, although some of them strange to him, seemed like friends he had already known. The dark beautiful girl, the two red-haired boys, Beryl Gilliatt, fussing over the tea tray, arranging cups and saucers, beckoning to a maid from the house to bring out cakes and plates of sandwiches. A splendid tea. There were chairs that pulled up to the tables so that you could sit comfortably eating all you wanted to eat. The boys settled themselves, inviting Mr. Satterthwaite to sit between them.

He was pleased at that. He had already planned in his own mind that it was the boys he wanted to talk to first, to see how much they recalled to him Tom Addison in the old days, and he thought, "Lily. How I wish Lily could be here now." Here he was, thought Mr. Satterthwaite, here he was back in his boyhood. Here where he had come and been welcomed by Tom's father and mother, an aunt or so, too, there had been, and a great-uncle and cousins. And now, well, there were not so many in this family, but it was a family. Tom in his bedroom slippers, one red, one green, old but still merry and happy. Happy in those who were spread round him. And here was Doverton just, or almost just, as it had been. Not quite so well kept up, perhaps, but the lawn was in good condition. And down there he could see the gleam of the river through the trees and the trees, too. More trees than there had been. And the

house needing, perhaps, another coat of paint but not too badly. After all, Tom Addison was a rich man. Well provided for, owning a large quantity of land. A man with simple tastes who spent enough to keep his place up but was not a spendthrift in other ways. He seldom travelled or went abroad nowadays, but he entertained. Not big parties, just friends. Friends who came to stay, friends who usually had some connections going back into the past. A friendly house.

He turned a little in his chair, drawing it away from the table and turning it sideways so that he could see better the view down to the river. Down there was the mill, of course, and beyond the other side there were fields. And in one of the fields, it amused him to see a kind of scarecrow, a dark figure on which birds were settling on the straw. Just for a moment he thought it looked like Mr. Harley Quin. Perhaps, thought Mr. Satterthwaite, it is my friend Mr. Quin. It was an absurd idea, and yet if someone had piled up the scarecrow and tried to make it look like Mr. Quin, it could have had the sort of slender elegance that was foreign to most scarecrows one saw.

"Are you looking at our scarecrow?" said Timothy. "We've got a name for him, you know. We call him Mister Harley Barley."

"Do you indeed," said Mr. Satterthwaite. "Dear me, I find that very interesting."

"Why do you find it interesting?" said Roly, with some curiosity.

"Well, because it rather resembles someone that I know, whose name happens to be Harley. His first name, that is."

The boys began singing, "Harley Barley stands on guard, Harley Barley takes things hard. Guards the ricks and guards the hay, Keeps the trespassers away."

"Cucumber sandwich, Mr. Satterthwaite?" said Beryl Gilliatt, "or do you prefer a home-made pâté?"

Mr. Satterthwaite accepted the home-made pâté. She deposited by his side a puce cup, the same colour as he had admired in the shop. How gay it looked, all that tea set on the table. Yellow, red, blue, green, and all the rest of it. He wondered if each one had his favourite colour. Timothy, he noticed, had a red cup, Roland had a yellow one. Beside Timothy's cup was an object Mr. Satterthwaite could not at first identify. Then he saw it was a meerschaum pipe. It was years since Mr. Satterthwaite had thought of or seen a meerschaum pipe. Roland, noticing what he was looking at, said, "Tim brought that back from Germany when he went. He's killing himself with cancer smoking his pipe all the time."

"Don't you smoke, Roland?"

"No. I'm not one for smoking. I don't smoke cigarettes and I don't smoke pot either."

Inez came to the table and sat down on the other side of him. Both the young men pressed food upon her. They started a laughing conversation together.

Mr. Satterthwaite felt very happy among these young people. Not that they took very much notice of him apart from their natural politeness. But he liked hearing them. He liked, too, making up his judgement about them. He thought, he was almost sure, that both the young men were in love with Inez. Well, it was not surprising. Propinquity brings these things about. They had come to live here with their grandfather. A beautiful girl, Roland's first cousin, was living almost next door. Mr. Satterthwaite turned his head. He could just see the house through the trees where it poked up from the road just beyond the front gate. That was the same house that Dr. Horton had lived in last time he came here, seven or eight years ago.

He looked at Inez. He wondered which of the two young men she preferred or whether her affections were already engaged elsewhere. There was no reason why she should not fall in love with one of these two attractive young specimens of the male race.

Having eaten as much as he wanted - it was not very much - Mr. Satterthwaite drew his chair back, altering its angle a little so that he could look all round him.

Mrs. Gilliatt was still busy. Very much the housewife, he thought, making perhaps rather more of a fuss than she need of domesticity. Continually offering people cakes, taking their cups away and replenishing them, handing things round. Somehow, he thought, it would be more pleasant and more informal if she let

people help themselves. He wished she was not so busy a hostess.

He looked up to the place where Tom Addison lay stretched out in his chair. Tom Addison was also watching Beryl Gilliatt. Mr. Satterthwaite thought to himself: "He doesn't like her. No. Tom doesn't like her. Well, perhaps that's to be expected." After all, Beryl had taken the place of his own daughter, of Simon Gilliatt's first wife, Lily. "My beautiful Lily," thought Mr. Satterthwaite again, and wondered why for some reason he felt that although he could not see anyone like her, Lily in some strange way was here. She was here at this tea party.

"I suppose one begins to imagine these things as one gets old," said Mr. Satterthwaite to himself. "After all, why shouldn't Lily be here to see her son."

He looked affectionately at Timothy and then suddenly realized that he was not looking at Lily's son. Roland was Lily's son. Timothy was Beryl's son.

"I believe Lily knows I'm here. I believe she'd like to speak to me," said Mr. Satterthwaite. "Oh dear, oh dear, I mustn't start imagining foolish things."

For some reason he looked again at the scarecrow. It didn't look like a scarecrow now. It looked like Mr. Harley Quin. Some tricks of the light, of the sunset, were providing it with colour, and there was a black dog like Hermes chasing the birds.

"Colour," said Mr. Satterthwaite, and looked again at the table and the tea set and the people having tea. "Why am I here?" said Mr. Satterthwaite. "Why am I here and what ought I to be doing? There's a reason..."

Now he knew, he felt, there was something, some crisis, something affecting - affecting all these people or only some of them? Beryl Gilliatt, Mrs. Gilliatt. She was nervous about something. On edge. Tom? Nothing wrong with Tom. He wasn't affected. A lucky man to own this beauty, to own Doverton and to have a grandson so that when he died all this would come to Roland. All this would be Roland's. Was Tom hoping that Roland would marry Inez? Or would he have a fear of first cousins marrying? Though throughout history, Mr. Satterthwaite thought, brothers had married sisters with no ill result. "Nothing must happen," said Mr. Satterthwaite, "nothing must happen. I must prevent it."

Really, his thoughts were the thoughts of a madman. A peaceful scene. A tea set. The varying colours of the Harlequin cups. He looked at the white meerschaum pipe lying against the red of the cup. Beryl Gilliatt said something to Timothy. Timothy nodded, got up and went off towards the house. Beryl removed some empty plates from the table, adjusted a chair or two, murmured something to Roland, who went across and offered a frosted cake to Dr. Horton.

Mr. Satterthwaite watched her. He had to watch her. The sweep of her sleeve as she passed the table. He saw a red cup get pushed off the table. It broke on the iron feet of a chair. He heard her little

exclamation as she picked up the bits. She went to the tea tray, came back and placed on the table a pale blue cup and saucer. She replaced the meerschaum pipe, putting it close against it. She brought the teapot and poured tea, then she moved away.

The table was untenanted now. Inez also had got up and left it. Gone to speak to her grandfather. "I don't understand," said Mr. Satterthwaite to himself. "Something's going to happen. What's going to happen?"

A table with different-coloured cups round, and - yes, Timothy, his red hair glowing in the sun. Red hair glowing with that same tint, that attractive side-ways wave that Simon Gilliatt's hair had always had. Timothy, coming back, standing a moment, looking at the table with a slightly puzzled eye, then going to where the meerschaum pipe rested against the pale blue cup.

Inez came back then. She laughed suddenly and she said, "Timothy, you're drinking your tea out of the wrong cup. The blue cup's mine. Yours is the red one."

And Timothy said, "Don't be silly, Inez, I know my own cup. It's got sugar in it and you won't like it. Nonsense. This is my cup. The meerschaum's up against it."

It came to Mr. Satterthwaite then. A shock. Was he mad? Was he imagining things? Was any of this real?

He got up. He walked quickly towards the table, and as Timothy raised the blue cup to his lips, he shouted.

"Don't drink that!" he called. "Don't drink it, I say."

Timothy turned a surprised face. Mr. Satterthwaite turned his head. Dr. Horton, rather startled, got up from his seat and was coming near.

"What's the matter, Satterthwaite?"

"That cup. There's something wrong about it," said Mr. Satterthwaite. "Don't let the boy drink from it."

Horton stared at it. "My dear fellow - "

"I know what I'm saying. The red cup was his," said Mr. Satterthwaite, "and the red cup's broken. It's been replaced with a blue one. He doesn't know the red from blue, does he?"

Dr. Horton looked puzzled.

"D'you mean - d'you mean like Tom?"

"Tom Addison. He's colour-blind. You know that, don't you?"

"Oh yes, of course. We all know that. That's why he'd got odd shoes on today. He never knew red from green."

"This boy is the same."

"But - but surely not. Anyway, there's never been any sign of it in - in Roland."

"There might be, though, mightn't there?" said Mr. Satterthwaite. "I'm right in thinking - Daltonism. That's what they call it, don't they?"

"It was a name they used to call it by, yes."

"It's not inherited by a female, but it passes through the female. Lily wasn't colour-blind, but Lily's son might easily be colour-blind."

"But my dear Satterthwaite, Timothy isn't Lily's son. Roly is Lily's son. I know they're rather alike. Same age, same-coloured hair and things, but - well, perhaps you don't remember."

"No," said Mr. Satterthwaite, "I shouldn't have remembered. But I know now. I can see the resemblance too. Roland's Beryl's son. They were both babies, weren't they, when Simon remarried. It is very easy for a woman looking after two babies, especially if both of them were going to have red hair. Timothy's Lily's son and Roland is Beryl's son. Beryl's and Christopher Eden's. There is no reason why he should be colour-blind. I know it, I tell you. I know it!"

He saw Dr. Horton's eyes go from one to the other. Timothy, not catching what they said but standing holding the blue cup and looking puzzled.

"I saw her buy it," said Mr. Satterthwaite. "Listen to me, man. You must listen to me. You've known me for some years. You know that I don't make mistakes if I say a thing positively."

"Quite true. I've never known you to make a mistake."

"Take that cup away from him," said Mr. Satterthwaite. "Take it back to your surgery or take it to an analytic chemist and find out what's in it. I saw that woman buy that cup. She bought it in the village shop. She knew then that she was going to break a red cup, replace it by a blue and that Timothy would never know that the colours were different."

"I think you're mad, Satterthwaite. But all the same I'm going to do what you say."

He advanced on the table, stretched out a hand to the blue cup.

"Do you mind letting me have a look at that?" said Dr. Horton.

"Of course," said Timothy. He looked slightly surprised.

"I think there's a flaw in the china, here, you know. Rather interesting."

Beryl came across the lawn. She came quickly and sharply.

"What are you doing? What's the matter? What is happening?"

"Nothing's the matter," said Dr. Horton, cheerfully. "I just want to show the boys a little experiment I'm going to make with a cup of tea."

He was looking at her very closely and he saw the expression of fear, of terror. Mr. Satterthwaite saw the entire change of countenance.

"Would you like to come with me, Satterthwaite? Just a little experiment, you know. A matter of testing porcelain and different qualities in it nowadays. A very interesting discovery was made lately."

Chatting, he walked along the grass. Mr. Satterthwaite followed him and the two young men, chatting to each other, followed him.

"What's the Doc up to now, Roly?" said Timothy.

"I don't know," said Roland. "He seems to have got some very extraordinary ideas. Oh well, we shall hear about it later, I expect. Let's go and get our bikes."

Beryl Gilliatt turned abruptly. She retraced her steps rapidly up the lawn towards the house.

Tom Addison called to her: "Anything the matter, Beryl?"

"Something I'd forgotten," said Beryl Gilliatt. "That's all."

Tom Addison looked inquiringly towards Simon Gilliatt.

"Anything wrong with your wife?" he said.

"Beryl? Oh no, not that I know of. I expect it's some little thing or other that she's forgotten. Nothing I can do for you, Beryl?" he called.

"No. No, I'll be back later." She turned her head half sideways, looking at the old man lying back in the chair. She spoke suddenly and vehemently. "You silly old fool. You've got the wrong shoes on again today. They don't match. Do you know you've got one shoe that's red and one shoe that's green?"

"Ah, done it again, have I?" said Tom Addison. "They look exactly the same colour to me, you know. It's odd, isn't it, but there it is."

She went past him, her steps quickening.

Presently Mr. Satterthwaite and Dr. Horton reached the gate that led out into the roadway. They heard a motor bicycle speeding along.

"She's gone," said Dr. Horton. "She's run for it. We ought to have stopped her, I suppose. Do you think she'll come back?"

"No," said Mr. Satterthwaite, "I don't think she'll come back. Perhaps," he said thoughtfully, "it's best left that way."

"You mean?"

"It's an old house," said Mr. Satterthwaite. "And an old family. A good family. A lot of good people in it. One doesn't want trouble, scandal, everything brought upon it. Best to let her go, I think."

"Tom Addison never liked her," said Dr. Horton. "Never. He was always polite and kind but he didn't like her."

"And there's the boy to think of," said Mr. Satterthwaite.

"The boy. You mean?"

"The other boy. Roland. This way he needn't know about what his mother was trying to do."

"Why did she do it? Why on earth did she do it?"

"You've no doubt now that she did," said Mr. Satterthwaite.

"No. I've no doubt now. I saw her face, Satterthwaite, when she looked at me. I knew then that what you'd said was truth. But why?"

"Greed, I suppose," said Mr. Satterthwaite. "She hadn't any money of her own, I believe. Her husband, Christopher Eden, was a nice chap by all accounts but he hadn't anything in the way of means. But Tom Addison's grandchild has got big money coming to him. A lot of money. Property all around here has appreciated enormously. I've no doubt that Tom Addison will leave the bulk of what he has to his grandson. She wanted it for her own son and

through her own son, of course, for herself. She is a greedy woman."

Mr. Satterthwaite turned his head back suddenly.

"Something's on fire over there," he said.

"Good lord, so it is. Oh, it's the scarecrow down in the field. Some young chap or other's set fire to it, I suppose. But there's nothing to worry about. There are no ricks or anything anywhere near. It'll just burn itself out."

"Yes," said Mr. Satterthwaite. "Well, you go on, Doctor. You don't need me to help you in your tests."

"I've no doubt of what I shall find. I don't mean the exact substance, but I have come to your belief that this blue cup holds death."

Mr. Satterthwaite had turned back through the gate. He was going now down in the direction where the scarecrow was burning. Behind it was the sunset. A remarkable sunset that evening. Its colours illuminated the air round it, illuminated the burning scarecrow.

"So that's the way you've chosen to go," said Mr. Satterthwaite.

He looked slightly startled then, for in the neighbourhood of the flames he saw the tall, slight figure of a woman. A woman dressed in some pale mother-of-pearl colouring. She was walking in the

direction of Mr. Satterthwaite. He stopped dead, watching.

"Lily," he said. "Lily."

He saw her quite plainly now. It was Lily walking towards him. Too far away for him to see her face but he knew very well who it was. Just for a moment or two he wondered whether anyone else would see her or whether the sight was only for him. He said, not very loud, only in a whisper,

"It's all right, Lily, your son is safe."

She stopped then. She raised one hand to her lips. He didn't see her smile, but he knew she was smiling. She kissed her hand and waved it to him and then she turned. She walked back towards where the scarecrow was disintegrating into a mass of ashes.

"She's going away again," said Mr. Satterthwaite to himself. "She's going away with him. They're walking away together. They belong to the same world, of course. They only come - those sort of people - they only come when it's a case of love or death or both."

He wouldn't see Lily again, he supposed, but he wondered how soon he would meet Mr. Quin again. He turned then and went back across the lawn towards the tea table and the Harlequin tea set, and beyond that, to his old friend Tom Addison. Beryl wouldn't come back. He was sure of it. Doverton Kingsbourne was safe again.

Across the lawn came the small black dog in flying leaps. It came to Mr. Satterthwaite, panting a little and wagging its tail. Through its collar was twisted a scrap of paper. Mr. Satterthwaite stooped and detached it - smoothing it out - on it in coloured letters was written a message:

Congratulations. To Our Next Meeting

H.Q.

"Thank you, Hermes," said Mr. Satterthwaite, and watched the black dog flying across the meadow to rejoin the two figures that he himself knew were here but could no longer see.

THE REGATTA MYSTERY

Mr Isaac Pointz removed a cigar from his lips and said approvingly:

"Pretty little place."

Having thus set the seal of his approval upon Dartmouth harbor, he replaced the cigar and looked about him with the air of a man pleased with himself, his appearance, his surroundings and life generally.

As regards the first of these, Mr Isaac Pointz was a man of fifty-eight, in good health and condition with perhaps a slight tendency to liver. He was not exactly stout, but comfortable-looking, and a yachting costume, which he wore at the moment, is not the most kindly of attires for a middle-aged man with a tendency to embonpoint. Mr Pointz was very well turned out - correct to every crease and button - his dark and slightly Oriental face beaming out under the peak of his yachting cap.

As regards his surroundings, these may have been taken to mean his companions - his partner Mr Leo Stein, Sir George and Lady Marroway, an American business acquaintance Mr Samuel Leathern and his schoolgirl daughter Eve, Mrs Rustington and Evan Llewellyn. The party had just come ashore from Mr Pointz' yacht - the Merrimaid. In the morning they had watched the yacht racing and they had now come ashore to join for a while in the fun of the fair - Coconut shies, Fat Ladies, the Human Spider and the Merry-go-round. It is hardly to be doubted that these delights were relished most by Eve Leathern. When Mr Pointz finally suggested that it was time to adjourn to the Royal George for dinner hers was the only dissentient voice.

"Oh, Mr Pointz - I did so want to have my fortune told by the Real Gypsy in the Caravan."

Mr Pointz had doubts of the essential Realness of the Gypsy in question but he gave indulgent assent.

"Eve's just crazy about the fair," said her father apologetically. "But don't you pay any attention if you want to be getting along."

"Plenty of time," said Mr Pointz benignantly. "Let the little lady enjoy herself. I'll take you on at darts, Leo."

"Twenty-five and over wins a prize," chanted the man in charge of the darts in a high nasal voice.

"Bet you a fiver my total score beats yours," said Pointz.

"Done," said Stein with alacrity.

The two men were soon whole-heartedly engaged in their battle.

Lady Marroway murmured to Evan Llewellyn:

"Eve is not the only child in the party."

Llewellyn smiled assent but somewhat absently. He had been absent-minded all that day. Once or twice his answers had been wide of the point. Pamela Marroway drew away from him and said to her husband:

"That young man has something on his mind."

Sir George murmured:

"Or someone?"

And his glance swept quickly over Janet Rustington. Lady Marroway frowned a little. She was a tall woman exquisitely

groomed. The scarlet of her fingernails was matched by the dark red coral studs in her ears. Her eyes were dark and watchful. Sir George affected a careless "hearty English gentleman" manner - but his bright blue eyes held the same watchful look as his wife's.

Isaac Pointz and Leo Stein were Hatton Garden diamond merchants. Sir George and Lady Marroway came from a different world - the world of Antibes and Juan les Pins - of golf at St Jean de Luz - of bathing from the rocks at Madeira in the winter.

In outward seeming they were as the lilies that toiled not, neither did they spin. But perhaps this was not quite true. There are diverse ways of toiling and also of spinning.

"Here's the kid back again," said Evan Llewellyn to Mrs Rustington.

He was a dark young man - there was a faintly hungry wolfish look about him which some women found attractive.

It was difficult to say whether Mrs Rustington found him so. She did not wear her heart on her sleeve. She had married young - and the marriage had ended in disaster in less than a year. Since that time it was difficult to know what Janet Rustington thought of anyone or anything - her manner was always the same - charming but completely aloof.

Eve Leathern came dancing up to them, her lank fair hair bobbing excitedly. She was fifteen - an awkward child - but full of vitality.

"I'm going to be married by the time I'm seventeen," she exclaimed breathlessly. "To a very rich man and we're going to have six children and Tuesdays and Thursdays are my lucky days and I ought always to wear green or blue and an emerald is my lucky stone and -"

"Why, pet, I think we ought to be getting along," said her father.

Mr Leathern was a tall, fair, dyspeptic-looking man with a somewhat mournful expression.

Mr Pointz and Mr Stein were turning away from the darts. Mr Pointz was chuckling and Mr Stein was looking somewhat rueful.

"It's all a matter of luck," he was saying.

Mr Pointz slapped his pocket cheerfully.

"Took a fiver off you all right. Skill, my boy, skill. My old Dad was a first class dart player. Well, folks, let's be getting along. Had your fortune told, Eve? Did they tell you to beware of a dark man?"

"A dark woman," corrected Eve. "She's got a cast in her eye and she'll be real mean to me if I give her a chance. And I'm to be married by the time I'm seventeen..."

She ran on happily as the party steered its way to the Royal George.

Dinner had been ordered beforehand by the forethought of Mr Pointz and a bowing waiter led them upstairs and into a private room on the first floor. Here a round table was ready laid. The big bulging bow-window opened on the harbor square and was open. The noise of the fair came up to them, and the raucous squeal of three roundabouts each blaring a different tune.

"Best shut that if we're to hear ourselves speak," observed Mr Pointz drily, and suited the action to the word.

They took their seats round the table and Mr Pointz beamed affectionately at his guests. He felt he was doing them well and he liked to do people well. His eye rested on one after another. Lady Marroway - fine woman - not quite the goods, of course, he knew that - he was perfectly well aware that what he had called all his life the crкme de la crкme would have very little to do with the Marroways - but then the crкme de la crкme were supremely unaware of his own existence. Anyway, Lady Marroway was a damned smart-looking woman - and he didn't mind if she did rook him a bit at bridge. Didn't enjoy it quite so much from Sir George. Fishy eye the fellow had. Brazenly on the make. But he wouldn't make too much out of Isaac Pointz. He'd see to that all right.

Old Leathern wasn't a bad fellow - longwinded, of course, like most Americans - fond of telling endless long stories. And he had that disconcerting habit of requiring precise information. What was the population of Dartmouth? In what year had the Naval College been built? And so on. Expected his host to be a kind of walking Baedeker. Eve was a nice cheery kid - he enjoyed chaffing

her. Voice rather like a corncrake, but she had all her wits about her. A bright kid.

Young Llewellyn - he seemed a bit quiet. Looked as though he had something on his mind. Hard up, probably. These writing fellows usually were. Looked as though he might be keen on Janet Rustington. A nice woman - attractive and clever, too. But she didn't ram her writing down your throat. Highbrow sort of stuff she wrote but you'd never think it to hear her talk. And old Leo! He wasn't getting younger or thinner. And blissfully unaware that his partner was at that moment thinking precisely the same thing about him, Mr Pointz corrected Mr Leathern as to pilchards being connected with Devon and not Cornwall, and prepared to enjoy his dinner.

"Mr Pointz," said Eve when plates of hot mackerel had been set before them and the waiters had left the room.

"Yes, young lady."

"Have you got that big diamond with you right now? The one you showed us last night and said you always took about with you?"

Mr Pointz chuckled.

"That's right. My mascot, I call it. Yes, I've got it with me all right."

"I think that's awfully dangerous. Somebody might get it away from you in the crowd at the fair."

"Not they," said Mr Pointz. "I'll take good care of that."

"But they might," insisted Eve. "You've got gangsters in England as well as we have, haven't you?"

"They won't get the Morning Star," said Mr Pointz. "To begin with it's in a special inner pocket. And anyway - old Pointz knows what he's about. Nobody's going to steal the Morning Star."

Eve laughed.

"Ugh-huh - bet I could steal it!"

"I bet you couldn't," Mr Pointz twinkled back at her.

"Well, I bet I could. I was thinking about it last night in bed - after you'd handed it round the table for us all to look at. I thought of a real cute way to steal it."

"And what's that?"

Eve put her head on one side, her fair hair wagged excitedly. "I'm not telling you - now. What do you bet I couldn't?"

Memories of Mr Pointz' youth rose in his mind.

"Half a dozen pairs of gloves," he said.

"Gloves," cried Eve disgustedly. "Who wears gloves?"

"Well - do you wear silk stockings?"

"Do I not? My best pair laddered this morning."

"Very well, then. Half a dozen pairs of the finest silk stockings -"

"Oo-er," said Eve blissfully. "And what about you?"

"Well, I need a new tobacco pouch."

"Right. That's a deal. Not that you'll get your tobacco pouch. Now I'll tell you what you've got to do. You must hand it round like you did last night -"

She broke off as two waiters entered to remove the plates. When they were starting on the next course of chicken, Mr Pointz said:

"Remember this, young woman, if this is to represent a real theft, I should send for the police and you'd be searched."

"That's quite O.K. by me. You needn't be quite so lifelike as to bring the police into it. But Lady Marroway or Mrs Rustington can do all the searching you like."

"Well, that's that then," said Mr Pointz. "What are you setting up to be? A first class jewel thief?"

"I might take to it as a career - if it really paid."

"If you got away with the Morning Star it would pay you. Even after recutting that stone would be worth over thirty thousand pounds."

"My!" said Eve, impressed. "What's that in dollars?"

Lady Marroway uttered an exclamation.

"And you carry such a stone about with you?" she said reproachfully. "Thirty thousand pounds." Her darkened eyelashes quivered.

Mrs Rustington said softly: "It's a lot of money. And then there's the fascination of the stone itself. It's beautiful."

"Just a piece of carbon," said Evan Llewellyn.

"I've always understood it's the 'fence' that's the difficulty in jewel robberies," said Sir George. "He takes the lion's share - eh, what?"

"Come on," said Eve excitedly. "Let's start. Take the diamond out and say what you said last night."

Mr Leathern said in his deep melancholy voice:

"I do apologize for my offspring. She gets kinder worked up -"

"That'll do, Pops," said Eve. "Now then, Mr Pointz -"

Smiling, Mr Pointz fumbled in an inner pocket. He drew something out. It lay on the palm of his hand, blinking in the light.

A diamond...

Rather stiffly, Mr Pointz repeated as far as he could remember his speech of the previous evening on the Merrimaid.

"Perhaps you ladies and gentlemen would like to have a look at this? It's an unusually beautiful stone. I call it the Morning Star and it's by way of being my mascot - goes about with me anywhere. Like to see it?"

He handed it to Lady Marroway, who took it, exclaimed at its beauty and passed it to Mr Leathern who said, "Pretty good - yes, pretty good," in a somewhat artificial manner and in his turn passed it to Llewellyn.

The waiters coming in at that moment there was a slight hitch in the proceedings. When they had gone again, Evan said, "Very fine stone" and passed it to Leo Stein who did not trouble to make any comment but handed it quickly on to Eve.

"How perfectly lovely," cried Eve in a high affected voice.

"Oh!" She gave a cry of consternation as it slipped from her hand. "I've dropped it."

She pushed back her chair and got down to grope under the table. Sir George at her right, bent also. A glass got swept off the table

in the confusion. Stein, Llewellyn and Mrs Rustington all helped in the search. Finally Lady Marroway joined in.

Only Mr Pointz took no part in the proceedings.

He remained in his seat sipping his wine and smiling sardonically.

"Oh, dear," said Eve, still in her artificial manner. "How dreadful! Where can it have rolled to? I can't find it anywhere."

One by one the assistant searchers rose to their feet.

"It's disappeared all right, Pointz," said Sir George, smiling.

"Very nicely done," said Mr Pointz, nodding approval. "You'd make a very good actress, Eve. Now the question is, have you hidden it somewhere or have you got it on you?"

"Search me," said Eve dramatically.

Mr Pointz' eye sought out a large screen in the corner of the room.

He nodded towards it and then looked at Lady Marroway and Mrs Rustington.

"If you ladies will be so good -"

"Why, certainly," said Lady Marroway, smiling.

The two women rose.

Lady Marroway said,

"Don't be afraid, Mr Pointz. We'll vet her properly."

The three went behind the screen.

The room was hot. Evan Llewellyn flung open the window. A news vender was passing. Evan threw down a coin and the man threw up a paper.

Llewellyn unfolded it.

"Hungarian situation none too good," he said.

"That the local rag?" asked Sir George. "There's a horse I'm interested in ought to have run at Haldon today - Natty Boy."

"Leo," said Mr Pointz. "Lock the door. We don't want those damned waiters popping in and out till this business is over."

"Natty Boy won three to one," said Evan.

"Rotten odds," said Sir George.

"Mostly Regatta news," said Evan, glancing over the sheet.

The three young women came out from the screen.

"Not a sign of it," said Janet Rustington.

"You can take it from me she hasn't got it on her," said Lady Marroway.

Mr Pointz thought he would be quite ready to take it from her. There was a grim tone in her voice and he felt no doubt that the search had been thorough.

"Say, Eve, you haven't swallowed it?" asked Mr Leathern anxiously. "Because maybe that wouldn't be too good for you."

"I'd have seen her do that," said Leo Stein quietly. "I was watching her. She didn't put anything in her mouth."

"I couldn't swallow a great thing all points like that," said Eve. She put her hands on her hips and looked at Mr Pointz. "What about it, big boy?" she asked.

"You stand over there where you are and don't move," said that gentleman.

Among them, the men stripped the table and turned it upside down. Mr Pointz examined every inch of it. Then he transferred his attention to the chair on which Eve had been sitting and those on either side of her.

The thoroughness of the search left nothing to be desired. The other four men joined in and the women also. Eve Leathern stood by the wall near the screen and laughed with intense enjoyment.

Five minutes later Mr Pointz rose with a slight groan from his knees and dusted his trousers sadly. His pristine freshness was somewhat impaired.

"Eve," he said. "I take off my hat to you. You're the finest thing in jewel thieves I've ever come across. What you've done with that stone beats me. As far as I can see it must be in the room as it isn't on you. I give you best."

"Are the stockings mine?" demanded Eve.

"They're yours, young lady."

"Eve, my child, where can you have hidden it?" demanded Mrs Rustington curiously.

Eve pranced forward.

"I'll show you. You'll all be just mad with yourselves."

She went across to the side table where the things from the dinner table had been roughly stacked. She picked up her little black evening bag.

"Right under your eyes. Right..."

Her voice, gay and triumphant, trailed off suddenly.

"Oh," she said. "Oh..."

"What's the matter, honey?" said her father.

Eve whispered: "It's gone... it's gone..."

"What's all this?" asked Pointz, coming forward.

Eve turned to him impetuously.

"It was like this. This pochette of mine has a big paste stone in the middle of the clasp. It fell out last night and just when you were showing that diamond round I noticed that it was much the same size. And so I thought in the night what a good idea for a robbery it would be to wedge your diamond into the gap with a bit of plasticine. I felt sure nobody would ever spot it. That's what I did tonight. First I dropped it - then went down after it with the bag in my hand, stuck it into the gap with a bit of plasticine which I had handy, put my bag on the table and went on pretending to look for the diamond. I thought it would be like the Purloined Letter - you know - lying there in full view under all your noses - and just looking like a common bit of rhinestone. And it was a good plan - none of you did notice."

"I wonder," said Mr Stein.

"What did you say?"

Mr Pointz took the bag, looked at the empty hole with a fragment of plasticine still adhering to it and said slowly: "It may have fallen out. We'd better look again."

The search was repeated, but this time it was a curiously silent business. An atmosphere of tension pervaded the room.

Finally everyone in turn gave it up. They stood looking at each other.

"It's not in this room," said Stein.

"And nobody's left the room," said Sir George significantly.

There was a moment's pause. Eve burst into tears.

Her father patted her on the shoulder.

"There, there," he said awkwardly.

Sir George turned to Leo Stein.

"Mr Stein," he said. "Just now you murmured something under your breath. When I asked you to repeat it, you said it was nothing. But as a matter of fact I heard what you said. Miss Eve had just said that none of us noticed the place where she had put the diamond. The words you murmured were: 'I wonder.' What we have to face is the probability that one person did notice - that that person is in this room now. I suggest that the only fair and honorable thing is for every one present to submit to a search. The diamond cannot have left the room."

When Sir George played the part of the old English gentleman, none could play it better. His voice rang with sincerity and indignation.

"Bit unpleasant, all this," said Mr Pointz unhappily.

"It's all my fault," sobbed Eve. "I didn't mean -"

"Buck up, kiddo," said Mr Stein kindly. "Nobody's blaming you."

Mr Leathern said in his slow pedantic manner,

"Why, certainly, I think that Sir George's suggestion will meet with the fullest approval from all of us. It does from me."

"I agree," said Evan Llewellyn.

Mrs Rustington looked at Lady Marroway who nodded a brief assent. The two of them went back behind the screen and the sobbing Eve accompanied them.

A waiter knocked on the door and was told to go away.

Five minutes later eight people looked at each other incredulously.

The Morning Star had vanished into space...

Mr Parker Pyne looked thoughtfully at the dark agitated face of the young man opposite him.

"Of course," he said. "You're Welsh, Mr Llewellyn."

"What's that got to do with it?"

Mr Parker Pyne waved a large, well-cared-for hand.

"Nothing at all, I admit. I am interested in the classification of emotional reactions as exemplified by certain racial types. That is all. Let us return to the consideration of your particular problem."

"I don't really know why I came to you," said Evan Llewellyn. His hands twitched nervously, and his dark face had a haggard look. He did not look at Mr Parker Pyne and that gentleman's scrutiny seemed to make him uncomfortable. "I don't know why I came to you," he repeated. "But where the hell can I go? And what the hell can I do? It's the powerlessness of not being able to do anything at all that gets me... I saw your advertisement and I remembered that a chap had once spoken of you and said that you got results... And - well - I came! I suppose I was a fool. It's the sort of position nobody can do anything about."

"Not at all," said Mr Parker Pyne. "I am the proper person to come to. I am a specialist in unhappiness. This business has obviously caused you a good deal of pain. You are sure the facts are exactly as you have told me?"

"I don't think I've left out anything. Pointz brought out the diamond and passed it around - that wretched American child stuck it on her ridiculous bag and when we came to look at the bag, the diamond was gone. It wasn't on anyone - old Pointz himself even was searched - he suggested it himself - and I'll swear it was nowhere in that room! And nobody left the room."

"No waiters, for instance?" suggested Mr Parker Pyne.

Llewellyn shook his head.

"They went out before the girl began messing about with the diamond, and afterwards Pointz locked the door so as to keep them out. No, it lies between one of us."

"It would certainly seem so," said Mr Parker Pyne thoughtfully.

"That damned evening paper," said Evan Lewellyn bitterly. "I saw it come into their minds - that that was the only way -"

"Just tell me again exactly what occurred."

"It was perfectly simple. I threw open the window, whistled to the man, threw down a copper and he tossed me up the paper. And there it is; you see - the only possible way the diamond could have left the room - thrown by me to an accomplice waiting in the street below."

"Not the only possible way," said Mr Parker Pyne.

"What other way can you suggest?"

"If you didn't throw it out, there must have been some other way."

"Oh, I see. I hoped you meant something more definite than that. Well, I can only say that I didn't throw it out. I can't expect you to believe me - or anyone else."

"Oh, yes, I believe you," said Mr Parker Pyne.

"You do? Why?"

"Not a criminal type," said Mr Parker Pyne. "Not, that is, the particular criminal type that steals jewelry. There are crimes, of course, that you might commit - but we won't enter into that subject. At any rate I do not see you as the purloiner of the Morning Star."

"Everyone else does though," said Llewellyn bitterly.

"I see," said Mr Parker Pyne.

"They looked at me in a queer sort of way at the time. Marroway picked up the paper and just glanced over at the window. He didn't say anything. But Pointz cottoned on to it quick enough! I could see what they thought. There hasn't been any open accusation, that's the devil of it."

Mr Parker Pyne nodded sympathetically.

"It is worse than that," he said.

"Yes. It's just suspicion. I've had a fellow round asking questions - routine inquiries, he called it. One of the new dress-shirted lot of police, I suppose. Very tactful - nothing at all hinted. Just interested in the fact that I'd been hard up and was suddenly cutting a bit of a splash."

"And were you?"

"Yes - some luck with a horse or two. Unluckily my bets were made on the course - there's nothing to show that that's how the money came in. They can't disprove it, of course - but that's just the sort of easy lie a fellow would invent if he didn't want to show where the money came from."

"I agree. Still they will have to have a good deal more than that to go upon."

"Oh! I'm not afraid of actually being arrested and charged with the theft. In a way that would be easier - one would know where one was. It's the ghastly fact that all those people believe I took it."

"One person in particular?"

"What do you mean?"

"A suggestion - nothing more -" Again Mr Parker Pyne waved his comfortable-looking hand. "There was one person in particular, wasn't there? Shall we say Mrs Rustington?"

Llewellyn's dark face flushed.

"Why pitch on her?"

"Oh, my dear sir - there is obviously someone whose opinion matters to you greatly - probably a lady. What ladies were there? An American flapper? Lady Marroway? But you would probably rise not fall in Lady Marroway's estimation if you had brought off such a coup. I know something of the lady. Clearly then, Mrs Rustington."

Llewellyn said with something of an effort, "She - she's had rather an unfortunate experience. Her husband was a down and out rotter. It's made her unwilling to trust anyone. She - if she thinks -"

He found it difficult to go on.

"Quite so," said Mr Parker Pyne. "I see the matter is important. It must be cleared up."

Evan gave a short laugh.

"That's easy to say."

"And quite easy to do," said Mr Parker Pyne.

"You think so?"

"Oh, yes - the problem is so clear cut. So many possibilities are ruled out. The answer must really be extremely simple. Indeed already I have a kind of glimmering -"

Llewellyn stared at him incredulously.

Mr Parker Pyne drew a pad of paper towards him and picked up a pen.

"Perhaps you would give me a brief description of the party."

"Haven't I already done so?"

"Their personal appearance - color of hair and so on."

"But, Mr Parker Pyne, what can that have to do with it?"

"A good deal, young man, a good deal. Classification and so on."

Somewhat unbelievingly, Evan described the personal appearance of the members of the yachting party.

Mr Parker Pyne made a note or two, pushed away the pad and said:

"Excellent. By the way, did you say a wineglass was broken?"

Evan stared again.

"Yes, it was knocked off the table and then it got stepped on."

"Nasty thing, splinters of glass," said Mr Parker Pyne. "Whose wine-glass was it?"

"I think it was the child's - Eve."

"Ah! - and who sat next to her on that side?"

"Sir George Marroway."

"You didn't see which of them knocked it off the table?"

"Afraid I didn't. Does it matter?"

"Not really. No. That was a superfluous question. Well -" he stood up - "good morning, Mr Llewellyn. Will you call again in three days' time? I think the whole thing will be quite satisfactorily cleared up by then."

"Are you joking, Mr Parker Pyne?"

"I never joke on professional matters, my dear sir. It would occasion distrust in my clients. Shall we say Friday at 11:30? Thank you."

Evan entered Mr Parker Pyne's office on the Friday morning in a considerable turmoil. Hope and skepticism fought for mastery.

Mr Parker Pyne rose to meet him with a beaming smile.

"Good morning, Mr Llewellyn. Sit down. Have a cigarette?"

Llewellyn waved aside the proffered box.

"Well?" he said.

"Very well indeed," said Mr Parker Pyne. "The police arrested the gang last night."

"The gang? What gang?"

"The Amalfi gang. I thought of them at once when you told me your story. I recognized their methods and once you had described the guests, well, there was no doubt at all in my mind."

"Who are the Amalfi gang?"

"Father, son and daughter-in-law - that is if Pietro and Maria are really married - which some doubt."

"I don't understand."

"It's quite simple. The name is Italian and no doubt the origin is Italian, but old Amalfi was born in America. His methods are usually the same. He impersonates a real business man, introduces himself to some prominent figure in the jewel business in some European country and then plays his little trick. In this case he was deliberately on the track of the Morning Star. Pointz' idiosyncrasy was well known in the trade. Maria Amalfi played the

part of his daughter (amazing creature, twenty-seven at least, and nearly always plays a part of sixteen)."

"Not Eve!" gasped Llewellyn.

"Exactly. The third member of the gang got himself taken on as an extra waiter at the Royal George - it was holiday time, remember, and they would need extra staff. He may even have bribed a regular man to stay away. The scene is set. Eve challenges old Pointz and he takes on the bet. He passes round the diamond as he had done the night before. The waiters enter the room and Leathern retains the stone until they have left the room. When they do leave, the diamond leaves also, neatly attached with a morsel of chewing gum to the underside of the plate that Pietro bears away. So simple!"

"But I saw it after that."

"No, no, you saw a paste replica, good enough to deceive a casual glance. Stein, you told me, hardly looked at it. Eve drops it, sweeps off a glass too and steps firmly on stone and glass together. Miraculous disappearance of diamond. Both Eve and Leathern can submit to as much searching as anyone pleases."

"Well - I'm -" Evan shook his head, at a loss for words.

"You say you recognized the gang from my description. Had they worked this trick before?"

"Not exactly - but it was their kind of business. Naturally my attention was at once directed to the girl Eve."

"Why? I didn't suspect her - nobody did. She seemed such a - such a child."

"That is the peculiar genius of Maria Amalfi. She is more like a child than any child could possibly be! And then the plasticine! This bet was supposed to have arisen quite spontaneously - yet the little lady had some plasticine with her all handy. That spoke of premeditation. My suspicions fastened on her at once."

Llewellyn rose to his feet.

"Well, Mr Parker Pyne, I'm no end obliged to you."

"Classification," murmured Mr Parker Pyne. "The classification of criminal types - it interests me."

"You'll let me know how much - er -"

"My fee will be quite moderate," said Mr Parker Pyne. "It will not make too big a hole in the - er - horse racing profits. All the same, young man, I should, I think, leave the horses alone in future. Very uncertain animal, the horse."

"That's all right," said Evan.

He shook Mr Parker Pyne by the hand and strode from the office.

He hailed a taxi and gave the address of Janet Rustington's flat.

He felt in a mood to carry all before him.

THE LOVE DETECTIVES

Little Mr Satterthwaite looked thoughtfully across at his host. The friendship between these two men was an odd one. The colonel was a simple country gentleman whose passion in life was sport. The few weeks that he spent perforce in London, he spent unwillingly. Mr Satterthwaite, on the other hand, was a town bird. He was an authority on French cooking, on ladies' dress, and on all the latest scandals. His passion was observing human nature, and he was an expert in his own special line - that of an onlooker at life.

It would seem, therefore, that he and Colonel Melrose would have little in common, for the colonel had no interest in his neighbours' affairs and a horror of any kind of emotion. The two men were friends mainly because their fathers before them had been friends. Also they knew the same people and had reactionary views about nouveaux riches.

It was about half past seven. The two men were sitting in the colonel's comfortable study, and Melrose was describing a run of the previous winter with a keen hunting man's enthusiasm. Mr

Satterthwaite, whose knowledge of horses consisted chiefly of the time-honoured Sunday morning visit to the stables which still obtains in old-fashioned country houses, listened with his invariable politeness.

The sharp ringing of the telephone interrupted Melrose. He crossed to the table and took up the receiver.

"Hello, yes - Colonel Melrose speaking. What's that?" His whole demeanour altered - became stiff and official. It was the magistrate speaking now, not the sportsman.

He listened for some moments, then said laconically, "Right, Curtis. I'll be over at once." He replaced the receiver and turned to his guest. "Sir James Dwighton has been found in his library - murdered."

"What?"

Mr Satterthwaite was startled - thrilled.

"I must go over to Alderway at once. Care to come with me?"

Mr Satterthwaite remembered that the colonel was chief constable of the county.

"If I shan't be in the way - " He hesitated.

"Not at all. That was Inspector Curtis telephoning. Good, honest fellow, but no brains. I'd be glad if you would come with me,

Satterthwaite. I've got an idea this is going to turn out a nasty business."

"Have they got the fellow who did it?"

"No," replied Melrose shortly.

Mr Satterthwaite's trained ear detected a nuance of reserve behind the curt negative. He began to go over in his mind all that he knew of the Dwightons.

A pompous old fellow, the late Sir James, brusque in his manner. A man that might easily make enemies. Veering on sixty, with grizzled hair and a florid face. Reputed to be tight-fisted in the extreme.

His mind went on to Lady Dwighton. Her image floated before him, young, auburn-haired, slender. He remembered various rumours, hints, odd bits of gossip. So that was it - that was why Melrose looked so glum. Then he pulled himself up - his imagination was running away with him.

Five minutes later Mr Satterthwaite took his place beside his host in the latter's little two seater, and they drove off together into the night.

The colonel was a taciturn man. They had gone quite a mile and a half before he spoke. Then he jerked out abruptly. "You know 'em, I suppose?"

"The Dwightons? I know all about them, of course." Who was there Mr Satterthwaite didn't know all about? "I've met him once, I think, and her rather oftener."

"Pretty woman," said Melrose.

"Beautiful!" declared Mr Satterthwaite.

"Think so?"

"A pure Renaissance type," declared Mr Satterthwaite, warming up to his theme. "She acted in those theatricals - the charity matinee, you know, last spring. I was very much struck. Nothing modern about her - a pure survival. One can imagine her in the doge's palace, or as Lucrezia Borgia."

The colonel let the car swerve slightly, and Mr Satterthwaite came to an abrupt stop. He wondered what fatality had brought the name of Lucrezia Borgia to his tongue. Under the circumstances -

"Dwighton was not poisoned, was he?" he asked abruptly.

Melrose looked at him sideways, somewhat curiously.

"Why do you ask that, I wonder?" he said.

"Oh, I - I don't know." Mr Satterthwaite was flustered. "I - It just occurred to me."

"Well, he wasn't," said Melrose gloomily. "If you want to know, he was crashed on the head."

"With a blunt instrument," murmured Mr Satterthwaite, nodding his head sagely.

"Don't talk like a damned detective story, Satterthwaite. He was hit on the head with a bronze figure."

"Oh," said Satterthwaite, and relapsed into silence.

"Know anything of a chap called Paul Delangua?" asked Melrose after a minute or two.

"Yes. Good-looking young fellow."

"I daresay women would call him so," growled the colonel.

"You don't like him?"

"No, I don't."

"I should have thought you would have. He rides very well."

"Like a foreigner at the horse show. Full of monkey tricks."

Mr Satterthwaite suppressed a smile. Poor old Melrose was so very British in his outlook. Agreeably conscious himself of a cosmopolitan point of view, Mr Satterthwaite was able to deplore the insular attitude toward life.

"Has he been down in this part of the world?" he asked.

"He's been staying at Alderway with the Dwightons. The rumour goes that Sir James kicked him out a week ago."

"Why?"

"Found him making love to his wife, I suppose. What the hell - "

There was a violent swerve, and a jarring impact.

"Most dangerous crossroads in England," said Melrose. "All the same, the other fellow should have sounded his horn. We're on the main road. I fancy we've damaged him rather more than he has damaged us."

He sprang out. A figure alighted from the other car and joined him. Fragments of speech reached Satterthwaite.

"Entirely my fault, I'm afraid," the stranger was saying. "But I do not know this part of the country very well, and there's absolutely no sign of any kind to show you're coming onto the main road."

The colonel, mollified, rejoined suitably. The two men bent together over the stranger's car, which a chauffeur was already examining.

The conversation became highly technical.

"A matter of half an hour, I'm afraid," said the stranger. "But don't let me detain you. I'm glad your car escaped injury as well as it did."

"As a matter of fact - " the colonel was beginning, but he was interrupted.

Mr Satterthwaite, seething with excitement, hopped out of the car with a birdlike action, and seized the stranger warmly by the hand.

"It is! I thought I recognized the voice," he declared excitedly. "What an extraordinary thing. What a very extraordinary thing."

"Eh?" said Colonel Melrose.

"Mr Harley Quin. Melrose, I'm sure you've heard me speak many times of Mr Quin?"

Colonel Melrose did not seem to remember the fact, but he assisted politely at the scene while Mr Satterthwaite was chirruping gaily on. "I haven't seen you - let me see - "

"Since the night at the Bells and Motley," said the other quietly.

"The Bells and Motley, eh?" said the colonel.

"An inn," explained Mr Satterthwaite.

"What an odd name for an inn."

"Only an old one," said Mr Quin. "There was a time, remember, when bells and motley were more common in England than they are nowadays."

"I suppose so, yes, no doubt you are right," said Melrose vaguely. He blinked. By a curious effect of light - the headlights of one car and the red tail-light of the other - Mr Quin seemed for a moment to be dressed in motley himself. But it was only the light.

"We can't leave you here stranded on the road," continued Mr Satterthwaite. "You must come along with us. There's plenty of room for three, isn't there, Melrose?"

"Oh rather." But the colonel's voice was a little doubtful. "The only thing is," he remarked, "the job we're on. Eh, Satterthwaite?"

Mr Satterthwaite stood stock-still. Ideas leaped and flashed over him. He positively shook with excitement.

"No," he cried. "No, I should have known better! There is no chance where you are concerned, Mr Quin. It was not an accident that we all met tonight at the crossroads."

Colonel Melrose stared at his friend in astonishment. Mr Satterthwaite took him by the arm.

"You remember what I told you - about our friend Derek Capel? The motive for his suicide, which no one could guess? It was Mr Quin who solved that problem - and there have been others since.

He shows you things that are there all the time, but which you haven't seen. He's marvellous."

"My dear Satterthwaite, you are making me blush," said Mr Quin, smiling. "As far as I can remember, these discoveries were all made by you, not by me."

"They were made because you were there," said Mr Satterthwaite with intense conviction.

"Well," said Colonel Melrose, clearing his throat uncomfortably. "We mustn't waste any more time. Let's get on."

He climbed into the driver's seat. He was not too well pleased at having the stranger foisted upon him through Mr Satterthwaite's enthusiasm, but he had no valid objection to offer, and he was anxious to get on to Alderway as fast as possible.

Mr Satterthwaite urged Mr Quin in next, and himself took the outside seat. The car was a roomy one and took three without undue squeezing.

"So you are interested in crime, Mr Quin?" said the colonel, doing his best to be genial.

"No, not exactly in crime."

"What, then?"

Mr Quin smiled. "Let us ask Mr Satterthwaite. He is a very shrewd observer."

"I think," said Satterthwaite slowly, "I may be wrong, but I think - that Mr Quin is interested in - lovers."

He blushed as he said the last word, which is one no Englishman can pronounce without self-consciousness. Mr Satterthwaite brought it out apologetically, and with an effect of inverted commas.

"By gad!" said the colonel, startled and silenced.

He reflected inwardly that this seemed to be a very rum friend of Satterthwaite's. He glanced at him sideways. The fellow looked all right - quite a normal young chap. Rather dark, but not at all foreign-looking.

"And now," said Satterthwaite importantly, "I must tell you all about the case."

He talked for some ten minutes. Sitting there in the darkness, rushing through the night, he had an intoxicating feeling of power. What did it matter if he were only a looker-on at life? He had words at his command, he was master of them, he could string them to a pattern - a strange Renaissance pattern composed of the beauty of Laura Dwighton, with her white arms and red hair - and the shadowy dark figure of Paul Delangua, whom women found handsome.

Set that against the background of Alderway - Alderway that had stood since the days of Henry VII and, some said, before that. Alderway that was English to the core, with its clipped yew and its old beak barn and the fishpond, where monks had kept their carp for Fridays.

In a few deft strokes he had etched in Sir James, a Dwighton who was a true descendant of the old De Wittons, who long ago had wrung money out of the land and locked it fast in coffers, so that whoever else had fallen on evil days, the masters of Alderway had never become impoverished.

At last Mr Satterthwaite ceased. He was sure, had been sure all along, of the sympathy of his audience. He waited now the word of praise which was his due. It came.

"You are an artist, Mr Satterthwaite."

"I - I do my best." The little man was suddenly humble.

They had turned in at the lodge gates some minutes ago. Now the car drew up in front of the doorway, and a police constable came hurriedly down the steps to meet them.

"Good evening, sir. Inspector Curtis is in the library."

"Right."

Melrose ran up the steps followed by the other two. As the three of them passed across the wide hall, an elderly butler peered from a doorway apprehensively. Melrose nodded to him.

"Evening, Miles. This is a sad business."

"It is indeed," the other quavered. "I can hardly believe it, sir; indeed I can't. To think that anyone should strike down the master."

"Yes, yes," said Melrose, cutting him short. "I'll have talk with you presently."

He strode on to the library. There a big, soldierly-looking inspector greeted him with respect.

"Nasty business, sir. I have not disturbed things. No fingerprints on the weapon. Whoever did it knew his business."

Mr Satterthwaite looked at the bowed figure sitting at the big writing table, and looked hurriedly away again. The man had been struck down from behind, a smashing blow that had crashed in the skull. The sight was not a pretty one.

The weapon lay on the floor - a bronze figure about two feet high, the base of it stained and wet. Mr Satterthwaite bent over it curiously.

"A Venus," he said softly. "So he was struck down by Venus."

He found food for poetic meditation in the thought.

"The windows," said the inspector, "were all closed and bolted on the inside."

He paused significantly.

"Making an inside job of it," said the chief constable reluctantly. "Well - well, we'll see."

The murdered man was dressed in golf clothes, and a bag of golf clubs had been flung untidily across a big leather couch.

"Just come in from the links," explained the inspector, following the chief constable's glance. "At five-fifteen, that was. Had tea brought here by the butler. Later he rang for his valet to bring him down a pair of soft slippers. As far as we can tell, the valet was the last person to see him alive."

Melrose nodded, and turned his attention once more to the writing table.

A good many of the ornaments had been overturned and broken. Prominent among these was a big dark enamel clock, which lay on its side in the very centre of the table.

The inspector cleared his throat.

"That's what you might call a piece of luck, sir," he said. "As you see, it's stopped. At half past six. That gives us the time of the crime. Very convenient."

The colonel was staring at the clock.

"As you say," he remarked. "Very convenient." He paused a minute, and then added, "Too damned convenient! I don't like it, Inspector."

He looked around at the other two. His eye sought Mr Quin's with a look of appeal in it.

"Damn it all," he said. "It's too neat. You know what I mean. Things don't happen like that."

"You mean," murmured Mr Quin, "that clocks don't fall like that?"

Melrose stared at him for a moment, then back at the clock, which had that pathetic and innocent look familiar to objects which have been suddenly bereft of their dignity. Very carefully Colonel Melrose replaced it on its legs again. He struck the table a violent blow. The clock rocked, but it did not fall. Melrose repeated the action, and very slowly, with a kind of unwillingness, the clock fell over on its back.

"What time was the crime discovered?" demanded Melrose sharply.

"Just about seven o'clock, sir."

"Who discovered it?"

"The butler."

"Fetch him in," said the chief constable. "I'll see him now. Where is Lady Dwighton, by the way?"

"Lying down, sir. Her maid says that she's prostrated and can't see anyone."

Melrose nodded, and Inspector Curtis went in search of the butler. Mr Quin was looking thoughtfully into the fireplace. Mr Satterthwaite followed his example. He blinked at the smouldering logs for a minute or two, and then something bright lying in the grate caught his eye. He stooped and picked up a little sliver of curved glass.

"You wanted me, sir?"

It was the butler's voice, still quavering and uncertain.

Mr Satterthwaite slipped the fragment of glass into his waistcoat pocket and turned round.

The old man was standing in the doorway.

"Sit down," said the chief constable kindly. "You're shaking all over. It's been a shock to you, I expect."

"It has indeed, sir."

"Well, I shan't keep you long. Your master came in just after five, I believe?"

"Yes, sir. He ordered tea to be brought to him here. Afterward, when I came to take it away, he asked for Jennings to be sent to him - that's his valet, sir."

"What time was that?"

"About ten minutes past six, sir."

"Yes - well?"

"I sent word to Jennings, sir. And it wasn't till I came in here to shut the windows and draw the curtains at seven o'clock that I saw - "

Melrose cut him short. "Yes, yes, you needn't go into all that. You didn't touch the body, or disturb anything, did you?"

"Oh! No indeed, sir! I went as fast as I could go to the telephone to ring up the police."

"And then?"

"I told Jane - her ladyship's maid, sir - to break the news to her ladyship."

"You haven't seen your mistress at all this evening?"

Colonel Melrose put the question casually enough, but Mr Satterthwaite's keen ears caught anxiety behind the words.

"Not to speak to, sir. Her ladyship has remained in her own apartments since the tragedy."

"Did you see her before?"

The question came sharply, and everyone in the room noted the hesitation before the butler replied.

"I - I just caught a glimpse of her, sir, descending the staircase."

"Did she come in here?"

Mr Satterthwaite held his breath.

"I - I think so, sir."

"What time was that?"

You might have heard a pin drop. Did the old man know, Mr Satterthwaite wondered, what hung on his answer?

"It was just upon half past six, sir."

Colonel Melrose drew a deep breath. "That will do, thank you. Just send Jennings, the valet, to me, will you?"

Jennings answered the summons with promptitude. A narrow-faced man with a catlike tread. Something sly and secretive about him.

A man, thought Mr Satterthwaite, who would easily murder his master if he could be sure of not being found out.

He listened eagerly to the man's answers to Colonel Melrose's questions. But his story seemed straightforward enough. He had brought his master down some soft hide slippers and removed the brogues.

"What did you do after that, Jennings?"

"I went back to the stewards' room, sir."

"At what time did you leave your master?"

"It must have been just after a quarter past six, sir."

"Where were you at half past six, Jennings?"

"In the stewards' room, sir."

Colonel Melrose dismissed the man with a nod. He looked across at Curtis inquiringly.

"Quite correct, sir, I checked that up. He was in the stewards' room from about six-twenty until seven o'clock."

"Then that lets him out," said the chief constable a trifle regretfully. "Besides, there's no motive."

They looked at each other.

There was a tap at the door.

"Come in," said the colonel.

A scared-looking lady's maid appeared.

"If you please, her ladyship has heard that Colonel Melrose is here and she would like to see him."

"Certainly," said Melrose. "I'll come at once. Will you show me the way?"

But a hand pushed the girl aside. A very different figure now stood in the doorway. Laura Dwighton looked like a visitor from another world.

She was dressed in a clinging medieval tea gown of dull blue brocade. Her auburn hair was parted in the middle and brought down over her ears. Conscious of the fact she had a style of her own, Lady Dwighton had never had her hair cut. It was drawn back into a simple knot on the nape of her neck. Her arms were bare.

One of them was outstretched to steady herself against the frame of the doorway, the other hung down by her side, clasping a book. She looks, Mr Satterthwaite thought, like a Madonna from an early Italian canvas.

She stood there, swaying slightly from side to side. Colonel Melrose sprang toward her.

"I've come to tell you - to tell you - "

Her voice was low and rich. Mr Satterthwaite was so entranced with the dramatic value of the scene that he had forgotten its reality.

"Please, Lady Dwighton - " Melrose had an arm round her, supporting her. He took her across the hall into a small anteroom, its walls hung with faded silk. Quin and Satterthwaite followed. She sank down on the low settee, her head resting back on a rust-coloured cushion, her eyelids closed. The three men watched her. Suddenly she opened her eyes and sat up. She spoke very quietly.

"I killed him," she said. "That's what I came to tell you. I killed him!"

There was a moment's agonized silence. Mr Satterthwaite's heart missed a beat.

"Lady Dwighton," said Melrose. "You've had a great shock - you're unstrung. I don't think you quite know what you're saying."

Would she draw back now - while there was yet time?

"I know perfectly what I'm saying. It was I who shot him."

Two of the men in the room gasped, the other made no sound. Laura Dwighton leaned still farther forward.

"Don't you understand? I came down and shot him. I admit it."

The book she had been holding in her hand clattered to the floor. There was a paper cutter in it, a thing shaped like a dagger with a jewelled hilt. Mr Satterthwaite picked it up mechanically and placed it on the table. As he did so he thought, That's a dangerous toy. You could kill a man with that.

"Well - " Laura Dwighton's voice was impatient. "- what are you going to do about it? Arrest me? Take me away?"

Colonel Melrose found his voice with difficulty.

"What you have told me is very serious, Lady Dwighton. I must ask you to go to your room till I have - er - made arrangements."

She nodded and rose to her feet. She was quite composed now, grave and cold.

As she turned toward the door, Mr Quin spoke. "What did you do with the revolver, Lady Dwighton?"

A flicker of uncertainty passed across her face. "I - I dropped it there on the floor. No, I think I threw it out of the window - oh! I can't remember now. What does it matter? I hardly knew what I was doing. It doesn't matter, does it?"

"No," said Mr Quin. "I hardly think it matters."

She looked at him in perplexity with a shade of something that might have been alarm. Then she flung back her head and went imperiously out of the room. Mr Satterthwaite hastened after her. She might, he felt, collapse at any minute. But she was already halfway up the staircase, displaying no sign of her earlier weakness. The scared-looking maid was standing at the foot of the stairway, and Mr Satterthwaite spoke to her authoritatively.

"Look after your mistress," he said.

"Yes, sir." The girl prepared to ascend after the blue-robed figure. "Oh, please, sir, they don't suspect him, do they?"

"Suspect whom?"

"Jennings, sir. Oh! Indeed, sir, he wouldn't hurt a fly."

"Jennings? No, of course not. Go and look after your mistress."

"Yes, sir."

The girl ran quickly up the staircase. Mr Satterthwaite returned to the room he had just vacated.

Colonel Melrose was saying heavily, "Well, I'm jiggered. There's more in this than meets the eye. It - it's like those dashed silly things heroines do in many novels."

"It's unreal," agreed Mr Satterthwaite. "It's like something on the stage."

Mr Quin nodded. "Yes, you admire the drama, do you not? You are a man who appreciates good acting when you see it."

Mr Satterthwaite looked hard at him.

In the silence that followed a far-off sound came to their ears.

"Sounds like a shot," said Colonel Melrose. "One of the keepers, I daresay. That's probably what she heard. Perhaps she went down to see. She wouldn't go close or examine the body. She'd leap at once to the conclusion - "

"Mr Delangua, sir." It was the old butler who spoke, standing apologetically in the doorway.

"Eh?" said Melrose. "What's that?"

"Mr Delangua is here, sir, and would like to speak to you if he may."

Colonel Melrose leaned back in his chair. "Show him in," he said grimly.

A moment later Paul Delangua stood in the doorway. As Colonel Melrose had hinted, there was something un-English about him - the easy grace of his movements, the dark, handsome face, the eyes set a little too near together. There hung about him the air of the Renaissance. He and Laura Dwighton suggested the same atmosphere.

"Good evening, gentlemen," said Delangua. He made a little theatrical bow.

"I don't know what your business may be, Mr Delangua," said Colonel Melrose sharply, "but if it is nothing to do with the matter at hand - "

Delangua interrupted him with a laugh. "On the contrary," he said, "it has everything to do with it."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean," said Delangua quietly, "that I have come to give myself up for the murder of Sir James Dwighton."

"You know what you are saying?" said Melrose gravely.

"Perfectly." The young man's eyes were riveted to the table.

"I don't understand - "

"Why I give myself up? Call it remorse - call it anything you please. I stabbed him, right enough - you may be quite sure of that." He nodded toward the table. "You've got the weapon there, I see. A very handy little tool. Lady Dwighton unfortunately left it lying around in a book, and I happened to snatch it up."

"One minute," said Colonel Melrose. "Am I to understand that you admit stabbing Sir James with this?" He held the dagger aloft.

"Quite right. I stole in through the window, you know. He had his back to me. It was quite easy. I left the same way."

"Through the window?"

"Through the window, of course."

"And what time was this?"

Delangua hesitated. "Let me see - I was talking to the keeper fellow - that was at a quarter past six. I heard the church tower chime. It must have been - well, say somewhere about half past."

A grim smile came to the colonel's lips.

"Quite right, young man," he said. "Half past six was the time. Perhaps you've heard that already? But this is altogether a most peculiar murder!"

"Why?"

"So many people confess to it," said Colonel Melrose.

They heard the sharp intake of the other's breath.

"Who else has confessed to it?" he asked in a voice that he vainly strove to render steady.

"Lady Dwighton."

Delangua threw back his head and laughed in rather a forced manner. "Lady Dwighton is apt to be hysterical," he said lightly. "I shouldn't pay any attention to what she says if I were you."

"I don't think I shall," said Melrose. "But there's another odd thing about this murder."

"What's that?"

"Well," said Melrose, "Lady Dwighton has confessed to having shot Sir James, and you have confessed to having stabbed him. But luckily for both of you, he wasn't shot or stabbed, you see. His skull was smashed in."

"My God!" cried Delangua. "But a woman couldn't possibly do that - "

He stopped, biting his lip. Melrose nodded with the ghost of a smile.

"Often read of it," he volunteered. "Never seen it happen."

"What?"

"Couple of young idiots each accusing themselves because they thought the other had done it," said Melrose. "Now we've got to begin at the beginning."

"The valet," cried Mr Satterthwaite. "That girl just now - I wasn't paying any attention at the time." He paused, striving for coherence. "She was afraid of our suspecting him. There must be some motive that he had and which we don't know, but she does."

Colonel Melrose frowned, then he rang the bell. When it was answered, he said, "Please ask Lady Dwighton if she will be good enough to come down again."

They waited in silence until she came. At sight of Delangua she started and stretched out a hand to save herself from falling. Colonel Melrose came quickly to the rescue.

"It's quite all right, Lady Dwighton. Please don't be alarmed."

"I don't understand. What is Mr Delangua doing here?"

Delangua came over to her, "Laura - Laura - why did you do it?"

"Do it?"

"I know. It was for me - because you thought that - After all, it was natural, I suppose. But, oh! You angel!"

Colonel Melrose cleared his throat. He was a man who disliked emotion and had a horror of anything approaching a 'scene'.

"If you'll allow me to say so, Lady Dwighton, both you and Mr Delangua have had a lucky escape. He had just arrived in his turn to 'confess' to the murder - oh, it's quite all right, he didn't do it! But what we want to know is the truth. No more shillyshallying. The butler says you went into the library at half past six - is that so?"

Laura looked at Delangua. He nodded.

"The truth, Laura," he said. "That is what we want now."

She breathed a deep sigh. "I will tell you."

She sank down on a chair that Mr Satterthwaite had hurriedly pushed forward.

"I did come down. I opened the library door and I saw - " She stopped and swallowed. Mr Satterthwaite leaned forward and patted her hand encouragingly.

"Yes," he said. "Yes. You saw?"

"My husband was lying across the writing table. I saw his head - the blood - oh!" She put her hands to her face.

The chief constable leaned forward.

"Excuse me, Lady Dwighton. You thought Mr Delangua had shot him?"

She nodded. "Forgive me, Paul," she pleaded. "But you said - you said - "

"That I'd shoot him like a dog," said Delangua grimly. "I remember. That was the day I discovered he'd been ill-treating you."

The chief constable kept sternly to the matter in hand.

"Then I am to understand, Lady Dwighton, that you went upstairs again and - er - said nothing. We needn't go into your reason. You didn't touch the body or go near the writing table?"

She shuddered. "No, no. I ran straight out of the room."

"I see, I see. And what time was this exactly? Do you know?"

"It was just half past six when I got back to my bedroom."

"Then at - say five-and-twenty past six, Sir James was already dead." The chief constable looked at the others. "That clock - it was faked, eh? We suspected that all along. Nothing easier than to move the hands to whatever time you wished, but they made a mistake to lay it down on its side like that. Well, that seems to narrow it down the butler or the valet, and I can't believe it's the butler. Tell me, Lady Dwighton, did this man Jennings have any grudge against your husband?"

Laura lifted her face from her hands. "Not exactly a grudge, but - well, James told me only this morning that he'd dismissed him. He'd found him pilfering."

"Ah! Now we're getting at it. Jennings would have been dismissed without a character. A serious matter for him."

"You said something about a clock," said Laura Dwighton. "There's just a chance - if you want to fix the time - James would have been sure to have his little golf watch on him. Mightn't that have been smashed, too, when he fell forward?"

"It's an idea," said the colonel slowly. "But I'm afraid - Curtis!"

The inspector nodded in quick comprehension and left the room. He returned a minute later. On the palm of his hand was a silver watch marked like a golf ball, the kind that are sold for golfers to carry loose in a pocket with balls.

"Here it is, sir," he said, "but I doubt if it will be any good. They're tough, these watches."

The colonel took it from him and held it to his ear.

"It seems to have stopped, anyway," he observed.

He pressed with his thumb, and the lid of the watch flew open. Inside the glass was cracked across.

"Ah!" he said exultantly.

The hand pointed to exactly a quarter past six.

"A very good glass of port, Colonel Melrose," said Mr Quin.

It was half past nine, and the three men had just finished a belated dinner at Colonel Melrose's house. Mr Satterthwaite was particularly jubilant.

"I was quite right," he chuckled. "You can't deny it, Mr Quin. You turned up tonight to save two absurd young people who were both bent on putting their heads into a noose."

"Did I?" said Mr Quin. "Surely not. I did nothing at all."

"As it turned out, it was not necessary," agreed Mr Satterthwaite. "But it might have been. It was touch and go, you know. I shall never forget the moment when Lady Dwighton said, 'I killed him.' I've never seen anything on the stage half as dramatic."

"I'm inclined to agree with you," said Mr Quin.

"Wouldn't have believed such a thing could happen outside a novel," declared the colonel, for perhaps the twentieth time that night.

"Does it?" asked Mr Quin.

The colonel stared at him, "Damn it, it happened tonight."

"Mind you," interposed Mr Satterthwaite, leaning back and sipping his port, "Lady Dwighton was magnificent, quite magnificent, but she made one mistake. She shouldn't have leaped to the conclusion that her husband had been shot. In the same way Delangua was a fool to assume that he had been stabbed just because the dagger happened to be lying on the table in front of us. It was a mere coincidence that Lady Dwighton should have brought it I down with her."

"Was it?" asked Mr Quin.

"Now if they'd only confined themselves to saying that they'd killed Sir James, without particularizing how - " went on Mr Satterthwaite - "what would have been the result?"

"They might have been believed," said Mr Quin with an odd smile.

"The whole thing was exactly like a novel," said the colonel.

"That's where they got the idea from, I daresay," said Mr Quin.

"Possibly," agreed Mr Satterthwaite. "Things one has read do come back to one in the oddest way." He looked across at Mr Quin. "Of course," he said, "the clock really looked suspicious from the first. One ought never to forget how easy it is to put the hands of a clock or watch forward or back."

Mr Quin nodded and repeated the words. "Forward," he said, and paused. "Or back."

There was something encouraging in his voice. His bright, dark eyes were fixed on Mr Satterthwaite.

"The hands of the clock were put forward," said Mr Satterthwaite. "We know that."

"Were they?" asked Mr Quin.

Mr Satterthwaite stared at him. "Do you mean," he said slowly, "that it was the watch which was put back? But that doesn't make sense. It's impossible."

"Not impossible," murmured Mr Quin.

"Well - absurd. To whose advantage could that be?"

"Only, I suppose, to someone who had an alibi for that time."

"By gad!" cried the colonel. "That's the time young Delangua said he was talking to the keeper."

"He told us that very particularly," said Mr Satterthwaite.

They looked at each other. They had an uneasy feeling as of solid ground failing beneath their feet. Facts went spinning round, turning new and unexpected faces. And in the centre of the kaleidoscope was the dark, smiling face of Mr Quin.

"But in that case - " began Melrose " - in that case - "

Mr Satterthwaite, nimble-witted, finished his sentence for him. "It's all the other way round. A plant just the same - but a plant against the valet. Oh, but it can't be! It's impossible. Why each of them accused themselves of the crime."

"Yes," said Mr Quin. "Up till then you suspected them, didn't you?" His voice went on, placid and dreamy. "Just like something out of a book, you said, colonel. They got the idea there. It's what the innocent hero and heroine do. Of course it made you think them innocent - there was the force of tradition behind them. Mr Satterthwaite has been saying all along it was like something on the stage. You were both right. It wasn't real. You've been saying so all along without knowing what you were saying. They'd have told a much better story than that if they'd wanted to be believed."

The two men looked at him helplessly.

"It would be clever," said Mr Satterthwaite slowly. "It would be diabolically clever. And I've thought of something else. The butler said he went in at seven to shut the windows - so he must have expected them to be open."

"That's the way Delangua came in,' said Mr Quin. "He killed Sir James with one blow, and he and she together did what they had to do - "

He looked at Mr Satterthwaite, encouraging him to reconstruct the scene. He did so, hesitatingly.

"They smashed the clock and put it on its side. Yes. They altered the watch and smashed it. Then he went out of the window, and she fastened it after him. But there's one thing I don't see. Why bother with the watch at all? Why not simply put back the hands of the clock?"

"The clock was always a little obvious," said Mr Quin. "Anyone might have seen through a rather transparent device like that."

"But surely the watch was too far-fetched. Why, it was pure chance that we ever thought of the watch."

"Oh, no," said Mr Quin. "It was the lady's suggestion, remember."

Mr Satterthwaite stared at him, fascinated.

"And yet, you know," said Mr Quin dreamily, "the one person who wouldn't be likely to overlook the watch would be the valet. Valets know better than anyone what their masters carry in their pockets. If he altered the clock, the valet would have altered the watch, too. They don't understand human nature, those two. They are not like Mr Satterthwaite."

Mr Satterthwaite shook his head.

"I was all wrong," he murmured humbly. "I thought that you had come to save them."

"So I did," said Mr Quin. "Oh! Not those two - the others. Perhaps you didn't notice the lady's maid? She wasn't wearing blue brocade, or acting a dramatic part. But she's really a very pretty girl, and I think she loves that man Jennings very much. I think that between you you'll be able to save her man from getting hanged."

"We've no proof of any kind," said Colonel Melrose heavily.

Mr Quin smiled. "Mr Satterthwaite has."

"I?" Mr Satterthwaite was astonished.

Mr Quin went on.

"You've got a proof that that watch wasn't smashed in Sir James's pocket. You can't smash a watch like that without opening the case. Just try it and see. Someone took the watch out and opened it, set back the hands, smashed the glass, and then shut it and put it back. They never noticed that a fragment of glass was missing."

"Oh!" cried Mr Satterthwaite. His hand flew to his waist-coat pocket. He drew out a fragment of curved glass.

It was his moment.

"With this," said Mr Satterthwaite importantly, "I shall save a man from death."

NEXT TO A DOG

The ladylike woman behind the Registry Office table cleared her throat and peered across at the girl who sat opposite.

"Then you refuse to consider the post? It only came in this morning. A very nice part of Italy, I believe, a widower with a little boy of three and an elderly lady, his mother or aunt."

Joyce Lambert shook her head.

"I can't go out of England," she said in a tired voice; "there are reasons. If only you could find me a daily post?"

Her voice shook slightly - ever so slightly, for she had it well under control. Her dark blue eyes looked appealingly at the woman opposite her.

"It's very difficult, Mrs. Lambert. The only kind of daily governess required is one who has full qualifications. You have none. I have hundreds on my books - literally hundreds." She paused. "You have someone at home you can't leave?"

Joyce nodded.

"A child?"

"No, not a child." And a faint smile flickered across her face.

"Well, it is very unfortunate. I will do my best, of course, but - "

The interview was clearly at an end. Joyce rose. She was biting her lip to keep the tears from springing to her eyes as she emerged from the frowsy office into the street.

"You mustn't," she admonished herself sternly. "Don't be a snivelling little idiot. You're panicking - that's what you're doing - panicking. No good ever came of giving way to panic. It's quite early in the day still and lots of things may happen. Aunt Mary ought to be good for a fortnight anyway. Come on, girl, step out, and don't keep your well-to-do relations waiting."

She walked down Edgware Road, across the park, and then down to Victoria Street, where she turned into the Army and Navy Stores. She went to the lounge and sat down glancing at her watch. It was just half-past one. Five minutes sped by and then an elderly lady with her arms full of parcels bore down upon her.

"Ah! There you are, Joyce. I'm a few minutes late, I'm afraid. The service is not as good as it used to be in the luncheon room. You've had lunch, of course?"

Joyce hesitated a minute or two, then she said quietly: "Yes, thank you."

"I always have mine at half-past twelve," said Aunt Mary, settling herself comfortably with her parcels. "Less rush and a clearer atmosphere. The curried eggs here are excellent."

"Are they?" said Joyce faintly.

She felt that she could hardly bear to think of curried eggs - the hot steam rising from them - the delicious smell! She wrenched her thoughts resolutely aside.

"You look peaky, child," said Aunt Mary, who was herself of a comfortable figure. "Don't go in for this modern fad of eating no meat. All fal-de-lal. A good slice off the joint never did anyone any harm."

Joyce stopped herself from saying "It wouldn't do me any harm now." If only Aunt Mary would stop talking about food. To raise your hopes by asking you to meet her at half past one and then to talk of curried eggs and slices of roast meat - oh! cruel - cruel.

"Well, my dear," said Aunt Mary. "I got your letter - and it was very nice of you to take me at my word. I said I'd be pleased to see you anytime and so I should have been - but as it happens, I've just had an extremely good offer to let the house. Quite too good to be missed, and bringing their own plate and linen. Five months. They come in on Thursday and I go to Harrogate. My rheumatism's been troubling me lately."

"I see," said Joyce. "I'm so sorry."

"So it'll have to be for another time. Always pleased to see you, my dear."

"Thank you, Aunt Mary."

"You know, you do look peaky," said Aunt Mary, considering her attentively. "You're thin, too; no flesh on your bones, and what's happened to your pretty colour? You always had a nice healthy colour. Mind you take plenty of exercise."

"I'm taking plenty of exercise today," said Joyce grimly. She rose. "Well, Aunt Mary, I must be getting along."

Back again - through St. James's Park this time, and so on through Berkeley Square and across Oxford Street and up Edgware Road, past Praed Street to the point where the Edgware Road begins to think of becoming something else. Then aside, through a series of dirty little streets till one particular dingy house was reached.

Joyce inserted her latchkey and entered a small frowsy hall. She ran up the stairs till she reached the top landing. A door faced her and from the bottom of this door a snuffling noise proceeded succeeded in a second by a series of joyful whines and yelps.

"Yes, Terry darling - it's Missus come home."

As the door opened, a white body precipitated itself upon the girl - an aged wire-haired terrier very shaggy as to coat and

suspiciously bleary as to eyes. Joyce gathered him up in her arms and sat down on the floor.

"Terry darling! Darling, darling Terry. Love your Missus, Terry; love your Missus a lot!"

And Terry obeyed, his eager tongue worked busily, he licked her face, her ears, her neck and all the time his stump of a tail wagged furiously.

"Terry darling, what are we going to do? What's going to become of us? Oh! Terry darling, I'm so tired."

"Now then, miss," said a tart voice behind her. "If you'll give over hugging and kissing that dog, here's a cup of nice hot tea for you."

"Oh! Mrs. Barnes, how good of you."

Joyce scrambled to her feet. Mrs. Barnes was a big, formidable-looking woman. Beneath the exterior of a dragon she concealed an unexpectedly warm heart.

"A cup of hot tea never did anyone any harm," enunciated Mrs. Barnes, voicing the universal sentiment of her class.

Joyce sipped gratefully. Her landlady eyed her covertly.

"Any luck, miss - ma'am, I should say?"

Joyce shook her head, her face clouded over.

"Ah!" said Mrs. Barnes with a sigh. "Well, it doesn't seem to be what you might call a lucky day."

Joyce looked up sharply.

"Oh, Mrs. Barnes - you don't mean - "

Mrs. Barnes was nodding gloomily.

"Yes - it's Barnes. Out of work again. What we're going to do, I'm sure I don't know."

"Oh, Mrs. Barnes - I must - I mean you'll want - "

"Now don't you fret, my dear. I'm not denying but that I'd be glad if you'd found something - but if you haven't - you haven't. Have you finished that tea? I'll take the cup."

"Not quite."

"Ah!" said Mrs. Barnes accusingly. "You're going to give what's left to that dratted dog - I know you."

"Oh, please, Mrs. Barnes. Just a little drop. You don't mind really, do you?"

"It wouldn't be any use if I did. You're crazy about that cantankerous brute. Yes, that's what I say - and that's what he is. As near as nothing bit me this morning, he did."

"Oh, no, Mrs. Barnes! Terry wouldn't do such a thing."

"Growled at me - showed his teeth. I was just trying to see if there was anything could be done to those shoes of yours."

"He doesn't like anyone touching my things. He thinks he ought to guard them."

"Well, what does he want to think for? It isn't a dog's business to think. He'd be well enough in his proper place, tied up in the yard to keep off burglars. All this cuddling! He ought to be put away, miss - that's what I say."

"No, no, no. Never. Never!"

"Please yourself," said Mrs. Barnes. She took the cup from the table, retrieved the saucer from the floor where Terry had just finished his share, and stalked from the room.

"Terry," said Joyce. "Come here and talk to me. What are we going to do, my sweet?"

She settled herself in the rickety armchair, with Terry on her knees. She threw off her hat and leaned back. She put one of Terry's paws on each side of her neck and kissed him lovingly on his nose and between his eyes. Then she began talking to him in a soft low voice, twisting his ears gently between her fingers.

"What are we going to do about Mrs. Barnes, Terry? We owe her four weeks - and she's such a lamb, Terry - such a lamb. She'd never turn us out. But we can't take advantage of her being a lamb, Terry. We can't do that. Why does Barnes want to be out of work? I hate Barnes. He's always getting drunk. And if you're always getting drunk, you are usually out of work. But I don't get drunk, Terry, and yet I'm out of work.

"I can't leave you, darling. I can't leave you. There's not even anyone I could leave you with - nobody who'd be good to you. You're getting old, Terry - twelve years old - and nobody wants an old dog who's rather blind and a little deaf and a little - yes, just a little - bad-tempered. You're sweet to me, darling, but you're not sweet to everyone, are you? You growl. It's because you know the world's turning against you. We've just got each other, haven't we, darling?"

Terry licked her cheek delicately.

"Talk to me, darling."

Terry gave a long lingering groan - almost a sigh, then be nuzzled his nose in behind Joyce's ear.

"You trust me, don't you, angel? You know I'd never leave you. But what are we going to do? We're right down to it now, Terry."

She settled back further in the chair, her eyes half closed.

"Do you remember, Terry, all the happy times we used to have? You and I and Michael and Daddy. Oh, Michael - Michael! It was his first leave, and he wanted to give me a present before he went back to France. And I told him not to be extravagant. And then we were down in the country - and it was all a surprise. He told me to look out of the window, and there you were, dancing up the path on a long lead. The funny little man who brought you, a little man who smelt of dogs. How he talked. 'The goods, that's what he is. Look at him, ma'am, ain't he a picture? I said to myself, as soon as the lady and gentleman see him they'll say: "That dog's the goods!"'

"He kept on saying that - and we called you that for quite a long time - the Goods! Oh, Terry, you were such a darling of a puppy, with your little head on one side, wagging your absurd tail! And Michael went away to France and I had you - the darlingest dog in the world. You read all Michael's letters with me, didn't you? You'd sniff them, and I'd say - 'From Master,' and you'd understand. We were so happy - so happy. You and Michael and I. And now Michael's dead, and you're old, and I - I'm so tired of being brave."

Terry licked her.

"You were there when the telegram came. If it hadn't been for you, Terry - if I hadn't had you to hold on to..."

She stayed silent for some minutes.

"And we've been together ever since - been through all the ups and downs together - there have been a lot of downs, haven't

there? And now we've come right up against it. There are only Michael's aunts, and they think I'm all right. They don't know he gambled that money away. We must never tell anyone that. I don't care - why shouldn't he? Everyone has to have some fault. He loved us both, Terry, and that's all that matters. His own relations were always inclined to be down on him and to say nasty things. We're not going to give them the chance. But I wish I had some relations of my own. It's very awkward having no relations at all.

"I'm so tired, Terry - and remarkably hungry. I can't believe I'm only twenty-nine - I feel sixty-nine. I'm not really brave - I only pretend to be. And I'm getting awfully mean ideas. I walked all the way to Ealing yesterday to see Cousin Charlotte Green. I thought if I got there at half-past twelve she'd be sure to ask me to stop to lunch. And then when I got to the house, I felt it was too cadging for anything. I just couldn't. So I walked all the way back. And that's foolish. You should be a determined cadger or else not even think of it. I don't think I'm a strong character."

Terry groaned again and put a black nose into Joyce's eye.

"You've got a lovely nose still, Terry - all cold like ice cream. Oh, I do love you so! I can't part from you. I can't have you 'put away.' I can't... I can't... I can't..." she began talking to him in a soft low voice, twisting his ears gently between her fingers. The warm tongue licked eagerly.

"You understand so, my sweet. You'd do anything to help Missus, wouldn't you?"

Terry clambered down and went unsteadily to a corner. He came back holding a battered bowl between his teeth.

Joyce was midway between tears and laughter.

"Was he doing his only trick? The only thing he could think of to help Missus. Oh, Terry - Terry - nobody shall part us! I'd do anything. Would I, though? One says that - and then when you're shown the thing, you say, 'I didn't mean anything like that.' Would I do anything?"

She got down on the floor beside the dog.

"You see, Terry, it seems that Nursery governesses can't have dogs, and companions to elderly ladies can't have dogs. Only married women can have dogs, Terry - little fluggy expensive dogs that they take shopping with them - and if one preferred an old blind terrier - well, why not?"

She stopped frowning and at that minute there was a double knock from below.

"The post. I wonder." She jumped up and hurried down the stairs, returning with a letter.

"It might be, if only..." She tore it open.

Dear Madam,

We have inspected the picture and our opinion is that it is not a genuine Cuyp and that its value is practically nil.

Yours truly,

Sloane & Ryder

Joyce stood holding it. When she spoke, her voice had changed.

"That's that," she said. "The last hope gone. But we won't be parted. There's a way - and it won't be cadging. Terry darling, I'm going out. I'll be back soon."

Joyce hurried down the stairs to where the telephone stood in a dark corner. There she asked for a certain number. A man's voice answered her, its tone changing as he realized her identity.

"Joyce, my dear girl. Come out and have some dinner and dance tonight."

"I can't," said Joyce lightly. "Nothing fit to wear."

And she smiled grimly as she thought of the empty pegs in the flimsy cupboard.

"How would it be if I came along and saw you now? What's the address? Good Lord, where's that? Rather come off your high horse, haven't you?"

"Completely."

"Well, you're frank about it. So long."

Arthur Halliday's car drew up outside the house about three quarters of an hour later. An awestruck Mrs. Barnes conducted him upstairs.

"My dear girl - what an awful hole. What on earth has got you into this mess?"

"Pride and a few other unprofitable emotions."

She spoke lightly enough; her eyes looked at the man opposite her sardonically.

Many people called Halliday handsome. He was a big man with square shoulders, fair, with small, very pale blue eyes and a heavy chin.

He sat down on the rickety chair she indicated.

"Well," he said thoughtfully. "I should say you'd had your lesson. I say - will that brute bite?"

"No, no, he's all right. I've trained him to be rather a - a watchdog."

Halliday was looking her up and down.

"Going to climb down, Joyce," he said softly. "Is that it?"

Joyce nodded.

"I told you before, my dear girl. I always get what I want in the end. I knew you'd come in time to see which way your bread was buttered."

"It's lucky for me you haven't changed your mind," said Joyce.

He looked at her suspiciously. With Joyce you never knew quite what she was driving at.

"You'll marry me?"

She nodded. "As soon as you please."

"The sooner, the better, in fact." He laughed, looking round the room. Joyce flushed.

"By the way, there's a condition." she said.

"A condition?" He looked at her again.

"My dog. He must come with me."

"This old scarecrow? You can choose any kind of a dog; I won't spare the expenses."

"I want Terry."

"Oh! All right, please yourself."

Joyce was staring at him. "You do know - don't you that I don't love you? Not in the least."

"I'm not worrying about that; I'm not thin-skinned. But no hanky-panky, my girl. If you come with me, you play fair."

The colour flashed into Joyce's cheeks. "You will have your money's worth." she said.

"What about a kiss now?"

He advanced upon her. She kept smiling. He took her in his arms, kissing her face, her neck. She neither stiffened nor drew back. He released at last.

"I'll get you a ring," he said. "What would you like, diamonds or pearls?"

"A ruby," said Joyce. "The largest ruby possible - the colour of blood."

"That's an odd idea."

"I should like it to be a fixed in a little half loop of pearls that was all that Michael could afford to give me."

"Better luck this time, eh?" he said.

"You put things wonderfully, Arthur."

Halliday went out chuckling.

"Terry," said Joyce. "Lick me - lick hard - all over my face and my neck - particularly the neck."

And as Terry obeyed, she spoke reflectively:

"Thinking of something else ought do the trick - that's the only way. You'd never guess what I thought of - jam - jam in a grocer's shop. I said it over to myself. Strawberry, blackcurrant, raspberry, damson. And perhaps, Terry, he'll get tired of me fairly soon. I hope so, don't you? They say men do when they're married to you. Only Michael wouldn't have tired of me - never - never! Oh, Michael..."

Joyce rose the next morning with a heart like lead. She gave a deep sigh and immediately Terry, who slept on her bed, had moved up and was kissing her affectionately.

"Oh, darling - darling! We've got to go through with it. But if only something would happen. Terry darling, can't you help Missus? You would if you could, I know."

Mrs. Barnes brought up some tea and bread and butter and was heartily congratulatory.

"There now, ma'am, to think of you going to marry that gentleman. It was a Rolls he came in. It was indeed. It quite sobered Barnes

up to think of one of them Rolls standing outside our door. Why, I declare that dog's sitting out on the window sill."

"He likes the sun," said Joyce. "But it's rather dangerous. Terry, come in."

"I'd have the poor dear put out of his misery if I was you," said Mrs. Barnes, "and get your gentleman to buy you one of them plummy dogs as ladies carry in their muffs."

Joyce smiled and called again to Terry. The dog rose awkwardly and just at that moment the noise of a dog fight rose from the street below. Terry craned his neck forward and added some brisk barking. The window sill was old and rotten. It tilted and Terry, too old and stiff to regain his balance, fell.

With a wild cry, Joyce ran down the stairs and out of the front door. In a few seconds she was kneeling by Terry's side. He was whining pitifully and his position showed her that he was badly hurt. She bent over him.

"Terry - Terry darling - darling, darling, darling - "

Very feebly, he tried to wag his tail.

"Terry boy - Missus will make you better - darling boy - "

A crowd, mainly composed of small boys, was pushing round.

"Fell from the window, 'e did." "My, 'e looks bad." "Broke 'is back as likely as not."

Joyce paid no heed.

"Mrs. Barnes, where's the nearest vet?"

"There's Jobling - round in Mere Street - if you could get him there."

"A taxi."

"Allow me."

It was the pleasant voice of an elderly man who had just alighted from a taxi. He knelt down by Terry and lifted the upper lip, then passed his hand down the dog's body.

"I'm afraid he may be bleeding internally," he said. "There don't seem to be any bones broken. We'd better get him along to the vet's."

Between them, he and Joyce lifted the dog. Terry gave a yelp of pain. His teeth met in Joyce's arm.

"Terry - it's all right - all right, old man."

They got him into the taxi and drove off. Joyce wrapped a handkerchief round her arm in an absent-minded way. Terry, distressed, tried to lick it.

"I know, darling; I know. You didn't mean to hurt me. It's all right. It's all right, Terry."

She stroked his head. The man opposite watched her but said nothing.

They arrived at the vet's fairly quickly and found him in. He was a red-faced man with an unsympathetic manner.

He handled Terry none too gently while Joyce stood by agonized. The tears were running down her face. She kept on talking in a low, reassuring voice.

"It's all right, darling. It's all right... "

The vet straightened himself.

"Impossible to say exactly. I must make a proper examination. You must leave him here."

"Oh! I can't."

"I'm afraid you must. I must take him below. I'll telephone you in - say - half an hour."

Sick at heart, Joyce gave in. She kissed Terry on his nose. Blind with tears, she stumbled down the steps. The man who had helped her was still there. She had forgotten him.

"The taxi's still here. I'll take you back." She shook her head.

"I'd rather walk."

"I'll walk with you."

He paid off the taxi. She was hardly conscious of him as he walked quietly by her side without speaking. When they arrived as Mrs Bernes', he spoke.

"Your wrist. You must see to it."

She looked down at it. "Oh! That's all tight."

"It wants properly washing and tying up. I'll come in with you."

He went with her up the stairs. She let him wash the place and bind it up with a clean handkerchief. She only said one thing.

"Terry didn't mean to do it. He would never, never mean to do it. He just didn't realize it was me. He must have been in dreadful pain."

"I'm afraid so, yes."

"And perhaps they're hurting him dreadfully now?"

"I'm sure that everything that can he done for him is being done. When the vet rings up, you can go and get him and nurse him here."

"Yes, of course."

The man paused, then moved towards the door.

"I hope it will be all right," he said awkwardly. "Goodbye."

"Goodbye."

Two or three minutes later it occurred to her that he had been kind and that she had never thanked him.

Mrs. Barnes appeared, cup in hand.

"Now, my poor lamb, a cup of hot tea. You're all to pieces, I can see that."

"Thank you, Mrs. Barnes, but I don't want any tea."

"It would do you good, dearie. Don't take on so now. The doggie will be all tight, and even if he isn't, that gentleman of yours will give you a pretty new dog - "

"Don't, Mrs. Barnes. Don't. Please, if you don't mind, I'd rather he left alone."

"Well, I never - there's the telephone."

Joyce sped down to it like an arrow. She lifted the receiver. Mrs. Barnes panted down after her. She heard Joyce say, "Yes - speaking. What? Oh! Oh! Yes. Yes, thank you."

She put back the receiver. The face she turned to Mrs. Barnes startled that good woman. It seemed devoid of any life or expression.

"Terry's dead, Mrs. Barnes," she said. "He died alone there without me."

She went upstairs and, going into her room, shut the door very decisively.

"Well, I never," said Mrs. Barnes to the hall wallpaper.

Five minutes later she poked her head into the room. Joyce was sitting bolt upright in a chair. She was not crying.

"It's your gentleman, miss. Shall I send him up?"

A sudden light came into Joyce's eyes. "Yes, please. I'd like to see him."

Halliday came in boisterously.

"Well, here we are. I haven't lost much time, have I? I'm prepared to carry you off from this dreadful place here and now. You can't stay here. Come on, get your things on."

"There's no need, Arthur."

"No need? What do you mean?"

"Terry's dead. I don't need to marry you now."

"What are you talking about?"

"My dog - Terry. He's dead. I was only marrying you so that we could be together."

Halliday stared at her, his face growing redder and redder. "You're mad."

"I dare say. People who love dogs are."

"You seriously tell me that you were only marrying me because - Oh, it's absurd!"

"Why did you think I was marrying you? You knew I hated you."

"You were marrying me because I could give you a jolly good time - and so I can."

"To my mind," said Joyce, "that is a much more revolting motive than mine. Anyway, it's off. I'm not marrying you!"

"Do you realize that you are treating me damned badly?"

She looked at him coolly but with such a blaze in her eyes that he drew back before it.

"I don't think so. I've heard you talk about getting a kick out of life. That's what you got out of me - and my dislike of you heightened it. You knew I hated you and you enjoyed it. When I let you kiss me yesterday, you were disappointed because I didn't flinch or wince. There's something brutal in you, Arthur, something cruel - something that likes hurting... Nobody could treat you as badly as you deserve. And now do you mind getting out of my room? I want it to myself."

He spluttered a little.

"Wh - What are you going to do? You've no money."

"That's my business. Please go."

"You little devil. You absolutely maddening little devil. You haven't done with me yet."

Joyce laughed.

The laugh routed him as nothing else had done. It was so unexpected. He went awkwardly down the stairs and drove away.

Joyce heaved a sigh. She pulled on her shabby black felt hat and went out. She walked along the streets mechanically, neither thinking nor feeling. Somewhere at the back of her mind there was

pain - pain that she would presently feel, but for the moment everything was mercifully dulled.

She passed the Registry office and hesitated.

"I must do something. There's the river, of course. I've often thought of that. Just finish everything. But it's so cold and wet. I don't think I'm brave enough. I'm not brave really."

She turned into the Registry Office.

"Good morning, Mrs Lambert. I'm afraid we've no daily post."

"It doesn't matter," said Joyce. "I can take any kind of post now. My friend, whom I lived with, has - gone away."

"Then you'd consider going abroad?"

Joyce nodded.

"Yes, as far away as possible."

"Mr Allaby is here now, as it happens, interviewing candidates. I'll send you in to him."

In another minute Joyce was sitting in a cubicle answering questions. Something about her interlocutor seemed vaguely familiar to her, but she could not place him. And then suddenly her mind awoke a little, aware that the last question was faintly out of the ordinary.

"Do you get on with the old ladies ?" Mr Allaby was asking.

Joyce smiled in spite of herself. "I think so."

"You see my aunt, who lives with me, is rather difficult. She is very fond of me and she is a great dear really, but I fancy that a young woman might find her rather difficult sometimes."

"I think I'm patient and good-tempered," said Joyce, "and I have always got on with elderly people very well."

"You would have to do certain things for my aunt and otherwise you would have the charge of my little boy, who is three. His mother died a year ago."

There was a pause.

"Then if you think you would like the post, we will consider that settled. We travel out next week. I will let you know the exact date, and I expect you would like a small advance of salary to fit yourself out."

"Thank you very much. That would be very kind of you."

They had both risen.

Suddenly Mr. Allaby said awkwardly:

"I - I hate to butt in - I mean I wish - I would like to know - I mean, is your dog all right?"

For the first time Joyce looked at him. The colour came into her face, her blue eyes deepened almost to black. She looked straight at him. She had thought him elderly, but he was not so very old. Hair turning grey, a pleasant weatherbeaten face, rather stooping shoulders, eyes that were brown and something of the shy kindliness of a dog's. He looked a little like a dog, Joyce thought.

"Oh, it's you," she said. "I thought afterwards - I never thanked you."

"No need. Didn't expect it. Knew what you were feeling like. What about the poor old chap?"

The tears came into Joyce's eyes. They streamed down her cheeks. Nothing on earth could have kept them back.

"He's dead."

"Oh!"

He said nothing else, but to Joyce that Oh! was one of the most comforting things she had ever heard. There was everything in it that couldn't be put into words.

After a minute or two he said jerkily:

"Matter of fact, I had a dog. Died two years ago. Was with a crowd of people at the time who couldn't understand making heavy weather about it. Pretty rotten to have to carry on as though nothing had happened."

Joyce nodded.

"I know - " said Mr. Allaby.

He took her hand, squeezed it hard and dropped it. He went out of the little cubicle. Joyce followed in a minute or two and fixed up various details with the ladylike person. When she arrived home, Mrs. Barnes met her on the doorstep with that relish in gloom typical of her class.

"They've sent the poor little doggie's body home," she announced. "It's up in your room. I was saying to Barnes, and he's ready to dig a nice little hole in the back garden - "

MAGNOLIA BLOSSOM

Vincent Easton was waiting under the clock at Victoria Station. Now and then he glanced up at it uneasily. He thought to himself: "How many other men have waited here for a woman who didn't come?"

A sharp pang shot through him. Supposing that Theo didn't come, that she had changed her mind? Women did that sort of thing. Was he sure of her - had he ever been sure of her? Did he really know anything at all about her? Hadn't she puzzled him from the first? There had seemed to be two women - the lovely, laughing creature who was Richard Darrell's wife, and the other - silent, mysterious, who had walked by his side in the garden of Haymer's Close. Like a magnolia flower - that was how he thought of her - perhaps because it was under the magnolia tree that they had tasted their first rapturous, incredulous kiss. The air had been sweet with the scent of magnolia bloom, and one or two petals, velvety-soft and fragrant, had floated down, resting on that upturned face that was as creamy and as soft and as silent as they. Magnolia blossom - exotic, fragrant, mysterious.

That had been a fortnight ago - the second day he had met her. And now he was waiting for her to come to him forever. Again incredulity shot through him. She wouldn't come. How could he ever have believed it? It would be giving up so much. The beautiful Mrs. Darrell couldn't do this sort of thing quietly. It was bound to be a nine days' wonder, a far-reaching scandal that would never quite be forgotten. There were better, more expedient ways of doing these things - a discreet divorce, for instance.

But they had never thought of that for a moment - at least he had not. Had she, he wondered? He had never known anything of her thoughts. He had asked her to come away with him almost timorously - for after all, what was he? Nobody in particular - one of a thousand orange-growers in the Transvaal. What a life to take

her to - after the brilliance of London! And yet, since he wanted her so desperately, he must needs ask.

She had consented very quietly, with no hesitations or protests, as though it were the simplest thing in the world that he was asking her.

"Tomorrow?" he had said, amazed, almost unbelieving.

And she had promised in that soft, broken voice that was so different from the laughing brilliance of her social manner. He had compared her to a diamond when he first saw her - a thing of flashing fire, reflecting light from a hundred facets. But at that first touch, that first kiss, she had changed miraculously to the clouded softness of a pearl - a pearl like a magnolia blossom, creamy-pink.

She had promised. And now he was waiting for her to fulfil that promise.

He looked again at the clock. If she did not come soon, they would miss the train.

Sharply a wave of reaction set in. She wouldn't come! Of course she wouldn't come. Fool that he had been ever to expect it! What were promises? He would find a letter when he got back to his rooms - explaining, protesting, saying all the things that women do when they are excusing themselves for lack of courage.

He felt anger - anger and the bitterness of frustration.

Then he saw her coming towards him down the platform, a faint smile on her face. She walked slowly, without haste or fluster, as one who had all eternity before her. She was in black - soft black that clung, with a little black hat that framed the wonderful creamy pallor of her face.

He found himself grasping her hand, muttering stupidly: "So you've come - you have come. After all!"

"Of course."

How calm her voice sounded! How calm!

"I thought you wouldn't," he said, releasing her hand and breathing hard.

Her eyes opened - wide, beautiful eyes. There was wonder in them, the simple wonder of a child.

"Why?"

He didn't answer. Instead he turned aside and requisitioned a passing porter. They had not much time. The next few minutes were all bustle and confusion. Then they were sitting in their reserved compartment and the drab houses of southern London were drifting by them.

II

Theodora Darrell was sitting opposite him. At last she was his. And he knew now how incredulous, up to the very last minute, he had been. He had not dared to let himself believe. That magical, elusive quality about her had frightened him. It had seemed impossible that she should ever belong to him.

Now the suspense was over. The irrevocable step was taken. He looked across at her. She lay back in the corner, quite still. The faint smile lingered on her lips, her eyes were cast down, the long, black lashes swept the creamy curve of her cheek.

He thought: "What's in her mind now? What is she thinking of? Me? Her husband? What does she think about him anyway? Did she care for him once? Or did she never care? Does she hate him, or is she indifferent to him?" And with a pang the thought swept through him: "I don't know. I never shall know. I love her, and I don't know anything about her - what she thinks or what she feels."

His mind circled round the thought of Theodora Darrell's husband. He had known plenty of married women who were only too ready to talk about their husbands - of how they were misunderstood by them, of how their finer feelings were ignored. Vincent Easton reflected cynically that it was one of the best-known opening gambits.

But except casually, Theo had never spoken of Richard Darrell. Easton knew of him what everybody knew. He was a popular man, handsome, with an engaging, carefree manner. Everybody liked Darrell. His wife always seemed on excellent terms with him. But

that proved nothing, Vincent reflected. Theo was well-bred - she would not air her grievances in public.

And between them, no word had passed. From that second evening of their meeting, when they had walked together in the garden, silent, their shoulders touching, and he had felt the faint tremor that shook her at his touch, there had been no explainings, no defining of the position. She had returned his kisses, a dumb, trembling creature, shorn of all that hard brilliance which, together with her cream-and-rose beauty, had made her famous. Never once had she spoken of her husband. Vincent had been thankful for that at the time. He had been glad to be spared the arguments of a woman who wished to assure herself and her lover that they were justified in yielding to their love.

Yet now the tacit conspiracy of silence worried him. He had again that panic-stricken sense of knowing nothing about this strange creature who was willingly linking her life to his. He was afraid.

In the impulse to reassure himself, he bent forward and laid a hand on the black-clad knee opposite him. He felt once again the faint tremor that shook her, and he reached up for her hand. Bending forward, he kissed the palm, a long, lingering kiss. He felt the response of her fingers on his and, looking up, met her eyes, and was content. He leaned back in his seat. For the moment, he wanted no more. They were together. She was his.

And presently he said in a light, almost bantering tone: "You're very silent?"

"Am I?"

"Yes." He waited a minute, then said in a graver tone: "You're sure you don't - regret?"

Her eyes opened wide at that. "Oh, no!"

He did not doubt the reply. There was an assurance of sincerity behind it.

"What are you thinking about? I want to know."

In a low voice she answered: "I think I'm afraid."

"Afraid?"

"Of happiness."

He moved over beside her then, held her to him and kissed the softness of her face and neck.

"I love you," he said. "I love you - love you."

Her answer was in the clinging of her body, the abandon of her lips.

Then he moved back to his own corner. He picked up a magazine and so did she. Every now and then, over the top of the magazines, their eyes met. Then they smiled.

They arrived at Dover just after five. They were to spend the night there, and cross to the Continent on the following day. Theo entered their sitting room in the hotel with Vincent close behind her. He had a couple of evening papers in his hand which he threw down on the table. Two of the hotel servants brought in the luggage and withdrew.

Theo turned from the window where she had been standing looking out. In another minute they were in each other's arms.

There was a discreet tap on the door and they drew apart again.

"Damn it all," said Vincent, "it doesn't seem as though we were ever going to be alone."

Theo smiled. "It doesn't look like it," she said softly. Sitting down on the sofa, she picked up one of the papers.

The knock proved to be a waiter bearing tea. He laid it on the table, drawing the latter up to the sofa on which Theo was sitting, cast a deft glance round, inquired if there were anything further, and withdrew.

Vincent, who had gone into the adjoining room, came back into the sitting room.

"Now for tea," he said cheerily, but stopped suddenly in the middle of the room. "Anything wrong?" he asked.

Theo was sitting bolt upright on the sofa. She was staring in front of her with dazed eyes, and her face had gone deathly white.

Vincent took a quick step towards her. "What is it, sweetheart?"

For answer she held out the paper to him, her finger pointing to the headline.

Vincent took the paper from her. "FAILURE OF HOBSON, JEKYLL AND LUCAS," he read. The name of the big city firm conveyed nothing to him at the moment, though he had an irritating conviction in the back of his mind that it ought to do so. He looked inquiringly at Theo.

"Richard is Hobson, Jekyll and Lucas," she explained.

"Your husband?"

"Yes."

Vincent returned to the paper and read the bald information it conveyed carefully. Phrases such as "sudden crash," "serious revelations to follow," "other houses affected" struck him disagreeably.

Roused by a movement, he looked up. Theo was adjusting her little black hat in front of the mirror. She turned at the movement he made.

Her eyes looked steadily into his.

"Vincent - I must go to Richard."

He sprang up. "Theo - don't he absurd."

She repeated mechanically:

"I must go to Richard."

"But, my dear - "

She made a gesture towards the paper on the floor.

"That means ruin - bankruptcy. I can't choose this day of all others to leave him."

"You had left him before you heard of this. Be reasonable!"

She shook her head mournfully.

"You don't understand. I must go to Richard."

And from that he could not move her. Strange that a creature so soft, so pliant, could he so unyielding. After the first, she did not argue. She let him say what he had to say unhindered. He held her in his arms, seeking to break her will by enslaving her senses, but though her soft mouth returned his kisses, he felt in her something aloof and invincible that withstood all his pleadings.

He let her go at last, sick and weary of the vain endeavour. From pleading he had turned to bitterness, reproaching her with never having loved him. That, too, she took in silence, without protest, her face, dumb and pitiful, giving the lie to his words. Rage mastered him in the end; he hurled at her every cruel word he could think of, seeking only to bruise and batter her to her knees. At last the words gave out; there was nothing more to say. He sat, his head in his hands, staring down at the red pile carpet. By the door, Theodora stood, a black shadow with a white face.

It was all over.

She said quietly: "Good-bye, Vincent."

He did not answer.

The door opened - and shut again.

III

The Darrells lived in a house in Chelsea - an intriguing, old-world house, standing in a little garden of its own. Up the front of the house grew a magnolia tree, smutty, dirty, begrimed, but still a magnolia.

Theo looked up at it, as she stood on the doorstep some three hours later. A sudden smile twisted her mouth in pain.

She went straight to the study at the back of the house. A man was pacing up and down in the room - a young man, with a handsome face and a haggard expression.

He gave an ejaculation of relief as she came in.

"Thank God you've turned up, Theo. They said you'd taken your luggage with you and gone off out of town somewhere."

"I heard the news and came back."

Richard Darrell put an arm about her and drew her to the couch. They sat down upon it side by side. Theo tore herself free of the encircling arms in what seemed a perfectly natural manner.

"How bad is it, Richard?" she asked quietly.

"Just as bad as it can be - and that's saying a lot."

"Tell me!"

He began to walk up and down again as he talked. Theo sat and watched him. He was not to know that every now and then the room went dim, and his voice faded from her hearing, while another room in a hotel at Dover came clearly before her eyes.

Nevertheless she managed to listen intelligently enough. He came back and sat down on the couch by her.

"Fortunately," he ended, "they can't touch your marriage settlement. The house is yours also."

Theo nodded thoughtfully.

"We shall have that at any rate," she said. "Then everything will not be too bad? It means a fresh start, that is all."

"Oh! Quite so. Yes."

But his voice did not ring true, and Theo thought suddenly: "There's something else. He hasn't told me everything."

"There's nothing more, Richard?" she said gently. "Nothing worse?"

He hesitated for just half a second, then: "Worse? What should there be?"

"I don't know," said Theo.

"It'll be all right," said Richard, speaking more as though to reassure himself than Theo. "Of course, it'll be all right."

He flung an arm about her suddenly.

"I'm glad you're here," he said. "It'll be all right now that you're here. Whatever else happens, I've got you, haven't I?"

She said gently: "Yes, you've got me." And this time she left his arm round her.

He kissed her and held her close to him, as though in some strange way he derived comfort from her nearness.

"I've got you, Theo," he said again presently, and she answered as before: "Yes, Richard."

He slipped from the couch to the floor at her feet.

"I'm tired out," he said fretfully. "My God, it's been a day. Awful! I don't know what I should do if you weren't here. After all, one's wife is one's wife, isn't she?"

She did not speak, only bowed her head in assent.

He laid his head on her lap. The sigh he gave was like that of a tired child.

Theo thought again: "There's something he hasn't told me. What is it?"

Mechanically her hand dropped to his smooth, dark head, and she stroked it gently, as a mother might comfort a child.

Richard murmured vaguely:

"It'll be all right now you're here. You won't let me down."

His breathing grew slow and even. He slept. Her hand still smoothed his head.

But her eyes looked steadily into the darkness in front of her, seeing nothing.

"Don't you think, Richard," said Theodora, "that you'd better tell me everything?"

It was three days later. They were in the drawing room before dinner.

Richard started, and flushed. "I don't know what you mean," he parried.

"Don't you?"

He shot a quick glance at her.

"Of course there are - well - details."

"I ought to know everything, don't you think, if I am to help?"

He looked at her strangely. "What makes you think I want you to help?"

She was a little astonished.

"My dear Richard, I'm your wife."

He smiled suddenly, the old, attractive, carefree smile. "So you are, Theo. And a very good-looking wife, too. I never could stand ugly women."

He began walking up and down the room, as was his custom when something was worrying him.

"I won't deny you're right in a way," he said presently. "There is something." He broke off.

"Yes - "

"It's so damned hard to explain things of this kind to women. They get hold of the wrong end of the stick - fancy a thing is - well, what it isn't."

Theo said nothing.

"You see," went on Richard, "the law's one thing, and right and wrong are quite another. I may do a thing that's perfectly right and honest, but the law wouldn't take the same view of it. Nine times out of ten, everything pans out all right, and the tenth time you - well, hit a snag."

Theo began to understand. She thought to herself: "Why am I not surprised? Did I always know, deep down, that he wasn't straight?"

Richard went on talking. He explained himself at unnecessary lengths. Theo was content for him to cloak the actual details of the

affair in this mantle of verbosity. The matter concerned a large tract of South African property. Exactly what Richard had done, she was not concerned to know. Morally, he assured her, everything was fair and aboveboard; legally - well, there it was, no getting away from the fact, he had rendered himself liable to criminal prosecution.

He kept shooting quick glances at his wife as he talked. He was nervous and uncomfortable. And still he excused himself and tried to explain away that which a child might have seen in its naked truth. Then finally in a burst of justification, he broke down. Perhaps Theo's eyes, momentarily scornful, had something to do with it. He sank down in a chair by the fireplace, his head in his hands.

"There it is, Theo," he said brokenly. "What are you going to do about it?"

She came over to him with scarcely a moment's pause and, kneeling down by the chair, put her face against his.

"What can he done, Richard? What can we do?"

He caught her to him.

"You mean it? You'll stick to me?"

"Of course. My dear, of course."

He said, moved to sincerity in spite of himself: "I'm a thief, Theo. That's what it means, shorn of fine language - just a thief."

"Then I'm a thief's wife, Richard. We'll sink or swim together."

They were silent for a little while. Presently Richard recovered something of his jaunty manner.

"You know, Theo, I've got a plan, but we'll talk of that later. It's just on dinnertime. We must go and change. Put on that creamy thingummybob of yours, you know - the Caillot model."

Theo raised her eyebrows quizzically.

"For an evening at home?"

"Yes, yes, I know. But I like it. Put it on, there's a good girl. It cheers me up to see you looking your best."

Theo came down to dinner in the Caillot. It was a creation in creamy brocade, with a faint pattern of gold running through it and an undernote of pale pink to give warmth to the cream. It was cut daringly low in the back, and nothing could have been better-designed to show off the dazzling whiteness of Theo's neck and shoulders. She was truly now a magnolia flower.

Richard's eye rested upon her in warm approval. "Good girl. You know, you look simply stunning in that dress."

They went in to dinner. Throughout the evening Richard was nervous and unlike himself, joking and laughing about nothing at all, as if in a vain attempt to shake off his cares. Several times Theo tried to lead him back to the subject they had been discussing before, but he edged away from it.

Then suddenly, as she rose to go to bed, he came to the point.

"No, don't go yet. I've got something to say. You know, about this miserable business."

She sat down again.

He began talking rapidly. With a bit of luck, the whole thing could be hushed up. He had covered his tracks fairly well. So long as certain papers didn't get into the receiver's hands -

He stopped significantly.

"Papers?" asked Theo perplexedly. "You mean you will destroy them?"

Richard made a grimace.

"I'd destroy them fast enough if I could get hold of them. That's the devil of it all!"

"Who has them, then?"

"A man we both know - Vincent Easton."

A very faint exclamation escaped Theo. She forced it back, but Richard had noticed it.

"I've suspected he knew something of the business all along. That's why I've asked him here a good bit. You may remember that I asked you to be nice to him?"

"I remember," said Theo.

"Somehow I never seem to have got on really friendly terms with him. Don't know why. But he likes you. I should say he likes you a good deal."

Theo said in a very clear voice: "He does."

"Ah!" said Richard appreciatively. "That's good. Now you see what I'm driving at. I'm convinced that if you went to Vincent Easton and asked him to give you those papers, he wouldn't refuse. Pretty woman, you know - all that sort of thing."

"I can't do that," said Theo quickly.

"Nonsense."

"It's out of the question."

The red came slowly out in blotches on Richard's face. She saw that he was angry.

"My dear girl, I don't think you quite realize the position. If this comes out, I'm liable to go to prison. It's ruin - disgrace."

"Vincent Easton will not use those papers against you. I am sure of that."

"That's not quite the point. He mayn't realize that they incriminate me. It's only taken in conjunction with - with my affairs - with the figures they're bound to find. Oh! I can't go into details. He'll ruin me without knowing what he's doing unless somebody puts the position before him."

"You can do that yourself, surely. Write to him."

"A fat lot of good that would be! No, Theo, we've only got one hope. You're the trump card. You're my wife. You must help me. Go to Easton tonight - "

A cry broke from Theo.

"Not tonight. Tomorrow perhaps."

"My God, Theo, can't you realize things? Tomorrow may be too late. If you could go now - at once - to Easton's rooms." He saw her flinch, and tried to reassure her. "I know, my dear girl, I know. It's a beastly thing to do. But it's life or death. Theo, you won't fail me? You said you'd do anything to help me - "

Theo heard herself speaking in a hard, dry voice. "Not this thing. There are reasons."

"It's life or death, Theo. I mean it. See here."

He snapped open a drawer of the desk and took out a revolver. If there was something theatrical about that action, it escaped her notice.

"It's that or shooting myself. I can't face the racket. If you won't do as I ask you, I'll be a dead man before morning. I swear to you solemnly that that's the truth."

Theo gave a low cry. "No, Richard, not that!"

"Then help me."

He flung the revolver down on the table and knelt by her side. "Theo, my darling - if you love me - if you've ever loved me - do this for me. You're my wife, Theo. I've no one else to turn to."

On and on his voice went, murmuring, pleading. And at last Theo heard her own voice saying: "Very well - yes."

Richard took her to the door and put her into a taxi.

IV

"Theo!"

Vincent Easton sprang up in incredulous delight. She stood in the doorway. Her wrap of white ermine was hanging from her shoulders. Never, Easton thought, had she looked so beautiful.

"You've come after all."

She put out a hand to stop him as he came towards her.

"No, Vincent, this isn't what you think."

She spoke in a low, hurried voice.

"I'm here from my husband. He thinks there are some papers which may - do him harm. I have come to ask you to give them to me."

Vincent stood very still, looking at her. Then he gave a short laugh.

"So that's it, is it? I thought Hobson, Jekyll and Lucas sounded familiar the other day, but I couldn't place them at the minute. Didn't know your husband was connected with the firm. Things have been going wrong there for some time. I was commissioned to look into the matter. I suspected some underling. Never thought of the man at the top.

Theo said nothing. Vincent looked at her curiously.

"It makes no difference to you, this?" he asked. "That - Oh! well, to put it plainly, that your husband's a swindler?'

She shook her head.

"It beats me," said Vincent. Then he added quietly: "Will you wait a minute or two? I will get the papers."

Theo sat down in a chair. He went into the other room. Presently he returned and delivered a small package into her hand.

"Thank you," said Theo. "Have you a match?"

Taking the matchbox he proffered, she knelt down by the fireplace. When the papers were reduced to a pile of ashes, she stood up.

"Thank you," she said again.

"Not at all," he answered formally. "Let me get you a taxi."

He put her into it, saw her drive away. A strange, formal little interview. After the first, they had not even dared look at each other. Well, that was that, the end. He would go away, abroad, try and forget.

Theo leaned her head out of the window and spoke to the taxi driver. She could not go back at once to the house in Chelsea. She must have a breathing space. Seeing Vincent again had shaken her horribly. If only - if only. But she pulled herself up. Love for her husband she had none - but she owed him loyalty. He was down, she must stick by him. Whatever else he might have done, he

loved her; his offence had been committed against society, not against her.

The taxi meandered on through the wide streets of Hampstead. They came out on the heath, and a breath of cool, invigorating air fanned Theo's cheeks. She had herself in hand again now. The taxi sped back towards Chelsea. Richard came out to meet her in the hall.

"Well," he demanded, "you've been a long time."

"Have I?"

"Yes - a very long time. Is it - all right?"

He followed her, a cunning look in his eyes. His hands were shaking.

"It's - it's all right, eh?" he said again.

"I burnt them myself."

"Oh!"

She went on into the study, sinking into a big armchair. Her face was dead white and her whole body drooped with fatigue. She thought to herself: "If only I could go to sleep now and never, never wake up again!"

Richard was watching her. His glance, shy, furtive, kept coming and going. She noticed nothing. She was beyond noticing.

"It went off quite all right, eh?"

"I've told you so."

"You're sure they were the right papers? Did you look?"

"No."

"But then - "

"I'm sure, I tell you. Don't bother me, Richard. I can't bear any more tonight."

Richard shifted nervously.

"No, no. I'm sure."

He fidgeted about the room. Presently he came over to her, laid a hand on her shoulder. She shook it off.

"Don't touch me." She tried to laugh. "I'm sorry, Richard. My nerves are on edge. I feel I can't bear to be touched."

"I know. I understand."

Again he wandered up and down. "Theo," he burst out suddenly. "I'm damned sorry."

"What?" She looked up, vaguely startled.

"I oughtn't to have let you go there at this time of night. I never dreamed that you'd be subjected to any - unpleasantness."

"Unpleasantness?" She laughed. The word seemed to amuse her. "You don't know! Oh, Richard, you don't know!"

"I don't know what?"

She said very gravely, looking straight in front of her: "What this night has cost me."

"My God! Theo! I never meant - You - you did that, for me? The swine! Theo - Theo - I couldn't have known. I couldn't have guessed. My God!"

He was kneeling by her now stammering, his arms round her, and she turned and looked at him with faint surprise, as though his words had at last really penetrated to her attention.

"I - I never meant - "

"You never meant what, Richard?"

Her voice startled him.

"Tell me. What was it that you never meant?"

"Theo, don't let us speak of it. I don't want to know. I want never to think of it."

She was staring at him, wide awake now, with every faculty alert. Her words came clear and distinct: "You never meant - What do you think happened?"

"It didn't happen, Theo. Let's say it didn't happen."

And still she stared, till the truth began to come to her. "You think that - "

"I don't want - "

She interrupted him: "You think that Vincent Easton asked a price for those letters? You think that I - paid him?"

Richard said weakly and unconvincingly: "I - I never dreamed he was that kind of man."

V

"Didn't you?" She looked at him searchingly. His eyes fell before hers.

"Why did you ask me to put on this dress this evening? Why did you send me there alone at this time of night? You guessed he - cared for me. You wanted to save your skin - save it at any cost - even at the cost of my honour."

She got up. "I see now. You meant that from the beginning - or at least you saw it as a possibility, and it didn't deter you."

"Theo - "

"You can't deny it. Richard, I thought I knew all there was to know about you years ago. I've known almost from the first that you weren't straight as regards the world. But I thought you were straight with me."

"Theo - "

"Can you deny what I've just been saying?"

He was silent, in spite of himself.

"Listen, Richard. There is something I must tell you. Three days ago when this blow fell on you, the servants told you I was away - gone to the country. That was only partly true. I had gone away with Vincent Easton."

Richard made an inarticulate sound. She held out a hand to stop him.

"Wait. We were at Dover. I saw a paper - I realized what had happened. Then, as you know, I came back."

She paused.

Richard caught her by the wrist. His eyes burnt into hers. "You came back - in time?"

Theo gave a short, bitter laugh. "Yes, I came back, as you say, 'in time,' Richard."

Her husband relinquished his hold on her arm. He stood by the mantelpiece, his head thrown back. He looked handsome and rather noble.

"In that case," he said, "I can forgive."

"I cannot."

The two words came crisply. They had the semblance and the effect of a bomb in the quiet room. Richard started forward, staring, his jaw dropped with an almost ludicrous effect.

"You - er - what did you say, Theo?"

"I said I cannot forgive! In leaving you for another man, I sinned - not technically, perhaps, but in intention, which is the same thing. But if I sinned, I sinned through love. You, too, have not been faithful to me since our marriage. Oh, yes, I know. That I forgave, because I really believed in your love for me. But the thing you have done tonight is different. It is an ugly thing, Richard - a thing no woman should forgive. You sold me, your own wife, to purchase safety!"

She picked up her wrap and turned towards the door.

"Theo," he stammered out, "where are you going?"

She looked back over her shoulder at him.

"We all have to pay in this life, Richard. For my sin I must pay in loneliness. For yours - well, you gambled with the thing you love, and you have lost it!"

"You are going?"

She drew a long breath. "To freedom. There is nothing to bind me here."

He heard the door shut. Ages passed, or was it a few minutes? Something fluttered down outside the window - the last of the magnolia petals, soft, fragrant.

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THE HOUSE OF DREAMS

This is the story of John Segrave - of his life, which was unsatisfactory; of his love, which was unsatisfied; of his dreams, and of his death; and if in the two latter he found what was denied in the two former, then his life may, after all, be taken as a success. Who knows?

John Segrave came of a family which had been slowly going down the hill for the last century. They had been landowners since the days of Elizabeth, but their last piece of property was sold. It was thought well that one of the sons at least should acquire the useful art of money-making. It was an unconscious irony of Fate that John should be the one chosen.

With his strangely sensitive mouth, and the long dark blue slits of eyes that suggested an elf or a faun, something wild and of the woods, it was incongruous that he should be offered up, a sacrifice on the altar of Finance. The smell of the earth, the taste of the sea salt on one's lips, and the free sky above one's head - these were the things beloved by John Segrave, to which he was to bid farewell.

At the age of eighteen he became a junior clerk in a big business house. Seven years later he was still a clerk, not quite so junior, but with status otherwise unchanged. The faculty for "getting on in the world" had been omitted from his makeup. He was punctual, industrious, plodding - a clerk and nothing but a clerk. And yet he might have been - what? He could hardly answer that question himself, but he could not rid himself of the conviction that somewhere there was a life in which he could have - counted. There was power in him, swiftness of vision, a something of which his fellow toilers had never had a glimpse. They liked him. He was popular because of his air of careless friendship, and they never appreciated the fact that he barred them out by that same manner from any real intimacy.

The dream came to him suddenly. It was no childish fantasy growing and developing through the years. It came on a midsummer night, or rather early morning, and he woke from it tingling all over, striving to hold it to him as it fled, slipping from his clutch in the elusive way dreams have.

Desperately he clung to it. It must not go - it must not - He must remember the house. It was the House, of course! The House he knew so well. Was it a real house, or did he merely know it in dreams? He didn't remember - but he certainly knew it - knew it very well.

The faint grey light of the early morning was stealing into the room. The stillness was extraordinary. At 4:50 a.m. London, weary London, found her brief instant of peace.

John Segrave lay quiet, wrapped in the joy, the exquisite wonder and beauty of his dream. How clever it had been of him to remember it! A dream flitted so quickly as a rule, ran past you just as with waking consciousness your clumsy fingers sought to stop and hold it. But he had been too quick for this dream! He had seized it as it was slipping swiftly by him.

It was really a most remarkable dream! There was the house and - His thoughts were brought up with a jerk, for when he came to think of it, he couldn't remember anything but the house. And suddenly, with a tinge of disappointment, he recognized that, after all, the house was quite strange to him. He hadn't even dreamed of it before.

It was a white house, standing on high ground. There were trees near it, blue hills in the distance, but its peculiar charm was independent of surroundings for (and this was the point, the climax of the dream) it was a beautiful, a strangely beautiful house. His pulses quickened as he remembered anew the strange beauty of the house.

The outside of it, of course, for he hadn't been inside. There had been no question of that - no question of it whatsoever.

Then, as the dingy outlines of his bed-sitting-room began to take shape in the growing light, he experienced the disillusion of the dreamer. Perhaps, after all, his dream hadn't been so very wonderful - or had the

wonderful, the explanatory part, slipped past him, and laughed at his ineffectual clutching hands? A white house, standing on high ground - there wasn't much there to get excited about, surely. It was rather a big house, he remembered, with a lot of windows in it, and the blinds were all down, not because the people were away (he was sure of that), but because it was so early that no one was up yet.

Then he laughed at the absurdity of his imaginings, and remembered that he was to dine with Mr. Wetterman that night.

Maisie Wetterman was Rudolf Wetterman's only daughter, and she had been accustomed all her life to having exactly what she wanted. Paying a visit to her father's office one day, she had noticed John Segrave. He had brought in some letters that her father had asked for. When he had departed again, she asked her father about him. Wetterman was communicative.

"One of Sir Edward Segrave's sons. Fine old family, but on its last legs. This boy will never set the Thames on fire. I like him all right, but there's nothing to him. No punch of any kind."

Maisie was, perhaps, indifferent to punch. It was a quality valued more by her parent than herself. Anyway, a fortnight later she persuaded her father to ask John Segrave to dinner. It was an intimate dinner, herself and her father, John Segrave, and a girlfriend who was staying with her.

The girlfriend was moved to make a few remarks.

"On approval, I suppose, Maisie? Later, father will do it up in a nice little parcel and bring it home from the city as a present to his dear little daughter, duly bought and paid for."

"Allegra! You are the limit."

Allegra Kerr laughed.

"You do take fancies, you know, Maisie. I like that hat - I must have it! If hats, why not husbands?"

"Don't be absurd. I've hardly spoken to him yet."

"No. But you've made up your mind," said the other girl. "What's the attraction, Maisie?"

"I don't know," said Maisie Wetterman slowly. "He's - different."

"Different?"

"Yes. I can't explain. He's good-looking, you know, in a queer sort of way, but it's not that. He's a way of not seeing you're there. Really, I don't believe he as much as glanced at me that day in father's office."

Allegra laughed.

"That's an old trick. Rather an astute young man, I should say."

"Allegra, you're hateful!"

"Cheer up, darling. Father will buy a wooly lamb for his little Maisiekins."

"I don't want it to be like that."

"Love with a capital L. Is that it?"

"Why shouldn't he fall in love with me?"

"No reason at all. I expect he will."

Allegra smiled as she spoke, and let her glance sweep over the other. Maisie Wetterman was short - inclined to be plump - she had dark hair, well shingled and artistically waved. Her naturally good complexion was enhanced by the latest colors in powder and lipstick. She had a good mouth and teeth, dark eyes, rather small and twinkly, and a jaw and chin slightly on the heavy side. She was beautifully dressed.

"Yes," said Allegra, finishing her scrutiny. "I've no doubt he will. The whole effect is really very good, Maisie."

Her friend looked at her doubtfully.

"I mean it," said Allegra. "I mean it - honor bright. But just supposing, for the sake of argument, that he shouldn't. Fall in love, I mean. Suppose his affection to become sincere, but platonic. What then?"

"I may not like him at all when I know him better."

"Quite so. On the other hand you may like him very much indeed. And in that latter case -"

Maisie shrugged her shoulders.

"I should hope I've too much pride -"

Allegra interrupted.

"Pride comes in handy for masking one's feelings - it doesn't stop you from feeling them."

"Well," said Maisie, flushed. "I don't see why I shouldn't say it. I am a very good match. I mean from his point of view, father's daughter and everything."

"Partnership in the offing, et cetera," said Allegra. "Yes, Maisie. You're father's daughter, all right. I'm awfully pleased. I do like my friends to run true to type."

The faint mockery of her tone made the other uneasy.

"You are hateful, Allegra."

"But stimulating, darling. That's why you have me here. I'm a student of history, you know, and it always intrigued me why the court jester was permitted and encouraged. Now that I'm one myself, I see the point. It's rather a good rôle, you see, I had to do something. There was I, proud and penniless like the heroine of a novelette, well born and badly educated. 'What to do, girl? God wot,' saith she. The poor

relation type of girl, all willingness to do without a fire in her room and content to do odd jobs and 'help dear Cousin So-and-So,' I observed to be at a premium. Nobody really wants her - except those people who can't keep their servants, and they treat her like a galley slave.

"So I became the court fool. Insolence, plain speaking, a dash of wit now and again (not too much lest I should have to live up to it), and behind it all, a very shrewd observation of human nature. People rather like being told how horrible they really are. That's why they flock to popular preachers. It's been a great success. I'm always overwhelmed with invitations. I can live on my friends with the greatest ease, and I'm careful to make no pretence of gratitude."

"There's no one quite like you, Allegra. You don't mind in the least what you say."

"That's where you're wrong. I mind very much - I take care and thought about the matter. My seeming outspokenness is always calculated. I've got to be careful. This job has got to carry me on to old age."

"Why not marry? I know heaps of people have asked you."

Allegra's face grew suddenly hard.

"I can never marry."

"Because -" Maisie left the sentence unfinished, looking at her friend. The latter gave a short nod of assent.

Footsteps were heard on the stairs. The butler threw open the door and announced:

"Mr. Segrave."

John came in without any particular enthusiasm. He couldn't imagine why the old boy had asked him. If he could have got out of it he would have done so. The house depressed him, with its solid magnificence and the soft pile of its carpet.

A girl came forward and shook hands with him. He remembered vaguely having seen her one day in her father's office.

"How do you do, Mr. Segrave? Mr. Segrave - Miss Kerr."

Then he woke. Who was she? Where did she come from? From the flame-colored draperies that floated round her, to the tiny Mercury wings on her small Greek head, she was a being transitory and fugitive, standing out against the dull background with an effect of unreality.

Rudolph Wetterman came in, his broad expanse of gleaming shirtfront creaking as he walked. They went down informally to dinner.

Allegra Kerr talked to her host. John Segrave had to devote himself to Maisie. But his whole mind was on the girl on the other side of him. She was marvelously effective. Her effectiveness was, he thought, more studied than natural. But behind all that, there lay something else. Flickering fire, fitful, capricious, like the will-o'-the-wisps that of old lured men into the marshes.

At last he got a chance to speak to her. Maisie was giving her father a message from some friend she had met that day. Now that the moment had come, he was tongue-tied. His glance pleaded with her dumbly.

"Dinner-table topics," she said lightly. "Shall we start with the theatres, or with one of those innumerable openings, beginning, 'Do you like -?'"

John laughed.

"And if we find we both like dogs and dislike sandy cats, it will form what is called a 'bond' between us?"

"Assuredly," said Allegra gravely.

"It is, I think, a pity to begin with a catechism."

"Yet it puts conversation within the reach of all."

"True, but with disastrous results."

"It is useful to know the rules - if only to break them."

John smiled at her.

"I take it, then, that you and I will indulge our personal vagaries. Even though we display thereby the genius that is akin to madness."

With a sharp unguarded movement, the girl's hand swept a wineglass off the table. There was the tinkle of broken glass. Maisie and her father stopped speaking.

"I'm so sorry, Mr. Wetterman. I'm throwing glasses on the floor."

"My dear Allegra, it doesn't matter at all, not at all." Beneath his breath John Segrave said quickly: "Broken glass. That's bad luck. I wish - it hadn't happened."

"Don't worry. How does it go? 'Ill luck thou canst not bring where ill luck has its home.'"

She turned once more to Wetterman. John, resuming conversation with Maisie, tried to place the quotation. He got it at last. They were the words used by Sieglinde in the Walküre when Sigmund offers to leave the house.

He thought: "Did she mean -"

But Maisie was asking his opinion of the latest revue. Soon he had admitted that he was fond of music.

"After dinner," said Maisie, "we'll make Allegra play for us."

They all went up to the drawing room together. Secretly, Wetterman considered it a barbarous custom.

He liked the ponderous gravity of the wine passing round, the handed cigars. But perhaps it was as well tonight. He didn't know what on

earth he could find to say to young Segrave. Maisie was too bad with her whims. It wasn't as though the fellow were good-looking - really good-looking - and certainly he wasn't amusing. He was glad when Maisie asked Allegra Kerr to play. They'd get through the evening sooner. The young idiot didn't even play bridge.

Allegra played well, though without the sure touch of a professional. She played modern music, Debussy and Strauss, a little Scriabine. Then she dropped into the first movement of Beethoven's Pathétique, that expression of a grief that is infinite, a sorrow that is endless and vast as the ages, but in which from end to end breathes the spirit that will not accept defeat. In the solemnity of undying woe, it moves with the rhythm of the conqueror to its final doom.

Towards the end she faltered, her fingers struck a discord, and she broke off abruptly. She looked across at Maisie and laughed mockingly.

"You see," she said. "They won't let me."

Then, without waiting for a reply to her somewhat enigmatical remark, she plunged into a strange haunting melody, a thing of weird harmonies and curious measured rhythm, quite unlike anything Segrave had ever heard before. It was delicate as the flight of a bird, poised, hovering - Suddenly, without the least warning, it turned into a mere discordant jangle of notes, and Allegra rose laughing from the piano.

In spite of her laugh, she looked disturbed and almost frightened. She sat down by Maisie, and John heard the latter say in a low tone to her:

"You shouldn't do it. You really shouldn't do it."

"What was the last thing?" John asked eagerly.

"Something of my own."

She spoke sharply and curtly. Wetterman changed the subject.

That night John Segrave dreamed again of the House.

John was unhappy. His life was irksome to him as never before. Up to now he had accepted it patiently - a disagreeable necessity, but one which left his inner freedom essentially untouched. Now all that was changed. The outer world and the inner intermingled.

He did not disguise to himself the reason for the change. He had fallen in love at first sight with Allegra Kerr. What was he going to do about it?

He had been too bewildered that first night to make any plans. He had not even tried to see her again. A little later, when Maisie Wetterman asked him down to her father's place in the country for a weekend, he went eagerly, but he was disappointed, for Allegra was not there.

He mentioned her once, tentatively, to Maisie, and she told him that Allegra was up in Scotland paying a visit. He left it at that. He would have liked to go on talking about her, but the words seemed to stick in his throat.

Maisie was puzzled by him that weekend. He didn't appear to see - well, to see what was so plainly to be seen. She was a direct young woman in her methods, but directness was lost upon John. He thought her kind, but a little overpowering.

Yet the Fates were stronger than Maisie. They willed that John should see Allegra again.

They met in the park one Sunday afternoon. He had seen her from far off, and his heart thumped against the side of his ribs. Supposing she should have forgotten him -

But she had not forgotten. She stopped and spoke. In a few minutes they were walking side by side, striking out across the grass. He was ridiculously happy.

He said suddenly and unexpectedly: "Do you believe in dreams?"

"I believe in nightmares."

The harshness of her voice startled him.

"Nightmares," he said stupidly. "I didn't mean nightmares."

Allegra looked at him.

"No," she said. "There have been no nightmares in your life. I can see that."

Her voice was gentle - different -

He told her then of his dream of the white house, stammering a little. He had had it now six - no, seven times. Always the same. It was beautiful - so beautiful!

He went on.

"You see - it's to do with you - in some way. I had it first the night before I met you -"

"To do with me?" She laughed - a short bitter laugh. "Oh, no, that's impossible. The house was beautiful."

"So are you," said John Segrave.

Allegra flushed a little with annoyance.

"I'm sorry - I was stupid. I seemed to ask for a compliment, didn't I? But I didn't really mean that at all. The outside of me is all right, I know."

"I haven't seen the inside of the house yet," said John Segrave. "When I do I know it will be quite as beautiful as the outside."

He spoke slowly and gravely, giving the words a meaning that she chose to ignore.

"There is something more I want to tell you - if you will listen."

"I will listen," said Allegra.

"I am chucking up this job of mine. I ought to have done it long ago - I see that now. I have been content to drift along knowing I was an utter failure, without caring much, just living from day to day. A man shouldn't do that. It's a man's business to find something he can do and make a success of it. I'm chucking this, and taking on something else - quite a different sort of thing. It's a kind of expedition in West Africa - I can't tell you the details. They're not supposed to be known; but if it comes off well, I shall be a rich man."

"So you, too, count success in terms of money?"

"Money," said John Segrave, "means just one thing to me - you! When I come back -" he paused.

She bent her head. Her face had grown very pale.

"I won't pretend to misunderstand. That's why I must tell you now, once and for all: I shall never marry."

He stayed a little while considering, then he said very gently:

"Can't you tell me why?"

"I could, but more than anything in the world I want not to tell you."

Again he was silent, then he looked up suddenly and a singularly attractive smile illumined his faun's face.

"I see," he said. "So you won't let me come inside the House - not even to peep in for a second? The blinds are to stay down."

Allegra leaned forward and laid her hand on his.

"I will tell you this much. You dream of your House. But I - I don't dream. My dreams are nightmares!"

And on that she left him, abruptly, disconcertingly. That night, once more, he dreamed. Of late, he had realized that the House was most certainly tenanted. He had seen a hand draw aside the blinds, had caught glimpses of moving figures within.

Tonight the House seemed fairer than it had ever done before. Its white walls shone in the sunlight. The peace and the beauty of it were complete.

Then, suddenly, he became aware of a fuller ripple of the waves of joy. Someone was coming to the window. He knew it. A hand, the same hand that he had seen before, laid hold of the blind, drawing it back. In a minute he would see -

He was awake - still quivering with the horror, the unutterable loathing of the Thing that had looked out at him from the window of the House.

It was a Thing utterly and wholly horrible, a Thing so vile and loathsome that the mere remembrance of it made him feel sick. And he knew that the most unutterably and horribly vile thing about it was its presence in that House - the House of Beauty.

For where that Thing abode was horror - horror that rose up and slew the peace and the serenity which were the birthright of the House. The

beauty, the wonderful immortal beauty of the House was destroyed for ever, for within its holy consecrated walls there dwelt the Shadow of an Unclean Thing!

If ever again he should dream of the House, Segrave knew he would awake at once with a start of terror, lest from its white beauty that Thing might suddenly look out at him.

The following evening, when he left the office, he went straight to the Wettermans' house. He must see Allegra Kerr. Maisie would tell him where she was to be found.

He never noticed the eager light that flashed into Maisie's eyes as he was shown in, and she jumped up to greet him. He stammered out his request at once, with her hand still in his.

"Miss Kerr. I met her yesterday, but I don't know where she's staying."

He did not feel Maisie's hand grow limp in his as she withdrew it. The sudden coldness of her voice told him nothing.

"Allegra is here - staying with us. But I'm afraid you can't see her."

"But -"

"You see, her mother died this morning. We've just had the news."

"Oh!" He was taken aback.

"It is all very sad," said Maisie. She hesitated just a minute, then went on. "You see, she died in - well, practically an asylum. There's insanity in the family. The grandfather shot himself, and one of Allegra's aunts is a hopeless imbecile, and another drowned herself."

John Segrave made an inarticulate sound.

"I thought I ought to tell you," said Maisie virtuously. "We're such friends, aren't we? And of course Allegra is very attractive. Lots of people have asked her to marry them, but naturally she won't marry at all - she couldn't, could she?"

"She's all right," said Segrave. "There's nothing wrong with her."

His voice sounded hoarse and unnatural in his own ears.

"One never knows; her mother was quite all right when she was young. And she wasn't just - peculiar, you know. She was quite raving mad. It's a dreadful thing - insanity."

"Yes," he said, "it's a most awful Thing -"

He knew now what it was that had looked at him from the window of the House.

Maisie was still talking on. He interrupted her brusquely.

"I really came to say good-bye - and to thank you for all your kindness."

"You're not - going away?"

There was alarm in her voice.

He smiled sideways at her - a crooked smile, pathetic and attractive.

"Yes," he said. "To Africa."

"Africa!"

Maisie echoed the word blankly. Before she could pull herself together he had shaken her by the hand and gone. She was left standing there, her hands clenched by her sides, an angry spot of color in each cheek.

Below, on the doorstep, John Segrave came face to face with Allegra coming in from the street. She was in black, her face white and lifeless. She took one glance at him then drew him into a small morning room.

"Maisie told you," she said. "You know?"

He nodded.

"But what does it matter? You're all right. It - it leaves some people out."

She looked at him somberly, mournfully.

"You are all right," he repeated.

"I don't know," she almost whispered it. "I don't know. I told you - about my dreams. And when I play - when I'm at the piano - those others come and take hold of my hands."

He was staring at her - paralyzed. For one instant, as she spoke, something looked out from her eyes. It was gone in a flash - but he knew it. It was the Thing that had looked out from the House.

She caught his momentary recoil.

"You see," she whispered. "You see - But I wish Maisie hadn't told you. It takes everything from you."

"Everything?"

"Yes. There won't even be the dreams left. For now - you'll never dare to dream of the House again."

The West African sun poured down, and the heat was intense.

John Segrave continued to moan.

"I can't find it. I can't find it."

The little English doctor with the red head and the tremendous jaw scowled down upon his patient in that bullying manner which he had made his own.

"He's always saying that. What does he mean?"

"He speaks, I think, of a house, monsieur." The soft-voiced Sister of Charity from the Roman Catholic Mission spoke with her gentle detachment, as she too looked down on the stricken man.

"A house, eh? Well, he's got to get it out of his head, or we shan't pull him through. It's on his mind. Segrave! Segrave!"

The wandering attention was fixed. The eyes rested with recognition on the doctor's face.

"Look here, you're going to pull through. I'm going to pull you through. But you've got to stop worrying about this house. It can't run away, you know. So don't bother about looking for it now."

"All right." He seemed obedient. "I suppose it can't very well run away if it's never been there at all."

"Of course not!" The doctor laughed his cheery laugh. "Now you'll be all right in no time." And with a boisterous bluntness of manner he took his departure.

Segrave lay thinking. The fever had abated for the moment, and he could think clearly and lucidly. He must find that House.

For ten years he had dreaded finding it - the thought that he might come upon it unawares had been his greatest terror. And then, he remembered, when his fears were quite lulled to rest, one day it had found him. He recalled clearly his first haunting terror, and then his sudden, his exquisite, relief. For, after all, the House was empty!

Quite empty and exquisitely peaceful. It was as he remembered it ten years before. He had not forgotten. There was a huge black furniture van moving slowly away from the House. The last tenant, of course, moving out with his goods. He went up to the men in charge of the van and spoke to them. There was something rather sinister about that van, it was so very black. The horses were black, too, with freely flowing manes and tails, and the men all wore black clothes and gloves. It all reminded him of something else, something that he couldn't remember.

Yes, he had been quite right. The last tenant was moving out, as his lease was up. The House was to stand empty for the present, until the owner came back from abroad.

And waking, he had been full of the peaceful beauty of the empty House.

A month after that, he had received a letter from Maisie (she wrote to him perseveringly, once a month). In it she told him that Allegra Kerr had died in the same home as her mother, and wasn't it dreadfully sad? Though of course a merciful release.

It had really been very odd indeed. Coming after his dream like that. He didn't quite understand it all. But it was odd.

And the worst of it was that he'd never been able to find the House since. Somehow, he'd forgotten the way.

The fever began to take hold of him once more. He tossed restlessly. Of course, he'd forgotten, the House was on high ground! He must

climb to get there. But it was hot work climbing cliffs - dreadfully hot. Up, up, up - Oh! he had slipped! He must start again from the bottom. Up, up, up - days passed, weeks - he wasn't sure that years didn't go by! And he was still climbing.

Once he heard the doctor's voice. But he couldn't stop climbing to listen. Besides the doctor would tell him to leave off looking for the House. He thought it was an ordinary house. He didn't know.

He remembered suddenly that he must be calm, very calm. You couldn't find the House unless you were very calm. It was no use looking for the House in a hurry, or being excited.

If he could only keep calm! But it was so hot! Hot? It was cold - yes, cold. These weren't cliffs, they were icebergs - jagged, cold icebergs.

He was so tired. He wouldn't go on looking - it was no good - Ah! here was a lane - that was better than icebergs, anyway. How pleasant and shady it was in the cool, green lane. And those trees - they were splendid! They were rather like - what? He couldn't remember, but it didn't matter.

Ah! here were flowers. All golden and blue! How lovely it all was - and how strangely familiar. Of course, he had been here before. There, through the trees, was the gleam of the House, standing on the high ground. How beautiful it was. The green lane and the trees and the flowers were as nothing to the paramount, the all-satisfying beauty of the House.

He hastened his steps. To think that he had never yet been inside! How unbelievably stupid of him - when he had the key in his pocket all the time!

And of course the beauty of the exterior was as nothing to the beauty that lay within - especially now that the Owner had come back from abroad. He mounted the steps to the great door.

Cruel strong hands were dragging him back! They fought him, dragging him to and fro, backwards and forwards.

The doctor was shaking him, roaring in his ear.

"Hold on, man, you can. Don't let go. Don't let go." His eyes were alight with the fierceness of one who sees an enemy. Segrave wondered who the Enemy was.

The black-robed nun was praying. That, too, was strange.

And all he wanted was to be left alone. To go back to the House. For every minute the House was growing fainter.

That, of course, was because the doctor was so strong. He wasn't strong enough to fight the doctor. If he only could.

But stop! There was another way - the way dreams went in the moment of waking. No strength could stop them - they just flitted past. The doctor's hands wouldn't be able to hold him if he slipped - just slipped!

Yes, that was the way! The white walls were visible once more, the doctor's voice was fainter, his hands were barely felt. He knew now how dreams laugh when they give you the slip!

He was at the door of the House. The exquisite stillness was unbroken. He put the key in the lock and turned it.

Just a moment he waited, to realize to the full the perfect, the ineffable, the all-satisfying completeness of joy.

Then - he passed over the Threshold.

THE ACTRESS

The shabby man in the fourth row of the pit leaned forward and stared incredulously at the stage. His shifty eyes narrowed furtively.

"Nancy Taylor!" he muttered. "By the Lord, little Nancy Taylor!"

His glance dropped to the program in his hand. One name was printed in slightly larger type than the rest.

"Olga Stormer! So that's what she calls herself. Fancy yourself a star, don't you, my lady? And you must be making a pretty little pot of money, too. Quite forgotten your name was ever Nancy Taylor, I daresay. I wonder now - I wonder now what you'd say if Jake Levitt should remind you of the fact?"

The curtain fell on the close of the first act. Hearty applause filled the auditorium. Olga Stormer, the great emotional actress, whose name in a few short years had become a household word, was adding yet another triumph to her list of successes as "Cora", in *The Avenging Angel*.

Jake Levitt did not join in the clapping, but a slow, appreciative grin gradually distended his mouth. God! What luck! Just when he was on his beam-ends, too. She'd try to bluff it out, he supposed, but she couldn't put it over on him. Properly worked, the thing was a gold mine!

On the following morning the first workings of Jake Levitt's gold mine became apparent. In her drawing room, with its red lacquer and black hangings, Olga Stormer read and reread a letter thoughtfully. Her pale face, with its exquisitely mobile features, was a little more set than usual, and every now and then the grey-green eyes under the level brows steadily envisaged the middle distance, as though she contemplated the threat behind rather than the actual words of the letter.

In that wonderful voice of hers, which could throb with emotion or be as clear-cut as the click of a typewriter, Olga called: "Miss Jones!"

A neat young woman with spectacles, a shorthand pad and a pencil clasped in her hand, hastened from an adjoining room.

"Ring up Mr. Danahan, please, and ask him to come round, immediately."

Syd Danahan, Olga Stormer's manager, entered the room with the usual apprehension of the man whose life it is to deal with and overcome the vagaries of the artistic feminine. To coax, to soothe, to bully, one at a time or all together, such was his daily routine. To his relief, Olga appeared calm and reposed, and merely flicked a note across the table to him.

"Read that."

The letter was scrawled in an illiterate hand, of cheap paper.

Dear Madam,

I much appreciated your performance in The Avenging Angel last night. I fancy we have a mutual friend in Miss Nancy Taylor, late of Chicago. An article regarding her is to be published shortly. If you would care to discuss same, I could call upon you at any time convenient to yourself.

Yours respectfully,

Jake Levitt

Danahan looked lightly bewildered,

"I don't quite get it. Who is this Nancy Taylor?"

"A girl who would be better dead, Danny." There was bitterness in her voice and a weariness that revealed her thirty-four years. "A girl who was dead until this carrion crow brought her to life again."

"Oh! Then..."

"Me, Danny. Just me."

"This means blackmail, of course?"

She nodded. "Of course, and by a man who knows the art thoroughly."

Danahan frowned, considering the matter. Olga, her cheek pillowed on a long, slender hand, watched him with unfathomable eyes.

"What about bluff? Deny everything. He can't be sure that he hasn't been misled by a chance resemblance."

Olga shook her head.

"Levitt makes his living by blackmailing women. He's sure enough."

"The police?" hinted Danahan doubtfully.

Her faint, derisive smile was answer enough. Beneath her self-control, though he did not guess it, was the impatience of the keen brain watching a slower brain laboriously cover the ground it had already traversed in a flash.

"You don't - er - think it might be wise for you to - er - say something yourself to Sir Richard? That would partly spike his guns."

The actress's engagement to Sir Richard Everard, M.P., had been announced a few weeks previously.

"I told Richard everything when he asked me to marry him."

"My word, that was clever of you!" said Danahan admiringly.

Olga smiled a little.

"It wasn't cleverness, Danny dear. You wouldn't understand. All the same, if this man Levitt does what he threatens, my number is up, and incidentally Richard's Parliamentary career goes smash, too. No, as far as I can see, there are only two things to do."

"Well?"

"To pay - and that of course is endless! Or to disappear, start again."

The weariness was again very apparent in her voice.

"It isn't even as though I'd done anything I regretted. I was a half-starved little gutter waif, Danny, striving to keep straight. I shot a man, a beast of a man who deserved to be shot. The circumstances under which I killed him were such that no jury on earth would have convicted me. I know that now, but at the time I was only a frightened kid - and - I ran."

Danahan nodded.

"I suppose," he said doubtfully, "there's nothing against this man Levitt we could get hold of?"

Olga shook her head.

"Very unlikely. He's too much of a coward to go in for evil-doing." The sound of her own words seemed to strike her. "A coward! I wonder if we couldn't work on that in some way."

"If Sir Richard were to see him and frighten him," suggested Danahan.

"Richard is too fine an instrument. You can't handle that sort of man with gloves on."

"Well, let me see him."

"Forgive me, Danny, but I don't think you're subtle enough. Something between gloves and bare fists is needed. Let us say mittens! That means a woman! Yes, I rather fancy a woman might do the trick. A woman with a certain amount of finesse, but who knows the baser side of life from bitter experience. Olga Stormer, for instance! Don't talk to me, I've got a plan coming."

She leaned forward, burying her face in her hands. She lifted it suddenly.

"What's the name of that girl who wants to understudy me? Margaret Ryan, isn't it? The girl with the hair like mine?"

"Her hair's all right," admitted Danahan grudgingly, his eyes resting on the bronze-gold coil surrounding Olga's head. "It's just like yours, as you say. But she's no good any other way. I was going to sack her next week."

"If all goes well, you'll probably have to let her understudy 'Cora'." She smothered his protests with a wave of her hand. "Danny, answer me one question honestly. Do you think I can act? Really act, I mean. Or am I just an attractive woman who trails round in pretty dresses?"

"Act? My God! Olga, there's been nobody like you since Duse!"

"Then if Levitt is really a coward, as I suspect, the thing will come off. No, I'm not going to tell you about it. I want you to get hold of the Ryan girl. Tell her I'm interested in her and want her to dine here tomorrow night. She'll come fast enough."

"I should say she would!"

"The other thing I want is some good strong knockout drops, something that will put anyone out of action for an hour or two, but leave them none the worse the next day."

Danahan grinned.

"I can't guarantee our friend won't have a headache, but there will be no permanent damage done."

"Good! Run away now, Danny, and leave the rest to me." She raised her voice: "Miss Jones!"

The spectacled young woman appeared with her usual alacrity.

"Take down this, please."

Walking slowly up and down, Olga dictated the day's correspondence. But one answer she wrote with her own hand.

Jake Levitt, in his dingy room, grinned as he tore open the expected envelope.

Dear Sir,

I cannot recall the lady of whom you speak, but I meet so many people that my memory is necessarily uncertain. I am always pleased to help any fellow actress, and shall be at home if you will call this evening at nine o'clock.

Yours faithfully,

Olga Stormer

Levitt nodded appreciatively. Clever note! She admitted nothing. Nevertheless she was willing to treat.

The gold mine was developing.

At nine o'clock precisely Levitt stood outside the door of the actress's flat and pressed the bell. No one answered the summons, and he was about to press it again when he realized that the door was not latched.

He pushed the door open and entered the hall. To his right was an open door leading into a brilliantly lighted room, a room decorated in scarlet and black. Levitt walked in. On the table under the lamp lay a sheet of paper on which were written the words:

"Please wait until I return. - O. Stormer."

Levitt sat down and waited. In spite of himself a feeling of uneasiness was stealing over him. The flat was so very quiet. There was something eerie about the silence.

Nothing wrong, of course, how could there be? But the room was so deadly quiet; and yet, quiet as it was, he had the preposterous, uncomfortable notion that he wasn't alone in it. Absurd! He wiped the perspiration from his brow. And still the impression grew stronger. He wasn't alone! With a muttered oath he sprang up and began to pace up and down. In a minute the woman would return and then -

He stopped dead with a muffled cry. From beneath the black velvet hangings that draped the window a hand protruded! He stooped and touched it. Cold - horribly cold - a dead hand.

With a cry he flung back the curtains. A woman was lying there, one arm flung wide, the other doubled under her as she lay face

downwards, her golden-bronze hair lying in dishevelled masses on her neck.

Olga Stormer! Tremblingly his fingers sought the icy coldness of that wrist and felt for the pulse. As he thought, there was none. She was dead. She had escaped him, then, by taking the simplest way out.

Suddenly his eyes were arrested by two ends of red cord finishing in fantastic tassels, and half hidden by the masses of her hair. He touched them gingerly; the head sagged as he did so, and he caught a glimpse of a horrible purple face. He sprang back with a cry, his head whirling. There was something here he did not understand. His brief glimpse of the face, disfigured as it was, had shown him one thing. This was murder, not suicide. The woman had been strangled and - she was not Olga Stormer!

Ah! What was that? A sound behind him. He wheeled round and looked straight into the terrified eyes of a maidservant crouching against the wall. Her face was as white as the cap and apron she wore, but he did not understand the fascinated horror in her eyes until her half-breathed words enlightened him to the peril in which he stood.

"Oh, my God! You've killed 'er!"

Even then he did not quite realize. He replied:

"No, no, she was dead when I found her."

"I saw yer do it! You pulled the cord and strangled her. I 'eard the gurgling cry she give."

The sweat broke out upon his brow in earnest. His mind went rapidly over his actions of the previous few minutes. She must have come in just as he had the two ends of cord in his hands; she had seen the sagging head and had taken his own cry as coming from the victim. He stared at her helplessly. There was no doubting what he saw in her face - terror and stupidity. She would tell the police she had seen the crime committed, and no cross-examination would shake her, he was sure of that. She would swear away his life with the unshakable conviction that she was speaking the truth.

What a horrible, unforeseen chain of circumstances! Stop, was it unforeseen? Was there some devilry here? On an impulse he said, eyeing her narrowly:

"That's not your mistress, you know."

Her answer, given mechanically, threw a light upon the situation.

"No, it's 'er actress friend - if you can call 'em friends, seeing that they fought like cat and dog. They were at it tonight, 'ammer and tongs."

A trap! He saw it now.

"Where's your mistress?"

"Went out ten minutes ago."

A trap! And he had walked into it like a lamb. A clever devil, this Olga Stormer; she had rid herself of a rival, and he was to suffer for the

deed. Murder! My God, they hung a man for murder! And he was innocent - innocent!

A stealthy rustle recalled him. The little maid was sidling towards the door. Her wits were beginning to work again. Her eyes wavered to the telephone, then back to the door. At all costs he must silence her. It was the only way. As well hang for a real crime as a fictitious one. She had no weapon, neither had he. But he had his hands! Then his heart gave a leap. On the table beside her, almost under her hand, lay a small, jeweled revolver. If he could reach it first -

Instinct or his eyes warned her. She caught it up as he sprang and held it pointed at his breast. Awkwardly as she held it, her finger was on the trigger, and she could hardly miss him at that distance. He stopped dead. A revolver belonging to a woman like Olga Stormer would be pretty sure to be loaded.

But there was one thing, she was no longer directly behind him and the door. So long as he did not attack her, she might not have the nerve to shoot. Anyway, he must risk it. Zigzagging, he ran for the door, through the hall and out through the outer door, banging it behind him. He heard her voice, faint and shaky, calling, "Police, Murder!" She'd have to call louder than that before anyone was likely to hear her. He'd got a start, anyway. Down the stairs he went, running down the open street, then slacking to a walk as a stray pedestrian turned the corner. He had his plan cut and dried.

To Gravesend as quickly as possible. A boat was sailing from there that night for the remoter parts of the world. He knew the captain, a

man who, for a consideration, would ask no questions. Once on board and out to sea he would be safe.

At eleven o'clock Danahan's telephone rang. Olga's voice spoke.

"Prepare a contract for Miss Ryan, will you? She's to understudy 'Cora'. It's absolutely no use arguing. I owe her something after all the things I did to her tonight! What? Yes, I think I'm out of my troubles. By the way, if she tells you tomorrow that I'm an ardent spiritualist and put her into a trance tonight, don't show open incredulity. How? Knockout drops in the coffee, followed by scientific passes! After that I painted her face with purple grease paint and put a tourniquet on her left arm! Mystified? Well, you must stay mystified until tomorrow. I haven't time to explain now. I must get out of the cap and apron before my faithful Maud returns from the pictures. There was a 'beautiful drama' on tonight, she told me. But she missed the best drama of all. I played my best part tonight, Danny. The mittens won! Jake Levitt is a coward all right, and oh, Danny, Danny - I'm an actress!"

THE EDGE

Clare Halliwell walked down the short path that led from her cottage door to the gate. On her arm was a basket, and in the basket was a bottle of soup, some home-made jelly, and a few grapes. There were not many poor people in the small village of Daymer's End, but such as there were were assiduously looked after, and Clare was one of the most efficient of the parish workers.

Clare Halliwell was thirty-two. She had an upright carriage, a healthy color, and nice brown eyes. She was not beautiful, but she looked fresh and pleasant and very English. Everybody liked her and said she was a good sort. Since her mother's death, two years ago, she had lived alone in the cottage with her dog, Rover. She kept poultry and was fond of animals and of a healthy outdoor life.

As she unlatched the gate, a two-seater car swept past, and the driver, a girl in a red hat, waved a greeting. Clare responded, but for a moment her lips tightened. She felt that pang at her heart which always came when she saw Vivien Lee, Gerald's wife!

Medenham Grange, which lay just a mile outside the village, had belonged to the Lees for many generations. Sir Gerald Lee, the present owner of the Grange, was a man old for his years and considered by many stiff in manner. His pomposity really covered a good deal of shyness. He and Clare had played together as children. Later they had been friends, and a closer and dearer tie had been confidently expected by many - including, it may be said, Clare herself. There was no hurry, of course - but some day - She left it so in her own mind. Some day.

And then, just a year ago, the village had been startled by the news of Sir Gerald's marriage to a Miss Harper - a girl nobody had ever heard of!

The new Lady Lee had not been popular in the village. She took not the faintest interest in parochial matters, was bored by hunting, and loathed the country and outdoor sports. Many of the wiseacres shook

their heads and wondered how it would end. It was easy to see where Sir Gerald's infatuation had come in. Vivien was a beauty. From head to foot she was a complete contrast to Clare Halliwell - small, elfin, dainty, with golden-red hair that curled enchantingly over her pretty ears, and big violet eyes that could shoot a sideways glance of provocation to the manner born.

Gerald Lee, in his simple man's way, had been anxious that his wife and Clare should be great friends. Clare was often asked to dine at the Grange, and Vivien made a pretty pretence of affectionate intimacy whenever they met. Hence that gay salutation of hers this morning.

Clare walked on and did her errand. The vicar was also visiting the old woman in question, and he and Clare walked a few yards together afterwards before their ways parted. They stood still for a minute discussing parish affairs.

"Jones has broken out again, I'm afraid," said the vicar. "And I had such hopes after he had volunteered, of his own accord, to take the pledge."

"Disgusting," said Clare crisply.

"It seems so to us," said Mr. Wilmot, "but we must remember that it is very hard to put ourselves in his place and realize his temptation. The desire for drink is unaccountable to us, but we all have our own temptations, and thus we can understand."

"I suppose we have," said Clare uncertainly.

The vicar glanced at her.

"Some of us have the good fortune to be very little tempted," he said gently. "But even to those people their hour comes. Watch and pray, remember, that ye enter not into temptation."

Then bidding her good-bye, he walked briskly away. Clare went on thoughtfully, and presently she almost bumped into Sir Gerald Lee.

"Hullo, Clare. I was hoping to run across you. You look jolly fit. What a color you've got."

The color had not been there a minute before. Lee went on:

"As I say, I was hoping to run across you. Vivien's got to go off to Bournemouth for the weekend. Her mother's not well. Can you dine with us Tuesday instead of tonight?"

"Oh, yes! Tuesday will suit me just as well."

"That's all right, then. Splendid. I must hurry along."

Clare went home to find her one faithful domestic standing on the doorstep looking out for her.

"There you are, miss. Such a to-do. They've brought Rover home. He went off on his own this morning, and a car ran clean over him."

Clare hurried to the dog's side. She adored animals, and Rover was her especial darling. She felt his legs one by one, and then ran her hands over his body. He groaned once or twice and licked her hand.

"If there's any serious injury, it's internal," she said at last. "No bones seem to be broken."

"Shall we get the vet to see him, Miss?"

Clare shook her head. She had little faith in the local vet.

"We'll wait until tomorrow. He doesn't seem to be in great pain, and his gums are a good color, so there can't be much internal bleeding. Tomorrow, if I don't like the look of him, I'll take him over to Skippington in the car and let Reeves have a look at him. He's far and away the best man."

On the following day, Rover seemed weaker, and Clare duly carried out her project. The small town of Skippington was about forty miles away, a long run, but Reeves, the vet there, was celebrated for many miles around.

He diagnosed certain internal injuries but held out good hopes of recovery, and Clare went away quite content to leave Rover in his charge.

There was only one hotel of any pretensions in Skippington, the County Arms. It was mainly frequented by commercial travelers, for there was no good hunting country near Skippington, and it was off the track of the main roads for motorists.

Lunch was not served till one o'clock, and as it wanted a few minutes of that hour, Clare amused herself by glancing over the entries in the open visitors' book.

Suddenly she gave a stifled exclamation. Surely she knew that handwriting, with its loops and whirls and flourishes? She had always considered it unmistakable. Even now she could have sworn - but of course it was clearly impossible. Vivien Lee was at Bournemouth. The entry itself showed it to be impossible:

Mr. and Mrs. Cyril Brown, London.

But in spite of herself her eyes strayed back again and again to that curly writing, and on an impulse she could not quite define she asked abruptly of the woman in the office:

"Mrs. Cyril Brown? I wonder if that is the same one I know?"

"A small lady? Reddish hair? Very pretty. She came in a red two-seater car, madam. A Peugeot, I believe."

Then it was! A coincidence would be too remarkable. As if in a dream, she heard the woman go on:

"They were here just over a month ago for a weekend, and liked it so much that they have come again. Newly married, I should fancy."

Clare heard herself saying: "Thank you. I don't think that could be my friend."

Her voice sounded different, as though it belonged to someone else. Presently she was sitting in the dining room, quietly eating cold roast beef, her mind a maze of conflicting thought and emotions.

She had no doubts whatever. She had summed Vivien up pretty correctly on their first meeting. Vivien was that kind. She wondered vaguely who the man was. Someone Vivien had known before her marriage? Very likely - it didn't matter - nothing mattered but Gerald.

What was she - Clare - to do about Gerald? He ought to know - surely he ought to know. It was clearly her duty to tell him. She had discovered Vivien's secret by accident, but she must lose no time in acquainting Gerald with the facts. She was Gerald's friend, not Vivien's.

But somehow or other she felt uncomfortable. Her conscience was not satisfied. On the face of it, her reasoning was good, but duty and inclination jumped suspiciously together. She admitted to herself that she disliked Vivien. Besides, if Gerald Lee were to divorce his wife - and Clare had no doubts at all that that was exactly what he would do, he was a man with an almost fanatical view of his own honor - then - well, the way would lie open for Gerald to come to her. Put like that, she shrank back fastidiously. Her own proposed action seemed naked and ugly.

The personal element entered in too much. She could not be sure of her own motives. Clare was essentially a high-minded, conscientious woman. She strove now very earnestly to see where her duty lay. She

wished, as she had always wished, to do right. What was right in this case? What was wrong?

By a pure accident she had come into possession of facts that affected vitally the man she loved and the woman whom she disliked and - yes, one might as well be frank - of whom she was bitterly jealous. She could ruin that woman. Was she justified in doing so?

Clare had always held herself aloof from the back-biting and scandal which is an inevitable part of village life. She hated to feel that she now resembled one of those human ghouls she had always professed to despise.

Suddenly the vicar's words that morning flashed across her mind:

"Even to those people their hour comes."

Was this her hour? Was this her temptation? Had it come insidiously disguised as a duty? She was Clare Halliwell, a Christian, in love and charity with all men - and women. If she were to tell Gerald, she must be quite sure that only impersonal motives guided her. For the present she would say nothing.

She paid her bill for luncheon and drove away, feeling an indescribable lightening of spirit. Indeed, she felt happier than she had done for a long time. She felt glad that she had had the strength to resist temptation, to do nothing mean or unworthy. Just for a second it flashed across her mind that it might be a sense of power that had so lightened her spirits, but she dismissed the idea as fantastic.

By Tuesday night she was strengthened in her resolve. The revelation could not come through her. She must keep silence. Her own secret love for Gerald made speech impossible. Rather a high-minded view to take? Perhaps; but it was the only one possible for her.

She arrived at the Grange in her own little car. Sir Gerald's chauffeur was at the front door to drive it round to the garage after she had alighted, as the night was a wet one. He had just driven off when Clare remembered some books which she had borrowed and had brought with her to return. She called out, but the man did not hear her. The butler ran out after the car.

So, for a minute or two, Clare was alone in the hall, close to the door of the drawing room, which the butler had just unlatched prior to announcing her. Those inside the room, however, knew nothing of her arrival, and so it was that Vivien's voice, high-pitched - not quite the voice of a lady - rang out clearly and distinctly.

"Oh, we're only waiting for Clare Halliwell. You must know her - lives in the village - supposed to be one of the local belles, but frightfully unattractive really. She tried her best to catch Gerald, but he wasn't having any."

"Oh, yes, darling -" this in answer to a murmured protest from her husband. "She did - you mayn't be aware of the fact - but she did her very utmost. Poor old Clare! A good sort, but such a dump!"

Clare's face went dead white, her hands, hanging against her sides, clenched themselves in anger such as she had never known before. At that moment she could have murdered Vivien Lee. It was only by a

supreme physical effort that she regained control of herself. That, and the half-formed thought that she held it in her power to punish Vivien for those cruel words.

The butler had returned with the books. He opened the door, announced her, and in another moment she was greeting a roomful of people in her usual pleasant manner.

Vivien, exquisitely dressed in some dark wine color that showed off her white fragility, was particularly affectionate and gushing. They didn't see half enough of Clare. She, Vivien, was going to learn golf, and Clare must come out with her on the links.

Gerald was very attentive and kind. Though he had no suspicion that she had overheard his wife's words, he had some vague idea of making up for them. He was very fond of Clare, and he wished Vivien wouldn't say the things she did. He and Clare had been friends, nothing more - and if there was an uneasy suspicion at the back of his mind that he was shirking the truth in that last statement, he put it away from him.

After dinner the talk fell on dogs, and Clare recounted Rover's accident. She purposely waited for a lull in the conversation to say:

"- so, on Saturday, I took him to Skippington."

She heard the sudden rattle of Vivien Lee's coffee cup on the saucer, but she did not look at her - yet.

"To see that man, Reeves?"

"Yes. He'll be all right, I think. I had lunch at the County Arms afterwards. Rather a decent little pub." She turned now to Vivien. "Have you ever stayed there?"

If she had had any doubts, they were swept aside.

Vivien's answer came quick - in stammering haste.

"I? Oh! N-no, no."

Fear was in her eyes. They were wide and dark with it as they met Clare's. Clare's eyes told nothing. They were calm, scrutinizing. No one could have dreamed of the keen pleasure that they veiled. At that moment Clare almost forgave Vivien for the words she had overheard earlier in the evening. She tasted in that moment a fullness of power that almost made her head reel. She held Vivien Lee in the hollow of her hand.

The following day, she received a note from the other woman. Would Clare come up and have tea with her quietly that afternoon? Clare refused.

Then Vivien called on her. Twice she came at hours when Clare was almost certain to be at home. On the first occasion, Clare really was out; on the second, she slipped out by the back way when she saw Vivien coming up the path.

"She's not sure yet whether I know or not," she said to herself. "She wants to find out without committing herself. But she shan't - not until I'm ready."

Clare hardly knew herself what she was waiting for. She had decided to keep silence - that was the only straight and honorable course. She felt an additional glow of virtue when she remembered the extreme provocation she had received. After overhearing the way Vivien talked of her behind her back, a weaker character, she felt, might have abandoned her good resolutions.

She went twice to church on Sunday. First to early communion, from which she came out strengthened and uplifted. No personal feelings should weigh with her - nothing mean or petty. She went again to morning service. Mr. Wilmot preached on the famous prayer of the Pharisee. He sketched the life of that man, a good man, pillar of the church. And he pictured the slow, creeping blight of spiritual pride that distorted and soiled all that he was.

Clare did not listen very attentively. Vivien was in the big square pew of the Lee family, and Clare knew by instinct that the other intended to get hold of her afterwards.

So it fell out. Vivien attached herself to Clare, walked home with her, and asked if she might come in. Clare, of course, assented. They sat in Clare's little sitting room, bright with flowers and old-fashioned chintzes. Vivien's talk was desultory and jerky.

"I was at Bournemouth, you know, last weekend," she remarked presently.

"Gerald told me so," said Clare.

They looked at each other. Vivien appeared almost plain today. Her face had a sharp, foxy look that robbed it of much of its charm.

"When you were at Skippington -" began Vivien.

"When I was at Skippington?" echoed Clare politely.

"You were speaking about some little hotel there."

"The County Arms. Yes. You didn't know it, you said?"

"I - I have been there once."

"Oh!"

She had only to keep still and wait. Vivien was quite unfitted to bear a strain of any kind. Already she was breaking down under it. Suddenly she leaned forward and spoke vehemently.

"You don't like me. You never have. You've always hated me. You're enjoying yourself now, playing with me like a cat with a mouse. You're cruel - cruel. That's why I'm afraid of you, because deep down you're cruel."

"Really, Vivien!" said Clare sharply.

"You know, don't you? Yes, I can see that you know. You knew that night - when you spoke about Skippington. You've found out somehow. Well, I want to know what you are going to do about it. What are you going to do?"

Clare did not reply for a minute, and Vivien sprang to her feet.

"What are you going to do? I must know. You're not going to deny that you know all about it?"

"I do not propose to deny anything," said Clare coldly.

"You saw me there that day?"

"No. I saw your handwriting in the book - Mr. and Mrs. Cyril Brown."

Vivien flushed darkly.

"Since then," continued Clare quietly, "I have made inquiries. I find that you were not at Bournemouth that weekend. Your mother never sent for you. Exactly the same thing happened about six weeks previously."

Vivien sank down again on the sofa. She burst into furious crying, the crying of a frightened child.

"What are you going to do?" she gasped. "Are you going to tell Gerald?"

"I don't know yet," said Clare.

She felt calm, omnipotent.

Vivien sat up, pushing the red curls back from her forehead.

"Would you like to hear all about it?"

"It would be as well, I think."

Vivien poured out the whole story. There was no reticence in her. Cyril 'Brown', was Cyril Haviland, a young engineer to whom she had previously been engaged. His health failed, and he lost his job, whereupon he made no bones about jilting the penniless Vivien and marrying a rich widow many years older than himself. Soon afterwards Vivien married Gerald Lee.

She had met Cyril again by chance. That was the first of many meetings. Cyril, backed by his wife's money, was prospering in his career, and becoming a well known figure.

It was a sordid story, a story of backstairs meeting, of ceaseless lying and intrigue.

"I love him so," Vivien repeated again and again, with a sudden moan, and each time the words made Clare feel physically sick.

At last the stammering recital came to an end.

Vivien muttered a shamefaced: "Well?"

"What am I going to do?" asked Clare. "I can't tell you. I must have time to think."

"You won't give me away to Gerald?"

"It may be my duty to do so."

"No, no." Vivien's voice rose to a hysterical shriek. "He'll divorce me. He won't listen to a word. He'll find out from that hotel, and Cyril will be dragged into it. And then his wife will divorce him. Everything will go - his career, his health - he'll be penniless again. He'd never forgive me - never."

"If you'll excuse my saying so," said Clare, "I don't think much of this Cyril of yours."

Vivien paid no attention.

"I tell you he'll hate me - hate me. I can't bear it. Don't tell Gerald. I'll do anything you like, but don't tell Gerald."

"I must have time to decide," said Clare gravely. "I can't promise anything offhand. In the meantime, you and Cyril mustn't meet again."

"No, no, we won't. I swear it."

"When I know what's the right thing to do," said Clare, "I'll let you know."

She got up. Vivien went out of the house in a furtive, slinking way, glancing back over her shoulder.

Clare wrinkled her nose in disgust. A beastly affair. Would Vivien keep her promise not to see Cyril? Probably not. She was weak - rotten all through.

That afternoon Clare went for a long walk. There was a path which led along the downs. On the left the green hills sloped gently down to the sea far below, while the path wound steadily upward. This walk was known locally as the Edge. Though safe enough if you kept to the path, it was dangerous to wander from it.

Those insidious gentle slopes were dangerous. Clare had lost a dog there once. The animal had gone racing over the smooth grass, gaining momentum, had been unable to stop and had gone over the edge of the cliff to be dashed to pieces on the sharp rocks below.

The afternoon was clear and beautiful. From far below there came the ripple of the sea, a soothing murmur. Clare sat down on the short green turf and stared out over the blue water. She must face this thing clearly. What did she mean to do?

She thought of Vivien with a kind of disgust. How the girl had crumpled up, how abjectly she had surrendered! Clare felt a rising contempt. She had no pluck - no grit.

Nevertheless, much as she disliked Vivien, Clare decided that she would continue to spare her for the present. When she got home she wrote a note to her, saying that although she could make no definite

promise for the future, she had decided to keep silence for the present.

Life went on much the same in Daymer's End. It was noticed locally that Lady Lee was looking far from well. On the other hand, Clare Halliwell bloomed. Her eyes were brighter, she carried her head higher, and there was a new confidence and assurance in her manner.

She and Lady Lee often met, and it was noticed on these occasions that the younger woman watched the older with a flattering attention to her slightest word.

Sometimes Miss Halliwell would make remarks that seemed a little ambiguous - not entirely relevant to the matter at hand. She would suddenly say that she had changed her mind about many things lately - that it was curious how a little thing might alter entirely one's point of view. One was apt to give way too much to pity - and that was really quite wrong.

When she said things of that kind she usually looked at Lady Lee in a peculiar way, and the latter would suddenly grow quite white, and look almost terrified.

But as the year drew on, these little subtleties became less apparent. Clare continued to make the same remarks, but Lady Lee seemed less affected by them. She began to recover her looks and spirits. Her old gay manner returned.

One morning, when she was taking her dog for a walk, Clare met Gerald in a lane. The latter's spaniel fraternized with Rover, while his master talked to Clare.

"Heard our news?" he said buoyantly. "I expect Vivien's told you."

"What sort of news? Vivien hasn't mentioned anything in particular."

"We're going abroad - for a year - perhaps longer. Vivien's fed up with this place. She never has cared for it, you know." He sighed; for a moment or two he looked downcast. Gerald Lee was very proud of his home. "Anyway, I've promised her a change. I've taken a villa near Algiers. A wonderful place, by all accounts." He laughed a little self-consciously. "Quite a second honeymoon, eh?"

For a minute or two Clare could not speak. Something seemed to be rising up in her throat and suffocating her. She could see the white walls of the villa, the orange trees, smell the soft perfumed breath of the South. A second honeymoon!

They were going to escape. Vivien no longer believed in her threats. She was going away, carefree, gay, happy.

Clare heard her own voice, a little hoarse in timbre, saying the appropriate things. How lovely! She envied them!

Mercifully at that moment Rover and the spaniel decided to disagree. In the scuffle that ensued, further conversation was out of the question.

That afternoon Clare sat down and wrote a note to Vivien. She asked her to meet her on the Edge the following day, as she had something very important to say to her.

The next morning dawned bright and cloudless. Clare walked up the steep path of the Edge with a lightened heart. What a perfect day! She was glad that she had decided to say what had to be said out in the open, under the blue sky, instead of in her stuffy little sitting room. She was sorry for Vivien, very sorry indeed, but the thing had got to be done.

She saw a yellow dot, like some yellow flower higher up by the side of the path. As she came nearer, it resolved itself into the figure of Vivien, dressed in a yellow knitted frock, sitting on the short turf, her hands clasped round her knees.

"Good morning," said Clare. "Isn't it a perfect morning?"

"Is it?" said Vivien. "I haven't noticed. What was it you wanted to say to me?"

Clare dropped down on the grass beside her.

"I'm quite out of breath," she said apologetically. "It's a steep pull up here."

"Damn you!" cried Vivien shrilly. "Why can't you say it, you smooth-faced devil, instead of torturing me?"

Clare looked shocked, and Vivien hastily recanted.

"I didn't mean that. I'm sorry, Clare. I am indeed. Only - my nerves are all to pieces, and your sitting here and talking about the weather - well, it got me all rattled."

"You'll have a nervous breakdown if you're not careful," said Clare coldly.

Vivien gave a short laugh.

"Go over the edge? No - I'm not that kind. I'll never be a loony. Now tell me - what's all this about?"

Clare was silent for a moment, then she spoke, looking not at Vivien but steadily out over the sea.

"I thought it only fair to warn you that I can no longer keep silence about - about what happened last year."

"You mean - you'll go to Gerald with that story?"

"Unless you'll tell him yourself. That would be infinitely the better way."

Vivien laughed sharply.

"You know well enough I haven't got the pluck to do that."

Clare did not contradict the assertion. She had had proof before of Vivien's utterly craven temper.

"It would be infinitely better," she repeated.

Again Vivien gave that short, ugly laugh.

"It's your precious conscience, I suppose, that drives you to do this?" she sneered.

"I dare say it seems very strange to you," said Clare quietly. "But it honestly is that."

Vivien's white, set face stared into hers.

"My God!" she said. "I really believe you mean it, too. You actually think that's the reason."

"It is the reason."

"No, it isn't. If so, you'd have done it before - long ago. Why didn't you? No, don't answer. I'll tell you. You got more pleasure out of holding it over me - that's why. You liked to keep me on tenterhooks, and make me wince and squirm. You'd say things - diabolical things - just to torment me and keep me perpetually on the jump. And so they did for a bit - till I got used to them."

"You got to feel secure," said Clare.

"You saw that, didn't you? But even then, you held back, enjoying your sense of power. But now we're going away, escaping from you, perhaps even going to be happy - you couldn't stick that at any price. So your convenient conscience wakes up!"

She stopped, panting. Clare said, still very quietly:

"I can't prevent your saying all these fantastical things, but I can assure you they're not true."

Vivien turned suddenly and caught her by the hand.

"Clare - for God's sake! I've been straight - I've done what you said. I've not seen Cyril again - I swear it."

"That's nothing to do with it."

"Clare - haven't you any pity - any kindness? I'll go down on my knees to you."

"Tell Gerald yourself. If you tell him, he may forgive you."

Vivien laughed scornfully.

"You know Gerald better than that. He'll be rabid - vindictive. He'll make me suffer - he'll make Cyril suffer. That's what I can't bear. Listen, Clare - he's doing so well. He's invented something - machinery, I don't understand about it, but it may be a wonderful success. He's working it out now - his wife supplies the money for it, of course. But she's suspicious - jealous. If she finds out, and she will find out if Gerald starts proceedings for divorce - she'll chuck Cyril - his work, everything. Cyril will be ruined."

"I'm not thinking of Cyril," said Clare. "I'm thinking of Gerald. Why don't you think a little of him, too?"

"Gerald? I don't care that -" she snapped her fingers - "for Gerald. I never have. We might as well have the truth now we're at it. But I do care for Cyril. I'm a rotter, through and through, I admit it. I dare say he's a rotter, too. But my feeling for him - that isn't rotten. I'd die for him, do you hear? I'd die for him!"

"That is easily said," said Clare derisively.

"You think I'm not in earnest? Listen, if you go on with this beastly business, I'll kill myself. Sooner than have Cyril brought into it and ruined, I'd do that."

Clare remained unimpressed.

"You don't believe me?" said Vivien, panting.

"Suicide needs a lot of courage."

Vivien flinched back as though she had been struck.

"You've got me there. Yes, I've no pluck. If there were an easy way -"

"There's an easy way in front of you," said Clare. "You've only got to run straight down the green slope. It would be all over in a couple of minutes. Remember that child last year."

"Yes," said Vivien thoughtfully. "That would be easy - quite easy - if one really wanted to -"

Clare laughed.

Vivien turned to her.

"Let's have this out once more. Can't you see that by keeping silence as long as you have, you've - you've no right to go back on it now? I'll not see Cyril again. I'll be a good wife to Gerald - I swear I will. Or I'll go away and never see him again. Whichever you like. Clare -"

Clare got up.

"I advise you," she said, "to tell your husband yourself... Otherwise - I shall."

"I see," said Vivien softly. "Well - I can't let Cyril suffer -"

She got up - stood still as though considering for a minute or two, then ran lightly down to the path, but instead of stopping, crossed it and went down the slope.

Once she half turned her head and waved a hand gaily to Clare, then she ran on gaily, lightly, as a child might run, out of sight...

Clare stood petrified. Suddenly she heard cries, shouts, a clamor of voices. Then - silence.

She picked her way stiffly down to the path. About a hundred yards away a party of people coming up it had stopped. They were staring and pointing. Clare ran down and joined them.

"Yes, Miss, someone's fallen over the cliff. Two men have gone down - to see."

She waited. Was it an hour, or eternity, or only a few minutes?

A man came toiling up the ascent. It was the vicar in his shirtsleeves. His coat had been taken off to cover what lay below.

"Horrible," he said, his face very white. "Mercifully, death must have been instantaneous."

He saw Clare, and came over to her.

"This must have been a terrible shock to you. You were taking a walk together, I understand?"

Clare heard herself answering mechanically.

Yes. They had just parted. No, Lady Lee's manner had been quite normal. One of the group interposed the information that the lady was laughing and waving her hand. A terribly dangerous place - there ought to be a railing along the path.

The vicar's voice rose again.

"An accident - yes, clearly an accident."

And then suddenly Clare laughed - a hoarse, raucous laugh that echoed along the cliff.

"That's a damned lie," she said. "I killed her."

She felt someone patting her shoulder, a voice spoke soothingly.

"There, there. It's all right. You'll be all right presently."

But Clare was not all right presently. She was never all right again. She persisted in the delusion - certainly a delusion, since at least eight persons had witnessed the scene - that she had killed Vivien Lee.

She was very miserable till Nurse Lauriston came to take charge. Nurse Lauriston was very successful with mental cases.

"Humor them, poor things," she would say comfortably.

So she told Clare that she was a wardress from Pentonville Prison. Clare's sentence, she said, had been commuted to penal servitude for life. A room was fitted up as a cell.

"And now, I think, we shall be quite happy and comfortable," said Nurse Lauriston to the doctor. "Round-bladed knives if you like, doctor, but I don't think there's the least fear of suicide. She's not the type. Too self-centered. Funny how those are often the ones who go over the edge most easily."

CHRISTMAS ADVENTURE

I

The big logs crackled merrily in the wide, open fireplace, and above their crackling rose the babel of six tongues all wagging industriously together. The house-party of young people were enjoying their Christmas.

Old Miss Endicott, known to most of those present as Aunt Emily, smiled indulgently on the clatter.

'Bet you you can't eat six mince-pies, Jean.'

'Yes, I can.'

'No, you can't.'

'You'll get the pig out of the trifle if you do.'

'Yes, and three helps of trifle, and two helps of plum-pudding.'

'I hope the pudding will be good,' said Miss Endicott apprehensively. 'But they were only made three days ago. Christmas puddings ought to be made a long time before Christmas. Why, I remember when I was a child, I thought the last Collect before Advent - "Stir up, O Lord, we beseech Thee ..." - referred in some way to stirring up the Christmas puddings!'

There was a polite pause while Miss Endicott was speaking. Not because any of the young people were in the least interested in her reminiscences of bygone days, but because they felt that some show of attention was due by good manners to their hostess. As soon as she stopped, the babel burst out again. Miss Endicott sighed, and glanced towards the only member of the party whose years approached her own, as though in search of sympathy - a little man with a curious egg-shaped head and fierce upstanding moustaches. Young people were not what they were, reflected Miss Endicott. In olden days there would have been a mute, respectful circle, listening to the pearls of wisdom dropped by their elders. Instead of which there was all this nonsensical chatter, most of it utterly incomprehensible. All the same, they were dear children! Her eyes softened as she passed them in review - tall, freckled Jean; little Nancy Cardell, with her dark, gipsy beauty; the two younger boys home from school, Johnnie and Eric, and their friend, Charlie Pease; and fair, beautiful Evelyn Haworth ... At thought of the last, her brow contracted a little, and her eyes wandered to where her eldest nephew, Roger, sat morosely silent, taking no part in the fun, with his eyes fixed on the exquisite Northern fairness of the young girl.

'Isn't the snow ripping?' cried Johnnie, approaching the window. 'Real Christmas weather. I say, let's have a snowball fight. There's lots of time before dinner, isn't there, Aunt Emily?'

'Yes, my dear. We have it at two o'clock. That reminds me, I had better see to the table.'

She hurried out of the room.

'I tell you what. We'll make a snowman!' screamed Jean.

'Yes, what fun! I know; we'll do a snow statue of M. Poirot. Do you hear, M. Poirot? The great detective, Hercule Poirot, modelled in snow, by six celebrated artists!'

The little man in the chair bowed his acknowledgements with a twinkling eye.

'Make him very handsome, my children,' he urged. 'I insist on that.'

'Ra-ther!'

The troop disappeared like a whirlwind, colliding in the doorway with a stately butler who was entering with a note on a salver. The butler, his calm re-established, advanced towards Poirot.

Poirot took the note and tore it open. The butler departed. Twice the little man read the note through, then he folded it up and put it in his pocket. Not a muscle of his face had moved, and yet the contents of the note were sufficiently surprising. Scrawled in an illiterate hand were the words: *'Don't eat any plum-pudding.'*

'Very interesting,' murmured M. Poirot to himself. 'And quite unexpected.'

He looked across to the fireplace. Evelyn Haworth had not gone out with the rest. She was sitting staring at the fire, absorbed in thought, nervously twisting a ring on the third finger of her left hand round and round.

'You are lost in a dream, Mademoiselle,' said the little man at last. 'And the dream is not a happy one, eh?'

She started, and looked across at him uncertainly. He nodded reassuringly.

'It is my business to know things. No, you are not happy. Me, too, I am not very happy. Shall we confide in each other? See you, I have the big sorrow because a friend of mine, a friend of many years, has gone away across the sea to the South America. Sometimes, when we were together, this friend made me impatient, his stupidity enraged me; but now that he is gone, I can remember only his good qualities. That is the way of life, is it not? And now, Mademoiselle, what is your trouble? You are not like me, old and alone - you are young and beautiful; and the man you love loves you - oh yes, it is so: I have been watching him for the last half-hour.'

The girl's colour rose.

'You mean Roger Endicott? Oh, but you have made a mistake; it is not Roger I am engaged to.'

'No, you are engaged to Mr Oscar Levering. I know that perfectly. But why are you engaged to him, since you love another man?'

The girl did not seem to resent his words; indeed, there was something in his manner which made that impossible. He spoke with a mixture of kindliness and authority that was irresistible.

'Tell me all about it,' said Poirot gently; and he added the phrase he had used before, the sound of which was oddly comforting to the girl. 'It is my business to know things.'

'I am so miserable, M. Poirot - so very miserable. You see, once we were very well off. I was supposed to be an heiress, and Roger was only a younger son; and - and although I'm sure he cared for me, he never said anything, but went off to Australia.'

'It is droll, the way they arrange the marriages over here,' interpolated M. Poirot. 'No order. No method. Everything left to chance.'

Evelyn continued.

'Then suddenly we lost all our money. My mother and I were left almost penniless. We moved into a tiny house, and we could just manage. But my mother became very ill. The only chance for her was to have a serious operation and go abroad to a warm climate. And we hadn't the money, M. Poirot - we hadn't the money! It meant that she must die. Mr Levering had proposed to me once or twice already. He again asked me to marry him, and promised to do everything that could be done for my mother. I said yes - what else could I do? He kept his word. The operation was performed by the greatest specialist of the day, and we went to Egypt for the winter. That was a year ago. My mother is well and strong again; and I - I am to marry Mr Levering after Christmas.'

'I see,' said M. Poirot; 'and in the meantime, M. Roger's elder brother has died, and he has come home - to find his dream shattered. All the same, you are not yet married, Mademoiselle.'

'A Haworth does not break her word, M. Poirot,' said the girl proudly.

Almost as she spoke, the door opened, and a big man with a rubicund face, narrow, crafty eyes, and a bald head stood on the threshold.

'What are you moping in here for, Evelyn? Come out for a stroll.'

'Very well, Oscar.'

She rose listlessly. Poirot rose also and demanded politely:

'Mademoiselle Levering, she is still indisposed?'

'Yes, I'm sorry to say my sister is still in bed. Too bad, to be laid up on Christmas Day.'

'It is indeed,' agreed the detective politely.

A few minutes sufficed for Evelyn to put on her snow-boots and some wraps, and she and her fiancé went out into the snow-covered grounds. It was an ideal Christmas Day, crisp and sunny. The rest of the house-party were busy with the erection of the snowman. Levering and Evelyn paused to watch them.

'Love's young dream, yah!' cried Johnnie, and threw a snowball at them.

'What do you think of it, Evelyn?' cried Jean. 'M. Hercule Poirot, the great detective.'

'Wait till the moustache goes on,' said Eric. 'Nancy's going to clip off a bit of her hair for it. Vivent les braves Belges! Pom, pom!'

'Fancy having a real-live detective in the house!' - this from Charlie - 'I wish there could be a murder, too.'

'Oh, oh, oh!' cried Jean, dancing about. 'I've got an idea. Let's get up a murder - a spoof one, I mean. And take him in. Oh, do let's - it would be no end of a rag.'

Five voices began to talk at once.

'How should we do it?'

'Awful groans!'

'No, you stupid, out here.'

'Footprints in the snow, of course.'

'Jean in her nightie.'

'You do it with red paint.'

'In your hand - and clap it to your head.'

'I say, I wish we had a revolver.'

'I tell you, Father and Aunt Em won't hear. Their rooms are the other side of the house.'

'No, he won't mind a bit; he's no end of a sport.'

'Yes, but what kind of red paint? Enamel?'

'We could get some in the village.'

'Fat-head, not on Christmas Day.'

'No, watercolour. Crimson lake.'

'Jean can be it.'

'Never mind if you are cold. It won't be for long.'

'No, Nancy can be it, Nancy's got those posh pyjamas.'

'Let's see if Graves knows where there's any paint.'

A stampede to the house.

'In a brown study, Endicott?' said Levering, laughing disagreeably.

Roger roused himself abruptly. He had heard little of what had passed.

'I was just wondering,' he said quietly.

'Wondering?'

'Wondering what M. Poirot was doing down here at all.'

Levering seemed taken aback; but at that moment the big gong pealed out, and everybody went in to Christmas dinner. The curtains were drawn in the dining-room, and the lights on, illuminating the long table piled high with crackers and other decorations. It was a real old-fashioned Christmas dinner. At one end of the table was the Squire, red-faced and jovial; his sister faced him at the other. M. Poirot, in honour of the occasion, had donned a red waistcoat, and his plumpness, and the way he carried his head on one side, reminded one irresistibly of a robin redbreast.

The Squire carved rapidly, and everyone fell to on turkey. The carcasses of two turkeys were removed, and there fell a breathless hush. Then Graves, the butler, appeared in state, bearing the plum-pudding aloft - a gigantic pudding wreathed in flames. A hullabaloo broke out.

'Quick. Oh! my piece is going out. Buck up, Graves; unless it's still burning, I shan't get my wish.'

Nobody had leisure to notice a curious expression on the face of M. Poirot as he surveyed the portion of pudding on his plate. Nobody observed the lightning glance he sent round the table. With a faint, puzzled frown he began to eat his pudding. Everybody began to eat pudding. The conversation was more subdued. Suddenly the Squire uttered an exclamation. His face became purple and his hand went to his mouth.

'Confound it, Emily!' he roared. 'Why do you let the cook put glass in the puddings?'

'Glass?' cried Miss Endicott, astonished.

The Squire withdrew the offending substance from his mouth.

'Might have broken a tooth,' he grumbled. 'Or swallowed it and had appendicitis.'

In front of each person was a small finger-bowl of water, designed to receive the sixpences and other matters found in the trifle. Mr Endicott dropped the piece of glass into this, rinsed it and held it up.

'God bless my soul!' he ejaculated. 'It's a red stone out of one of the cracker brooches.'

'You permit?' Very deftly, M. Poirot took it from his fingers and examined it attentively. As the Squire had said, it was a big red stone, the colour of a ruby. The light gleamed from its facets as he turned it about.

'Gee!' cried Eric. 'Suppose it's real.'

'Silly boy!' said Jean scornfully. 'A ruby that size would be worth thousands and thousands and thousands - wouldn't it, M. Poirot?'

'Extraordinary how well they get up these cracker things,' murmured Miss Endicott. 'But how did it get into the pudding?"

Undoubtedly that was the question of the hour. Every hypothesis was exhausted. Only M. Poirot said nothing, but carelessly, as though thinking of something else, he dropped the stone into his pocket.

After dinner he paid a visit to the kitchen.

The cook was rather flustered. To be questioned by a member of the house-party, and the foreign gentleman too! But she did her best to answer his questions. The puddings had been made three days ago - 'The day you arrived, Sir.' Everyone had come out into the kitchen to have a stir and wish. An old custom - perhaps they didn't have it abroad? After that the puddings were boiled, and then they were put in a row on the top shelf in the larder. Was there anything special to distinguish this pudding from the others? No, she didn't think so. Except that it was in an aluminium pudding-basin, and the others were in china ones. Was it the pudding originally intended for Christmas Day? It was funny that he should ask that. No, indeed! The Christmas pudding was always boiled in a big white china mould with a pattern of holly-leaves. But this very morning (the cook's red face became wrathful) Gladys, the kitchen-maid, sent to fetch it down for the final boiling, had managed to drop and break it. 'And of course, seeing that there might be splinters in it, I wouldn't send it to table, but took the big aluminium one instead.'

M. Poirot thanked her for her information. He went out of the kitchen, smiling a little to himself, as though satisfied with the information he had obtained. And the fingers of his right hand played with something in his pocket.

II

'M. Poirot! M. Poirot! Do wake up! Something dreadful's happened!'

Thus Johnnie in the early hours of the following morning. M. Poirot sat up in bed. He wore a night-cap. The contrast between the dignity of his countenance and the rakish tilt of the nightcap was certainly droll; but its effect on Johnnie seemed disproportionate. But for his words, one might have fancied that the boy was violently amused about something. Curious sounds came from outside the door, too, suggesting soda-water syphons in difficulty.

'Come down at once, please,' continued Johnnie, his voice shaking slightly. 'Someone's been killed.' He turned away.

'Aha, that is serious!' said M. Poirot.

He arose, and, without unduly hurrying himself, made a partial toilet. Then he followed Johnnie down the stairs. The house-party was clustered round the door into the garden. Their countenances all expressed intense emotion. At sight of him Eric was seized with a violent choking fit.

Jean came forward and laid her hand on M. Poirot's arm.

'Look!' she said, and pointed dramatically through the open door.

'Mon Dieu!' ejaculated M. Poirot. 'It is like a scene on the stage.'

His remark was not inapposite. More snow had fallen during the night, the world looked white and ghostly in the faint light of the early dawn. The expanse of white lay unbroken save for what looked like on splash of vivid scarlet.

Nancy Cardell lay motionless on the snow. She was clad in scarlet silk pyjamas, her small feet were bare, her arms were spread wide. Her head was turned aside and hidden by the mass of her clustering black hair. Deadly still she lay, and from her left side rose up the hilt of a dagger, whilst on the snow there was an ever-widening patch of crimson.

Poirot went out into the snow. He did not go to where the girl's body lay, but kept to the path. Two tracks of foot-marks, a man's and a woman's, led to where the tragedy had occurred. The man's footprints went away in the opposite direction alone. Poirot stood on the path, stroking his chin reflectively.

Suddenly Oscar Levering burst out of the house.

'Good God!' he cried. 'What's this?'

His excitement was a contrast to the other's calm.

'It looks,' said M. Poirot thoughtfully, 'like murder.'

Eric had another violent attack of coughing.

'But we must do something,' cried the other. 'What shall we do?'

'There is only one thing to be done,' said M. Poirot. 'Send for the police.'

'Oh!' said everybody at once.

M. Poirot looked inquiringly at them.

'Certainly,' he said. 'It is the only thing to be done. Who will go?'

There was a pause, then Johnnie came forward.

'Rag's over,' he declared. 'I say, M. Poirot, I hope you won't be too mad with us. It's all a joke, you know - got up between us - just to pull your leg. Nancy's only shamming.'

M. Poirot regarded him without visible emotion, save that his eyes twinkled a moment.

'You mock yourselves at me, is that it?' he inquired placidly.

'I say, I'm awfully sorry really. We shouldn't have done it. Beastly bad taste. I apologize, I really do.'

'You need not apologize,' said the other in a peculiar voice.

Johnnie turned.

'I say, Nancy, get up!' he cried. 'Don't lie there all day.'

But the figure on the ground did not move.

'Get up,' cried Johnnie again.

Still Nancy did not move, and suddenly a feeling of nameless dread came over the boy. He turned to Poirot.

'What - what's the matter? Why doesn't she get up?'

'Come with me,' said Poirot curtly.

He strode over the snow. He had waved the others back, and he was careful not to infringe on the other footmarks. The boy followed him, frightened and unbelieving. Poirot knelt down by the girl, then he signed to Johnnie.

'Feel her hand and pulse.'

Wondering, the boy bent down, then started back with a cry. The hand and arm were stiff and cold, and no vestige of a pulse was to be found.

'She's dead!' he gasped. 'But how? Why?'

M. Poirot passed over the first part of the question.

'Why?' he said musingly. 'I wonder.' Then, suddenly leaning across the dead girl's body, he unclasped her other hand, which was tightly clenched over something. Both he and the boy uttered an exclamation.

In the palm of Nancy's hand was a red stone that winked and flashed forth fire.

'Aha!' cried M. Poirot. Swift as a flash his hand flew to his pocket, and came away empty.

'The cracker ruby,' said Johnnie wonderingly. Then, as his companion bent to examine the dagger, and the stained snow, he cried out: 'Surely it can't be blood, M. Poirot. It's paint. It's only paint.'

Poirot straightened himself.

'Yes,' he said quietly. 'You are right. It's only paint.'

'Then how -' The boy broke off. Poirot finished the sentence for him.

'How was she killed? That we must find out. Did she eat or drink anything this morning?'

He was retracing his steps to the path where the others waited as he spoke. Johnnie was close behind him.

'She had a cup of tea,' said the boy. 'Mr Levering made it for her. He's got a spirit-lamp in his room.'

Johnnie's voice was loud and clear. Levering heard the words.

'Always take a spirit-lamp about with me,' he declared. 'Most handy thing in the world. My sister's been glad enough of it this visit - not liking to worry the servants all the time you know.'

M. Poirot's eyes fell, almost apologetically as it seemed, to Mr Levering's feet, which were encased in carpet slippers.

'You have changed your boots, I see,' he murmured gently.

Levering stared at him.

'But, M. Poirot,' cried Jean, 'what are we to do?'

'There is only one thing to be done, as I said just now, Mademoiselle. Send for the police.'

'I'll go,' cried Levering. 'It won't take me a minute to put on my boots. You people had better not stay out here in the cold.'

He disappeared into the house.

'He is so thoughtful, that Mr Levering,' murmured Poirot softly. 'Shall we take his advice?'

'What about waking father and - and everybody?'

'No,' said M. Poirot sharply. 'It is quite unnecessary. Until the police come, nothing must be touched out here; so shall we go inside? To the library? I have a little history to recount to you which may distract your minds from this sad tragedy.'

He led the way, and they followed him.

'The story is about a ruby,' said M. Poirot, ensconcing himself in a comfortable arm-chair. 'A very celebrated ruby which belonged to a very celebrated man. I will not tell you his name - but he is one of the great ones of the earth. Eh bien, this great man, he arrived in London, incognito. And since, though a great man, he was also a young and a foolish man, he became entangled with a pretty young lady. The pretty young lady, she did not care much for the man, but she did care for his possessions - so much so that she disappeared one day with the historic ruby which had belonged to his house for generations. The poor young man, he was in a quandary. He is shortly to be married to a noble Princess, and he does not want the scandal. Impossible to go to the police, he comes to me, Hercule Poirot, instead. "Recover for me my ruby," he says. Eh bien, I know something of this young lady. She has a brother, and between them they have put through many a clever coup. I happen to know where they are staying for Christmas. By the kindness of Mr Endicott, whom I chance to have met, I, too, become a guest. But when this pretty young lady hears that I am arriving, she is greatly alarmed. She is intelligent, and she knows that I am after the ruby. She must hide it immediately in a safe place; and figure to yourself where she hides it - in a plum-pudding! Yes, you may well say, oh! She is stirring with the rest, you see, and she pops it into a pudding-bowl of aluminium that is different from the others. By a strange chance, that pudding came to be used on Christmas Day.'

The tragedy forgotten for the moment, they stared at him open-mouthed.

'After that,' continued the little man, 'she took to her bed.' He drew out his watch and looked at it. 'The household is astir. Mr Levering is a

long time fetching the police, is he not? I fancy that his sister went with him.'

Evelyn rose with a cry, her eyes fixed on Poirot.

'And I also fancy that they will not return. Oscar Levering has been sailing close to the wind for a long time, and this is the end. He and his sister will pursue their activities abroad for a time under a different name. I alternately tempted and frightened him this morning. By casting aside all pretence he could gain possession of the ruby whilst we were in the house and he was supposed to be fetching the police. But it meant burning his boats. Still, with a case being built up against him for murder, flight seemed clearly indicated.'

'Did he kill Nancy?' whispered Jean.

Poirot rose.

'Supposing we visit once more the scene of the crime,' he suggested.

He led the way, and they followed him. But a simultaneous gasp broke from their lips as they passed outside the house. No trace of the tragedy remained; the snow was smooth and unbroken.

'Crikey!' said Eric, sinking down on the step. 'It wasn't all a dream, was it?'

'Most extraordinary,' said M. Poirot, 'The Mystery of the Disappearing Body.' His eyes twinkled gently.

Jean came up to him in sudden suspicion.

'M. Poirot, you haven't - you aren't - I say, you haven't been spoofing us all the time, have you? Oh, I do believe you have!'

'It is true, my children. I knew about your little plot, you see, and I arranged a little counterplot of my own. Ah, here is Mlle Nancy - and none the worse, I hope, after her magnificent acting of the comedy.'

It was indeed Nancy Cardell in the flesh, her eyes shining and her whole person exuberant with health and vigour.

'You have not caught cold? You drank the tisane I sent to your room?' demanded Poirot accusingly.

'I took one sip and that was enough. I'm all right. Did I do it well, M. Poirot? Oh, my arm hurts after that tourniquet!'

'You were splendid, petite. But shall we explain to the others? They are still in the fog, I perceive. See you, mes enfants, I went to Mlle Nancy, told her that I knew all about your little complot, and asked her if she would act a part for me. She did it very cleverly. She induced Mr Levering to make her a cup of tea, and also managed that he should be the one chosen to leave footprints on the snow. So when the time came, and he thought that by some fatality she was really dead, I had all the materials to frighten him with. What happened after we went into the house, Mademoiselle?'

'He came down with his sister, snatched the ruby out of my hand, and off they went post-haste.'

'But I say, M. Poirot, what about the ruby?' cried Eric. 'Do you mean to say you've let them have that?'

Poirot's face fell, as he faced a circle of accusing eyes.

'I shall recover it yet,' he said feebly; but he perceived that he had gone down in their estimation.

'Well, I do think!' began Johnnie. 'To let them get away with the ruby -'

But Jean was sharper.

'He's spoofing us again!' she cried. 'You are, aren't you?'

'Feel in my left-hand pocket, Mademoiselle.'

Jean thrust in an eager hand, and drew it out again with a squeal of triumph. She held aloft the great ruby in its crimson splendour.

'You see,' explained Poirot, 'the other was a paste replica I brought with me from London.'

'Isn't he clever?' demanded Jean ecstatically.

'There's one thing you haven't told us,' said Johnnie suddenly. 'How did you know about the rag? Did Nancy tell you?'

Poirot shook his head.

'Then how did you know?'

'It is my business to know things,' said M. Poirot, smiling a little as he watched Evelyn Haworth and Roger Endicott walking down the path together.

'Yes, but do tell us. Oh, do, please! Dear M. Poirot, please tell us!'

He was surrounded by a circle of flushed, eager faces.

'You really wish that I should solve for you this mystery?'

'Yes:

'I do not think I can.'

'Why not?'

'Ma foi, you will be so disappointed.'

'Oh, do tell us! How did you know?'

'Well; you see, I was in the library -'

'Yes?'

'And you were discussing your plans just outside - and the library window was open.'

'Is that all?' said Eric in disgust. 'How simple!'

'Is it not?' said M. Poirot, smiling.

'At all events, we know everything now,' said Jean in a satisfied voice.

'Do we?' muttered M. Poirot to himself, as he went into the house. 'I do not - I, whose business it is to know things.'

And, for perhaps the twentieth time, he drew from his pocket a rather dirty piece of paper.

'Don't eat any plum-pudding -'

M. Poirot shook his head perplexedly. At the same moment he became aware of a peculiar gasping sound very near his feet. He looked down and perceived a small creature in a print dress. In her left hand was a dust-pan, and in the right a brush.

'And who may you be, mon enfant?' inquired M. Poirot.

'Annie 'Icks, please, Sir. Between-maid.'

M. Poirot had an inspiration. He handed her the letter.

'Did you write that, Annie?'

'I didn't mean any 'arm, Sir.'

He smiled at her.

'Of course you didn't. Suppose you tell me all about it?'

'It was them two, Sir - Mr Levering and his sister. None of us can abide 'em; and she wasn't ill a bit - we could all tell that. So I thought something queer was going on, and I'll tell you straight, Sir, I listened at the door, and I heard him say as plain as plain, "This fellow Poirot must be got out of the way as soon as possible." And then he says to 'er, meaning-like, "Where did you put it?" And she answers, "In the pudding." And so I saw they meant to poison you in the Christmas pudding, and I didn't know what to do. Cook wouldn't listen to the likes of me. And then I thought of writing a warning, and I put it in the 'all where Mr Graves would be sure to see it and take it to you.'

Annie paused breathless. Poirot surveyed her gravely for some minutes.

'You read too many novelettes, Annie,' he said at last. 'But you have the good heart, and a certain amount of intelligence. When I return to London I will send you an excellent book upon le ménage, also the Lives of the Saints, and a work upon the economic position of woman.'

Leaving Annie gasping anew, he turned and crossed the hall. He had meant to go into the library, but through the open door he saw a dark head and a fair one, very close together, and he paused where he stood. Suddenly a pair of arms slipped round his neck.

'If you will stand just under the mistletoe!' said Jean.

'Me too,' said Nancy.

M. Poirot enjoyed it all - he enjoyed it very much indeed.

THE LONELY GOD

He stood on a shelf in the British Museum, alone and forlorn amongst a company of obviously more important deities. Ranged round the four walls, these greater personages all seemed to display an overwhelming sense of their own superiority. The pedestal of each was duly inscribed with the land and race that had been proud to possess him. There was no doubt of their position; they were divinities of importance and recognized as such.

Only the little god in the corner was aloof and remote from their company. Roughly hewn out of grey stone, his features almost totally obliterated by time and exposure, he sat there in isolation, his elbows on his knees, and his head buried in his hands; a lonely little god in a strange country.

There was no inscription to tell the land whence he came. He was indeed lost, without honor or renown, a pathetic little figure very far from home. No one noticed him, no one stopped to look at him. Why should they? He was so insignificant, a block of grey stone in a corner. On either side of him were two Mexican gods worn smooth with age, placid idols with folded hands, and cruel mouths curved in a smile that showed openly their contempt of humanity. There was also a rotund, violently self-assertive little god, with a clenched fist, who evidently suffered from a swollen sense of his own importance, but passers-by

stopped to give him a glance sometimes, even if it was only to laugh at the contrast of his absurd pomposity with the smiling indifference of his Mexican companions.

And the little lost god sat on there hopelessly, his head in his hands, as he had sat year in and year out, till one day the impossible happened, and he found - a worshipper.

"Any letters for me?"

The hall porter removed a packet of letters from a pigeonhole, gave a cursory glance through them, and said in a wooden voice:

"Nothing for you, sir."

Frank Oliver sighed as he walked out of the club again. There was no particular reason why there should have been anything for him. Very few people wrote to him. Ever since he had returned from Burma in the spring, he had become conscious of a growing and increasing loneliness.

Frank Oliver was a man just over forty, and the last eighteen years of his life had been spent in various parts of the globe, with brief furloughs in England.

Now that he had retired and come home to live for good, he realized for the first time how very much alone in the world he was.

True, there was his sister Greta, married to a Yorkshire clergyman, very busy with parochial duties and the bringing up of a family of small

children. Greta was naturally very fond of her only brother, but equally naturally she had very little time to give him. Then there was his old friend Tom Hurley. Tom was married to a nice, bright, cheerful girl, very energetic and practical, of whom Frank was secretly afraid. She told him brightly that he must not be a crabbed old bachelor, and was always producing "nice girls." Frank Oliver found that he never had anything to say to these "nice girls"; they persevered with him for a while, then gave him up as hopeless.

And yet he was not really unsociable. He had a great longing for companionship and sympathy, and ever since he had been back in England he had become aware of a growing discouragement. He had been away too long, he was out of tune with the times. He spent long, aimless days wandering about, wondering what on earth he was to do with himself next.

It was on one of these days that he strolled into the British Museum. He was interested in Asiatic curiosities, and so it was that he chanced upon the lonely god. Its charm held him at once. Here was something vaguely akin to himself; here, too, was someone lost and astray in a strange land. He became in the habit of paying frequent visits to the Museum, just to glance in on the little grey stone figure, in its obscure place on the high shelf.

"Rough luck on the little chap," he thought to himself. "Probably had a lot of fuss made about him once, kowtowing and offerings and all the rest of it."

He had begun to feel such a proprietary right in his little friend (it really almost amounted to a sense of actual ownership) that he was inclined

to be resentful when he found that the little god had made a second conquest. He had discovered the lonely god; nobody else, he felt, had a right to interfere.

But after the first flash of indignation, he was forced to smile at himself. For this second worshipper was such a little bit of a thing, such a ridiculous, pathetic creature, in a shabby black coat and skirt that had seen their best days. She was young, a little over twenty he should judge, with fair hair and blue eyes, and a wistful droop to her mouth.

Her hat especially appealed to his chivalry. She had evidently trimmed it herself, and it made such a brave attempt to be smart that its failure was pathetic. She was obviously a lady, though a poverty-stricken one, and he immediately decided in his own mind that she was a governess and alone in the world.

He soon found out that her days for visiting the god were Tuesdays and Fridays, and she always arrived at ten o'clock, as soon as the Museum was open. At first he disliked her intrusion, but little by little it began to form one of the principal interests of his monotonous life. Indeed, the fellow devotee was fast ousting the object of devotion from his position of preeminence. The days that he did not see the "Little Lonely Lady," as he called her to himself, were blank.

Perhaps she, too, was equally interested in him, though she endeavored to conceal the fact with studious unconcern. But little by little a sense of fellowship was slowly growing between them, though as yet they had exchanged no spoken word. The truth of the matter was, the man was too shy! He argued to himself that very likely she

had not even noticed him (some inner sense gave the lie to that instantly), that she would consider it a great impertinence, and, finally, that he had not the least idea what to say.

But Fate, or the little god, was kind, and sent him an inspiration - or what he regarded as such. With infinite delight in his own cunning, he purchased a woman's handkerchief, a frail little affair of cambric and lace which he almost feared to touch, and, thus armed, he followed her as she departed, and stopped her in the Egyptian room.

"Excuse me, but is this yours?" He tried to speak with airy unconcern, and signally failed.

The Lonely Lady took it, and made a pretence of examining it with minute care.

"No, it is not mine." She handed it back, and added, with what he felt guiltily was a suspicious glance: "It's quite a new one. The price is still on it."

But he was unwilling to admit that he had been found out. He started on an over-plausible flow of explanation.

"You see, I picked it up under that big case. It was just by the farthest leg of it." He derived great relief from this detailed account. "So, as you had been standing there, I thought it must be yours and came after you with it."

She said again: "No, it isn't mine," and added, as if with a sense of ungraciousness, "Thank you."

The conversation came to an awkward standstill. The girl stood there, pink and embarrassed, evidently uncertain how to retreat with dignity.

He made a desperate effort to take advantage of his opportunity.

"I - I didn't know there was anyone else in London who cared for our little lonely god till you came."

She answered eagerly, forgetting her reserve: "Do you call him that too?"

Apparently, if she had noticed his pronoun, she did not resent it. She had been startled into sympathy, and his quiet "Of course!" seemed the most natural rejoinder in the world.

Again there was a silence, but this time it was a silence born of understanding.

It was the Lonely Lady who broke it in a sudden remembrance of the conventionalities.

She drew herself up to her full height, and with an almost ridiculous assumption of dignity for so small a person, she observed in chilling accents: "I must be going now. Good morning." And with a slight, stiff inclination of her head, she walked away, holding herself very erect.

By all acknowledged standards Frank Oliver ought to have felt rebuffed, but it is a regrettable sign of his rapid advance in depravity that he merely murmured to himself: "Little darling!"

He was soon to repent of his temerity, however. For ten days his little lady never came near the Museum. He was in despair! He had frightened her away! She would never come back! He was a brute, a villain! He would never see her again!

In his distress he haunted the British Museum all day long. She might merely have changed her time of coming. He soon began to know the adjacent rooms by heart, and he contracted a lasting hatred of mummies. The guardian policeman observed him with suspicion when he spent three hours poring over Assyrian hieroglyphics, and the contemplation of endless vases of all ages nearly drove him mad with boredom.

But one day his patience was rewarded. She came again, rather pinker than usual, and trying hard to appear self-possessed.

He greeted her with cheerful friendliness.

"Good morning. It is ages since you've been here."

"Good morning."

She let the words slip out with icy frigidity, and coldly ignored the end part of his sentence.

But he was desperate.

"Look here!" He stood confronting her with pleading eyes that reminded her irresistibly of a large, faithful dog. "Won't you be friends?

I'm all alone in London - all alone in the world, and I believe you are, too. We ought to be friends. Besides, our little god has introduced us."

She looked up half doubtfully, but there was a faint smile quivering at the corners of her mouth.

"Has he?"

"Of course!"

It was the second time he had used this extremely positive form of assurance, and now, as before, it did not fail of its effect, for after a minute or two the girl said, in that slightly royal manner of hers:

"Very well."

"That's splendid," he replied gruffly, but there was something in his voice as he said it that made the girl glance at him swiftly, with a sharp impulse of pity.

And so the queer friendship began. Twice a week they met, at the shrine of a little heathen idol. At first they confined their conversation solely to him. He was, as it were, at once a palliation of, and an excuse for their friendship. The question of his origin was widely discussed. The man insisted on attributing to him the most bloodthirsty characteristics. He depicted him as the terror and dread of his native land, insatiable for human sacrifice, and bowed down to by his people in fear and trembling. In the contrast between his former greatness and his present insignificance there lay, according to the man, all the pathos of the situation.

The Lonely Lady would have none of this theory. He was essentially a kind little god, she insisted. She doubted whether he had ever been very powerful. If he had been so, she argued, he would not now be lost and friendless, and, anyway, he was a dear little god, and she loved him, and she hated to think of him sitting there day after day with all those other horrid, supercilious things jeering at him, because you could see they did! After this vehement outburst the little lady was quite out of breath.

That topic exhausted, they naturally began to talk of themselves. He found out that his surmise was correct. She was a nursery governess to a family of children who lived at Hampstead. He conceived an instant dislike of these children; of Ted, who was five and really not naughty, only mischievous; of the twins who were rather trying, and of Molly, who wouldn't do anything she was told, but was such a dear you couldn't be cross with her!

"Those children bully you," he said grimly and accusingly to her.

"They do not," she retorted with spirit. "I am extremely stern with them."

"Oh! Ye gods!" he laughed. But she made him apologize humbly for his scepticism.

She was an orphan, she told him, quite alone in the world.

Gradually he told her something of his own life: of his official life, which had been painstaking and mildly successful; and of his unofficial pastime, which was the spoiling of yards of canvas.

"Of course, I don't know anything about it," he explained. "But I have always felt I could paint something someday. I can sketch pretty decently, but I'd like to do a real picture of something. A chap who knew once told me that my technique wasn't bad."

She was interested, pressed for details.

"I am sure you paint awfully well."

He shook his head.

"No, I've begun several things lately and chucked them up in despair. I always thought that, when I had the time, it would be plain sailing. I have been storing up that idea for years, but now, like everything else, I suppose, I've left it too late."

"Nothing's too late - ever," said the little lady, with the vehement earnestness of the very young.

He smiled down on her. "You think not, child? It's too late for some things for me."

And the little lady laughed at him and nicknamed him Methuselah.

They were beginning to feel curiously at home in the British Museum. The solid and sympathetic police man who patrolled the galleries was

a man of tact, and on the appearance of the couple he usually found that his onerous duties of guardianship were urgently needed in the adjoining Assyrian room.

One day the man took a bold step. He invited her out to tea!

At first she demurred.

"I have no time. I am not free. I can come some mornings because the children have French lessons."

"Nonsense," said the man. "You could manage one day. Kill off an aunt or a second cousin or something, but come. We'll go to a little ABC shop near here, and have buns for tea! I know you must love buns!"

"Yes, the penny kind with currants!"

"And a lovely glaze on top -"

"They are such plump, dear things!"

"There is something," Frank Oliver said solemnly, "infinitely comforting about a bun!"

So it was arranged, and the little governess came, wearing quite an expensive hothouse rose in her belt in honor of the occasion.

He had noticed that, of late, she had a strained, worried look, and it was more apparent than ever this afternoon as she poured out the tea at the little marble-topped table.

"Children been bothering you?" he asked solicitously.

She shook her head. She had seemed curiously disinclined to talk about the children lately.

"They're all right. I never mind them."

"Don't you?"

His sympathetic tone seemed to distress her unwarrantably.

"Oh, no. It was never that. But - but, indeed, I was lonely. I was indeed!" Her tone was almost pleading.

He said quickly, touched: "Yes, yes, child. I know - I know."

After a minute's pause he remarked in a cheerful tone: "Do you know, you haven't even asked my name yet?"

She held up a protesting hand.

"Please, I don't want to know it. And don't ask mine. Let us be just two lonely people who've come together and made friends. It makes it so much more wonderful - and - and different."

He said slowly and thoughtfully: "Very well. In an otherwise lonely world we'll be two people who have just each other."

It was a little different from her way of putting it, and she seemed to find it difficult to go on with the conversation. Instead, she bent lower and lower over her plate, till only the crown of her hat was visible.

"That's rather a nice hat," he said by way of restoring her equanimity.

"I trimmed it myself," she informed him proudly.

"I thought so the moment I saw it," he answered, saying the wrong thing with cheerful ignorance.

"I'm afraid it is not as fashionable as I meant it to be!"

"I think it's a perfectly lovely hat," he said loyally.

Again constraint settled down upon them. Frank Oliver broke the silence bravely.

"Little Lady, I didn't mean to tell you yet, but I can't help it. I love you. I want you. I loved you from the first moment I saw you standing there in your little black suit. Dearest, if two lonely people were together - why - there would be no more loneliness. And I'd work, oh! how I'd work! I'd paint you. I could, I know I could. Oh! my little girl, I can't live without you. I can't indeed -"

His little lady was looking at him very steadily. But what she said was quite the last thing he expected her to say. Very quietly and distinctly she said: "You bought that handkerchief!"

He was amazed at this proof of feminine perspicacity, and still more amazed at her remembering it against him now. Surely, after this lapse of time, it might have been forgiven him.

"Yes, I did," he acknowledged humbly. "I wanted an excuse to speak to you. Are you very angry?"

He waited meekly for her words of condemnation.

"I think it was sweet of you!" cried the little lady with vehemence. "Just sweet of you!" Her voice ended uncertainly.

Frank Oliver went on in his gruff tone:

"Tell me, child, is it impossible? I know I'm an ugly, rough old fellow -"

The Lonely Lady interrupted him.

"No, you're not! I wouldn't have you different, not in any way. I love you just as you are, do you understand? Not because I'm sorry for you, not because I'm alone in the world and want someone to be fond of me and take care of me - but because you're just - you. Now do you understand?"

"Is it true?" he asked half in a whisper.

And she answered steadily: "Yes, it's true -"

The wonder of it overpowered them.

At last he said whimsically: "So we've fallen upon heaven, dearest!"

"In an ABC shop," she answered in a voice that held tears and laughter.

But terrestrial heavens are short-lived. The little lady started up with an exclamation.

"I'd no idea how late it was! I must go at once."

"I'll see you home."

"No, no, no!"

He was forced to yield to her insistence, and merely accompanied her as far as the Tube station.

"Good-bye, dearest." She clung to his hand with an intensity that he remembered afterwards.

"Only good-bye till tomorrow," he answered cheerfully. "Ten o'clock as usual, and we'll tell each other our names and our histories, and be frightfully practical and prosaic."

"Good-bye to - heaven, though," she whispered.

"It will be with us always, sweetheart!"

She smiled back at him, but with that same sad appeal that disquieted him and which he could not fathom. Then the relentless lift dragged her down out of sight.

He was strangely disturbed by those last words of hers, but he put them resolutely out of his mind and substituted radiant anticipations of tomorrow in their stead.

At ten o'clock he was there, in the accustomed place. For the first time he noticed how malevolently the other idols looked down upon him. It almost seemed as if they were possessed of some secret evil knowledge affecting him, over which they were gloating. He was uneasily aware of their dislike.

The little lady was late. Why didn't she come? The atmosphere of this place was getting on his nerves. Never had his own little friend (their god) seemed so hopelessly impotent as today. A helpless lump of stone, hugging his own despair!

His cogitations were interrupted by a small, sharp-faced boy who had stepped up to him, and was earnestly scrutinizing him from head to foot. Apparently satisfied with the result of his observations, he held out a letter.

"For me?"

It had no superscription. He took it, and the sharp boy decamped with extraordinary rapidity.

Frank Oliver read the letter slowly and unbelievingly. It was quite short.

Dearest,

I can never marry you. Please forget that I ever came into your Life at all, and try to forgive me if I have hurt you. Don't try to find me, because it will be no good. It is really 'goodbye."

The Lonely Lady

There was a postscript which had evidently been scribbled at the last moment:

I do love you. I do indeed.

And that little impulsive postscript was all the comfort he had in the weeks that followed. Needless to say, he disobeyed her injunction "not to try to find her," but all in vain. She had vanished completely, and he had no clue to trace her by. He advertised despairingly, imploring her in veiled terms at least to explain the mystery, but blank silence rewarded his efforts. She was gone, never to return.

And then it was that for the first time in his life he really began to paint. His technique had always been good. Now craftsmanship and inspiration went hand in hand.

The picture that made his name and brought him renown was accepted and hung in the Academy, and was accounted to be the picture of the year, no less for the exquisite treatment of the subject than for the masterly workmanship and technique. A certain amount of mystery, too, rendered it more interesting to the general outside public.

His inspiration had come quite by chance. A fairy story in a magazine had taken a hold on his imagination. It was the story of a fortunate Princess who had always had everything she wanted. Did she express a wish? It was instantly gratified. A desire? It was granted. She had a devoted father and mother, great riches, beautiful clothes and jewels, slaves to wait upon her and fulfil her lightest whim, laughing maidens to bear her company, all that the heart of a Princess could desire. The handsomest and richest Princes paid her court and sued in vain for her hand, and were willing to kill any number of dragons to prove their devotion. And yet, the loneliness of the Princess was greater than that of the poorest beggar in the land.

He read no more. The ultimate fate of the Princess interested him not at all. A picture had risen up before him of the pleasure-laden Princess with the sad, solitary soul, surfeited with happiness, suffocated with luxury, starving in the Palace of Plenty.

He began painting with furious energy. The fierce joy of creation possessed him.

He represented the Princess surrounded by her court, reclining on a divan. A riot of Eastern color pervaded the picture. The Princess wore

a marvelous gown of strange-colored embroideries; her golden hair fell round her, and on her head was a heavy jeweled circlet. Her maidens surrounded her, and Princes knelt at her feet bearing rich gifts. The whole scene was one of luxury and richness.

But the face of the Princess was turned away; she was oblivious of the laughter and mirth around her. Her gaze was fixed on a dark and shadowy corner where stood a seemingly incongruous object: a little grey stone idol with its head buried in its hand in a quaint abandonment of despair.

Was it so incongruous? The eyes of the young Princess rested on it with a strange sympathy, as though a dawning sense of her own isolation drew her glance irresistibly. They were akin, these two. The world was at her feet - yet she was alone: a Lonely Princess looking at a lonely little god.

All London talked of this picture, and Greta wrote a few hurried words of congratulation from Yorkshire, and Tom Hurley's wife besought Frank Oliver to "come for a weekend and meet a really delightful girl, a great admirer of your work." Frank Oliver laughed once sardonically, and threw the letter into the fire. Success had come - but what was the use of it? He only wanted one thing - that little lonely lady who had gone out of his life forever.

It was Ascot Cup Day, and the policeman on duty in a certain section of the British Museum rubbed his eyes and wondered if he were dreaming, for one does not expect to see there an Ascot vision, in a lace frock and a marvelous hat, a veritable nymph as imagined by a Parisian genius. The policeman stared in rapturous admiration.

The lonely god was not perhaps so surprised. He may have been in his way a powerful little god; at any rate, here was one worshipper brought back to the fold.

The Little Lonely Lady was staring up at him, and her lips moved in a rapid whisper.

"Dear little god, oh! dear little god, please help me! Oh, please do help me!"

Perhaps the little god was flattered. Perhaps, if he was indeed the ferocious, unappeasable deity Frank Oliver had imagined him, the long weary years and the march of civilization had softened his cold, stone heart. Perhaps the Lonely Lady had been right all along and he was really a kind little god. Perhaps it was merely a coincidence. However that may be, it was at that very moment that Frank Oliver walked slowly and sadly through the door of the Assyrian room.

He raised his head and saw the Parisian nymph.

In another moment his arm was round her, and she was stammering out rapid, broken words.

"I was so lonely - you know, you must have read that story I wrote; you couldn't have painted that picture unless you had, and unless you had understood. The Princess was I; I had everything, and yet I was lonely beyond words. One day I was going to a fortuneteller's, and I borrowed my maid's clothes. I came in here on the way and saw you looking at the little god. That's how it all began. I pretended - oh! it was hateful of

me, and I went on pretending, and afterwards I didn't dare confess that I had told you such dreadful lies. I thought you would be disgusted at the way I had deceived you. I couldn't bear for you to find out, so I went away. Then I wrote that story, and yesterday I saw your picture. It was your picture, wasn't it?"

Only the gods really know the word "ingratitude."

It is to be presumed that the lonely little god knew the black ingratitude of human nature. As a divinity he had unique opportunities of observing it, yet in the hour of trial, he who had had sacrifices innumerable offered to him, made sacrifice in his turn. He sacrificed his only two worshippers in a strange land, and it showed him to be a great little god in his way, since he sacrificed all that he had.

Through the chinks in his fingers he watched them go, hand in hand, without a backward glance, two happy people who had found heaven and had no need of him any longer.

What was he, after all, but a very lonely little god in a strange land?

MANX GOLD

"Manx Gold" is no ordinary detective story; indeed, it is probably unique. The detectives are conventional enough, but although they are confronted with a particularly brutal murder, the murderer's identity is not their main concern. They are more interested in unraveling a

series of clues to the whereabouts of hidden treasure, a treasure whose existence is not confined to the printed page. Clearly, some explanation is required...

In the winter of 1929, Alderman Arthur B. Crookall had an idea. Crookall was the chairman of the "June Effort," a committee responsible for boosting tourism to the Isle of Man, a small island off the northwest coast of England. His idea was that there should be a treasure hunt, inspired by the many legends of Manx smugglers and their long-forgotten hoards of booty.

There would be "real" treasure, hidden about the island, and clues to its location concealed in the framework of a detective story. Some reservations were expressed by members of the committee, but eventually planning began for the "Isle of Man Treasure Hunt Scheme," to take place at the start of the holiday season and run at the same time as a number of other annual events, such as the "Crowning of the Rose Queen" and the midnight yacht race.

But Crookall had to find someone to write the story on which the hunt would be based. Who better than Agatha Christie? Perhaps surprisingly, and for a fee of only sixty pounds, Christie accepted this, her most unusual commission. She visited the Isle of Man at the end of April 1930, staying as the guest of the lieutenant governor, before returning to Devon, where her daughter was ill. During her visit, Christie and Crookall spent several days discussing the treasure hunt, and visited various sites in order to decide where the treasure should be hidden and how the clues should be composed.

The resulting story, "Manx Gold," was published in five installments towards the end of May in the Daily Dispatch, a Manchester newspaper. A quarter of a million copies of the story also were distributed in booklet form to guesthouses and hotels across the island. The five clues were published separately, and as the date on which the first was due to appear in the Dispatch drew nearer, the June Effort Committee appealed to everyone to "cooperate in order to obtain as much publicity as possible" for the hunt. More tourists meant more tourist revenue, and the hunt was also drawn to the attention of several hundred "Homecomers" who had emigrated from the island to the United States and were due to return as honored guests in June. In the words of the publicity at the time, it was "an opportunity for all Amateur Detectives to test their skill!"

In the story, Juan Faraker and Fenella Mylecharane set out to find four chests of treasure, which have been hidden on the island by their eccentric Uncle Myles. To compete with Juan and Fenella, the reader was advised - like them - to equip himself with "several excellent maps, various guidebooks descriptive of the island, a book on folklore and a book on the history of the island."

The solutions to the clues are given at the end of the story.

* * *

"Old Mylecharane liv'd up on the broo,
Where Jurby slopes down to the wood,
His croft was all golden with cushag and furze,

His daughter was fair to behold.

"O father, they say you've plenty of store,
But hidden all out of the way.
No gold can I see, but its glint on the gorse;
Then what have you done with it, pray?"

"My gold is locked up in a coffer of oak,
Which I dropped in the tide and it sank,
And there it lies fixed like an anchor of hope,
All right and as safe as the hank."

"I like that song," I said appreciatively as Fenella finished.

"You should do," said Fenella. "It's about our ancestor, yours and mine. Uncle Myles's grandfather. He made a fortune out of smuggling and hid it somewhere, and no one ever knew where."

Ancestry is Fenella's strong point. She takes an interest in all her forbears. My tendencies are strictly modern. The difficult present and the uncertain future absorb all my energy. But I like hearing Fenella singing old Manx ballads.

Fenella is very charming. She is my first cousin and also, from time to time, my fiancée. In moods of financial optimism we are engaged. When a corresponding wave of pessimism sweeps over us and we realize that we shall not be able to marry for at least ten years, we break it off.

"Didn't anyone ever try to find the treasure?" I inquired.

"Of course. But they never did."

"Perhaps they didn't look scientifically."

"Uncle Myles had a jolly good try," said Fenella. "He said anyone with intelligence ought to be able to solve a little problem like that."

That sounded to me very like our Uncle Myles, a cranky and eccentric old gentleman, who lived in the Isle of Man and who was much given to didactic pronouncements.

It was at that moment that the post came - and the letter!

"Good Heavens," cried Fenella. "Talk of the devil - I mean angels - Uncle Myles is dead!"

Both she and I had seen our eccentric relative on only two occasions, so we could neither of us pretend to a very deep grief. The letter was from a firm of lawyers in Douglas, and it informed us that under the will of Mr. Myles Mylecharane, deceased, Fenella and I were joint inheritors of his estate, which consisted of a house near Douglas and an infinitesimal income. Enclosed was a sealed envelope, which Mr. Mylecharane had directed should be forwarded to Fenella at his death. This letter we opened and read its surprising contents. I reproduce it in full, since it was a truly characteristic document.

My dear Fenella and Juan,

for I take it that where one of you is the other will not be far away. Or so gossip has whispered.

You may remember having heard me say that anyone displaying a little intelligence could easily find the treasure concealed by my amiable scoundrel of a grandfather. I displayed that intelligence and my reward was four chests of solid gold - quite like a fairy story, is it not?

Of living relations I have only four: you two, my nephew Ewan Corjeag, whom I have always heard is a thoroughly bad lot, and a cousin, a Doctor Fayll, of whom I have heard very little, and that little not always good. My estate proper I am leaving to you and Fenella, but I feel a certain obligation laid upon me with regard to this "treasure" which has fallen to my lot solely through my own ingenuity. My amiable ancestor would not, I feel, be satisfied for me to pass it on tamely by inheritance. So I, in my turn, have devised a little problem.

There are still four "chests" of treasure (though in a more modern form than gold ingots or coins) and there are to he four competitors - my four living relations. It would be fairest to assign one "chest" to each - but the world, my children, is not fair. The race is to the swiftest - and often to the most unscrupulous.

Who am I to go against Nature? You must pit your wits against the other two. There will be, I fear, very little chance for you. Goodness and innocence are seldom rewarded in this world. So strongly do I feel this that I have deliberately cheated (unfairness again, you notice;). This letter goes to you twenty-four hours in advance of the letters to the other two. Thus you will have a very good chance of securing the

first "treasure" - twenty-four hours' start, if you have any brains at all, ought to be sufficient.

The clues for finding this treasure are to be found at my house in Douglas. The clues for the second "treasure" will not be released till the first treasure is found. In the second and succeeding cases, therefore, you will all start even. You have my good wishes for success, and nothing would please me better than for you to acquire all four "chests," but for the reasons which I have already stated I think that most unlikely. Remember that no scruples will stand in dear Ewan's way. Do not make the mistake of trusting him in any respect. As to Dr. Richard Fayll, I know little about him, but he is, I fancy, a dark horse.

Good luck to you both, but with little hopes of your success,

Your affectionate uncle,

Myles Mylecharane

As we reached the signature, Fenella made a leap from my side.

"What is it?" I cried.

Fenella was rapidly turning the pages of an ABC.

"We must get to the Isle of Man as soon as possible," she cried. "How dare he say we were good and innocent and stupid? I'll show him! Juan, we're going to find all four of these 'chests' and get married and

live happily ever afterwards, with Rolls-Royces and foot-men and marble baths. But we must get to the Isle of Man at once."

It was twenty-four hours later. We had arrived in Douglas, interviewed the lawyers, and were now at Maughold House facing Mrs. Skillicorn, our late uncle's housekeeper, a somewhat formidable woman who nevertheless relented a little before Fenella's eagerness.

"Queer ways he had," she said. "Liked to set everyone puzzling and contriving."

"But the clues," cried Fenella. "The clues?"

Deliberately, as she did everything, Mrs. Skillicorn left the room. She returned after an absence of some minutes and held out a folded piece of paper.

We unfolded it eagerly. It contained a doggerel rhyme in my uncle's crabbed handwriting.

Four points of the compass so there be
S and W, N and E.
East winds are bad for man and beast.
Go south and west and
North not east.

"Oh!" said Fenella blankly.

"Oh!" said I, with much the same intonation.

Mrs. Skillicorn smiled on us with gloomy relish.

"Not much sense to it, is there?" she said helpfully.

"It - I don't see how to begin," said Fenella, piteously.

"Beginning," I said, with a cheerfulness I did not feel, "is always the difficulty. Once we get going -"

Mrs. Skillicorn smiled more grimly than ever. She was a depressing woman.

"Can't you help us?" asked Fenella coaxingly.

"I know nothing about the silly business. Didn't confide in me, your uncle didn't. I told him to put his money in the bank, and no nonsense. I never knew what he was up to."

"He never went out with any chests - or anything of that kind?"

"That he didn't."

"You don't know when he hid the stuff - whether it was lately or long ago?"

Mrs. Skillicorn shook her head.

"Well," I said, trying to rally. "There are two possibilities. Either the treasure is hidden here, in the actual grounds, or else it may be hidden anywhere on the island. It depends on the bulk, of course."

A sudden brain wave occurred to Fenella.

"You haven't noticed anything missing?" she said. "Among my uncle's things, I mean."

"Why, now, it's odd your saying that -"

"You have, then?"

"As I say, it's odd your saying that. Snuffboxes - there's at least four of them I can't lay my hand on anywhere."

"Four of them!" cried Fenella. "That must be it! We're on the track. Let's go out in the garden and look about."

"There's nothing there," said Mrs. Skillicorn. "I'd know if there were. Your uncle couldn't have buried anything in the garden without my knowing about it."

"Points of the compass are mentioned," I said. "The first thing we need is a map of the island."

"There's one on that desk," said Mrs. Skillicorn.

Fenella unfolded it eagerly. Something fluttered out as she did so. I caught it.

"Hullo," I said. "This looks like a further clue." We both went over it eagerly.

It appeared to be a rude kind of map. There was a cross on it and a circle and a pointing arrow, and directions were roughly indicated, but it was hardly illuminating. We studied it in silence.

"It's not very illuminating, is it?" said Fenella.

"Naturally it wants puzzling over," I said. "We can't expect it to leap to the eye."

Mrs. Skillicorn interrupted with a suggestion of supper, to which we agreed thankfully.

"And could we have some coffee?" said Fenella. "Lots of it - very black."

Mrs. Skillicorn provided us with an excellent meal, and at its conclusion a large jug of coffee made its appearance.

"And now," said Fenella, "we must get down to it."

"The first thing," I said, "is direction. This seems to point clearly to the northeast of the island."

"It seems so. Let's look at the map."

We studied the map attentively.

"It all depends on how you take the thing," said Fenella. "Does the cross represent the treasure? Or is it something like a church? There really ought to be rules!"

"That would make it too easy."

"I suppose it would. Why are there little lines on one side of the circle and not the other?"

"I don't know."

"Are there any more maps anywhere?"

We were sitting in the library. There were several excellent maps. There were also various guidebooks descriptive of the island. There was a book on folklore. There was a book on the history of the island. We read them all.

And at last we formed a possible theory.

"It does seem to fit," said Fenella at last. "I mean the two together is a likely conjunction which doesn't seem to occur anywhere else."

"It's worth trying, anyhow," I said. "I don't think we can do anything more tonight. Tomorrow, first thing, we'll hire a car and go off and try our luck."

"It's tomorrow now," said Fenella. "Half past two! Just fancy!!"

Early morning saw us on the road. We had hired a car for a week, arranging to drive it ourselves. Fenella's spirits rose as we sped along the excellent road, mile after mile.

"If only it wasn't for the other two, what fun this would be," she said. "This is where the Derby was originally run, wasn't it? Before it was changed to Epsom. How queer that is to think off"

I drew her attention to a farmhouse.

"That must be where there is said to be a secret passage running under the sea to that island."

"What fun! I love secret passages, don't you? Oh! Juan, we're getting quite near now. I'm terribly excited. If we should be right!"

Five minutes later we abandoned the car.

"Everything's in the right position," said Fenella tremulously.

We walked on.

"Six of them - that's right. Now between these two. Have you got the compass?"

Five minutes later, we were standing facing each other, an incredulous joy on our faces - and on my outstretched palm lay an antique snuffbox.

We had been successful!

On our return to Maughold House, Mrs. Skillicorn met us with the information that two gentlemen had arrived. One had departed again, but the other was in the library.

A tall, fair man with a florid face rose smilingly from an armchair as we entered the room.

"Mr. Faraker and Miss Mylecharane? Delighted to meet you. I am your distant cousin, Dr. Fayll. Amusing game, all this, isn't it?"

His manner was urbane and pleasant, but I took an immediate dislike to him. I felt that in some way the man was dangerous. His pleasant manner was, somehow, too pleasant, and his eyes never met yours fairly.

"I'm afraid we've got bad news for you," I said. "Miss Mylecharane and myself have already discovered the first 'treasure.'"

He took it very well.

"Too bad - too bad. Posts from here must be odd. Barford and I started at once."

We did not dare to confess the perfidy of Uncle Myles.

"Anyway, we shall all start fair for the second round," said Fenella.

"Splendid. What about getting down to the clues right away? Your excellent Mrs. - er - Skillicorn holds them, I believe?"

"That wouldn't be fair to Mr. Corjeag," said Fenella, quickly. "We must wait for him."

"True, true - I had forgotten. We must get in touch with him as quickly as possible. I will see to that - you two must be tired out and want to rest."

Thereupon he took his departure. Ewan Corjeag must have been unexpectedly difficult to find, for it was not till nearly eleven o'clock that night that Dr. Fayll rang up. He suggested that he and Ewan should come over to Maughold House at ten o'clock the following morning, when Mrs. Skillicorn could hand us out the clues.

"That will do splendidly," said Fenella. "Ten o'clock tomorrow."

We retired to bed tired but happy.

The following morning we were aroused by Mrs. Skillicorn, completely shaken out of her usual pessimistic calm.

"Whatever do you think?" she panted. "The house has been broken into."

"Burglars?" I exclaimed incredulously. "Has anything been taken?"

"Not a thing - and that's the odd part of it! No doubt they were after the silver - but the door being locked on the outside they couldn't get any further."

Fenella and I accompanied her to the scene of the outrage, which happened to be in her own sitting room. The window there had undeniably been forced, yet nothing seemed to have been taken. It was all rather curious.

"I don't see what they can have been looking for," said Fenella.

"It's not as though there were a 'treasure chest' hidden in the house," I agreed facetiously. Suddenly an idea flashed into my mind. I turned to Mrs. Skillicorn.

"The clues - the clues you were to give us this morning?"

"Why to be sure - they're in that top drawer." She went across to it. "Why - I do declare - there's nothing here! They're gone!"

"Not burglars," I said. "Our esteemed relations!"

And I remembered Uncle Myles's warning on the subject of unscrupulous dealing. Clearly he had known what he was talking about. A dirty trick!

"Hush," said Fenella suddenly, holding up a finger. "what was that?"

The sound she had caught came plainly to our ears. It was a groan and it came from outside. We went to the window and leaned out. There was shrubbery growing against this side of the house and we could see nothing; but the groan came again, and we could see that the bushes seemed to have been disturbed and trampled.

We hurried down and out round the house. The first thing we found was a fallen ladder, showing how the thieves had reached the window. A few steps further brought us to where a man was lying.

He was a youngish man, dark, and he was evidently badly injured, for his head was lying in a pool of blood. I knelt down beside him.

"We must get a doctor at once. I'm afraid he's dying."

The gardener was sent off hurriedly. I slipped my hand into his breast pocket and brought out a pocket book. On it were the initials E.C.

"Ewan Corjeag," said Fenella.

The man's eyes opened. He said faintly: "Fell from ladder..." then lost consciousness again.

Close by his head was a large jagged stone stained with blood.

"It's clear enough," I said. "The ladder slipped and he fell, striking his head on this stone. I'm afraid it's done for him, poor fellow."

"So you think that was it?" said Fenella, in an odd tone of voice.

But at that moment the doctor arrived. He held out little hope of recovery. Ewan Corjeag was moved into the house and a nurse was sent for to take charge of him. Nothing could be done, and he would die a couple of hours later.

We had been sent for and were standing by his bed. His eyes opened and flickered.

"We are your cousins Juan and Fenella," I said. "Is there anything we can do?"

He made a faint negative motion of the head. A whisper came from his lips. I bent to catch it.

"Do you want the clue? I'm done. Don't let Fayll do you down."

"Yes," said Fenella. "Tell me."

Something like a grin came over his face.

"D'ye ken -" he began.

Then suddenly his head fell over sideways and he died.

"I don't like it," said Fenella suddenly.

"What don't you like?"

"Listen, Juan. Ewan stole those clues - he admits falling from the ladder. Then where are they? We've seen all the contents of his pockets. There were three sealed envelopes, so Mrs. Skillicorn says. Those sealed envelopes aren't there."

"What do you think, then?"

"I think there was someone else there, someone who jerked away the ladder so that Ewan fell. And that stone - he never fell on it - it was brought from some distance away - I've found the mark. He was deliberately bashed on the head with it."

"But Fenella - that's murder!"

"Yes," said Fenella, very white. "It's murder. Remember, Dr. Fayll never turned up at ten o'clock this morning. Where is he?"

"You think he's the murderer?"

"Yes. You know - this treasure - it's a lot of money, Juan."

"And we've no idea where to look for him," I said.

"A pity Corjeag couldn't have finished what he was going to say."

"There's one thing that might help. This was in his hand."

She handed me a torn snapshot.

"Suppose it's a clue. The murderer snatched it away and never noticed he'd left a corner of it behind. If we were to find the other half -"

"To do that," I said, "we must find the second treasure. Let's look at this thing."

"Hmm," I said, "there's nothing much to go by. That seems a kind of tower in the middle of the circle, but it would be very hard to identify."

Fenella nodded.

"Dr. Fayll has the important half. He knows where to look. We've got to find that man, Juan, and watch him. Of course, we won't let him see we suspect."

"I wonder whereabouts in the island he is this minute. If we only knew - "

My mind went back to the dying man. Suddenly I sat up excitedly.

"Fenella," I said, "Corjeag wasn't Scotch?"

"No, of course not."

"Well, then, don't you see? What he meant, I mean?"

"No?"

I scribbled something on a piece of paper and tossed it to her.

"What's this?"

"The name of a firm that might help us."

"Bellman and True. Who are they? Lawyers?"

"No - they're more in our line - private detectives."

And I proceeded to explain.

"Dr. Fayll to see you," said Mrs. Skillicorn.

We looked at each other. Twenty-four hours had elapsed. We had returned from our quest successful for the second time. Not wishing to draw attention to ourselves, we had journeyed in the Snaefell - a charabanc.

"I wonder if he knows we saw him in the distance?" murmured Fenella.

"It's extraordinary. If it hadn't been for the hint that photograph gave us - "

"Hush - and do be careful, Juan. He must be simply furious at our having outwitted him in spite of everything."

No trace of it appeared in the doctor's manner, however. He entered the room his urbane and charming self, and I felt my faith in Fenella's theory dwindling.

"What a shocking tragedy!" he said. "Poor Corjeag. I suppose he was - well - trying to steal a march on us. Retribution was swirl. Well, well - we scarcely knew him, poor fellow. You must have wondered why I didn't turn up this morning as arranged. I got a fake message - Corjeag's doing, I suppose - it sent me off on a wild-goose chase right across the island. And now you two have romped home again. How do you do it?"

There was a note of really eager inquiry in his voice which did not escape me.

"Cousin Ewan was fortunately able to speak just before he died," said Fenella.

I was watching the man, and I could swear I saw alarm leap into his eyes at her words.

"Eh - eh? What's that?" he said.

"He was just able to give us a clue as to the whereabouts of the treasure," explained Fenella.

"Oh! I see - I see. I've been clean out of things - though, curiously enough, I myself was in that part of the island. You may have seen me strolling round."

"We were so busy," said Fenella apologetically.

"Of course, of course. You must have run across the thing more or less by accident. Lucky young people, aren't you? Well, what's the next program? Will Mrs. Skillicorn oblige us with the new clues?"

But it seemed that this third set of clues had been deposited with the lawyer, and we all three repaired to the lawyer's office, where the sealed envelopes were handed over to us.

The contents were simple. A map with a certain area marked off on it, and a paper of directions attached.

In '85, this place made history.
11 paces from the landmark to
The east, then an equal ten
Places north. Stand there
Looking east. Two trees are in the
Line of vision. One of them
Was sacred in this island. Draw
A circle five feet from
The Spanish chestnut and,
With head bent, walk round. Look well. You'll find.

"Looks as though we are going to tread on each other's toes a bit today," commented the doctor.

True to my policy of apparent friendliness, I offered him a lift in our car, which he accepted. We had lunch at Port Erin, and then started on our search.

I had debated in my own mind the reason of my uncle's depositing this particular set of clues with his lawyer. Had he foreseen the possibility of a theft? And had he determined that not more than one set of clues should fall into the thief's possession?

The treasure hunt this afternoon was not without its humor. The area of search was limited and we were continually in sight of each other. We eyed each other suspiciously, each trying to determine whether the other was further on or had had a brain wave.

"This is all part of Uncle Myles's plan," said Fenella.

"He wanted us to watch each other and go through all the agonies of thinking the other person was getting there."

"Come," I said. "Let's get down to it scientifically. We've got one definite clue to start on. 'In '85 this place made history.' Look up the reference books we've got with us and see if we can't hunt that down. Once we get that -"

"He's looking in that hedge," interrupted Fenella. "Oh! I can't bear it. If he's got it -"

"Attend to me," I said firmly. "There's really only one way to go about it the proper way."

"There are so few trees on the island that it would be much simpler just to look for a chestnut tree!" said Fenella.

I pass over the next hour. We grew hot and despondent - and all the time we were tortured with fear that Fayll might be succeeding whilst we failed.

"I remember once reading in a detective story," I said, "how a fellow stuck a paper of writing in a bath of acid - and all sorts of other words came out."

"Do you think - but we haven't got a bath of acid!"

"I don't think Uncle Myles could expect expert chemical knowledge. But there's common or garden heat -"

We slipped round the corner of a hedge and in a minute or two I had kindled a few twigs. I held the paper as close to the blaze as I dared. Almost at once I was rewarded by seeing characters begin to appear at the foot of the sheet. There were just two words.

"Kirkhill Station," read out Fenella.

Just at that moment Fayll came round the corner. Whether he had heard or not we had no means of judging. He showed nothing.

"But Juan," said Fenella, when he moved away, "there isn't a Kirkhill Station!" She held out the map as she spoke.

"No," I said examining it, "but look here."

And with a pencil I drew a line on it.

"Of course! And somewhere on that line -"

"Exactly."

"But I wish we knew the exact spot."

It was then that my second brain wave came to me.

"We do!" I cried, and seizing the pencil again, I said: "Look!"

Fenella uttered a cry.

"How idiotic!" she cried. "And how marvelous: What a sell! Really. Uncle Myles was a most ingenious old gentleman!"

The time had come for the last clue. This, the lawyer had informed us, was not in his keeping. It was to be posted to us on receipt of a postcard sent by him. He would impart no further information.

Nothing arrived, however, on the morning it should have done, and Fenella and I went through agonies, believing that Fayll had managed somehow to intercept our letter. The next day, however, our fears were calmed and the mystery explained when we received the following illiterate scrawl:

Dear Sir or Madam,

Escuse delay but have been all sixes and sevens but i do now as mr. Mylecharane axed me to and send you the piece of riting wot as been in my family many long years the wot he wanted it for i do not know.

thanking you i am

Mary Kerruish

"Postmark - Bride," I remarked. "Now for the 'piece of riting handed down in my family'!"

Upon a rock, a sign you'll see.
O, tell me what the point of

That may be? Well, firstly, (A). Near
By you'll find, quite suddenly, the light
You seek. Then (B). A house. A
Cottage with a thatch and wall.
A meandering lane near by. That all.

"It's very unfair to begin with a rock," said Fenella. "There are rocks everywhere. How can you tell which one has the sign on it?"

"If we could settle on the district," I said, "it ought to be fairly easy to find the rock. It must have a mark on it pointing in a certain direction, and in that direction there will be something hidden which will throw light on the finding of the treasure."

"I think you're right," said Fenella.

"That's A. The new clue will give us a hint where B, the cottage, is to be found. The treasure itself is hidden down a lane alongside the cottage. But clearly we've got to find A first.

Owing to the difficulty of the initial step, Uncle Myles's last problem proved a real teaser. To Fenella falls the distinction of unraveling it - and even then she did not accomplish it for nearly a week. Now and then we had come across Fayll in our search of rocky districts, but the area was a wide one.

When we finally made our discovery it was late in the evening. Too late, I said, to start off to the place indicated. Fenella disagreed.

"Supposing Fayll finds it, too," she said. "And we wait till tomorrow and he starts off tonight. How we should kick ourselves!"

Suddenly, a marvelous idea occurred to me.

"Fenella," I said, "do you still believe that Fayll murdered Ewan Corjeag?"

"I do."

"Then I think that now we've got our chance to bring the crime home to him."

"That man makes me shiver. He's bad all through. Tell me."

"Advertise the fact that we've found A. Then start off. Ten to one he'll follow us. It's a lonely place - just what would suit his book. He'll come out in the open if we pretend to find the treasure."

"And then?"

"And then," I said, "he'll have a little surprise."

It was close on midnight. We had left the car some distance away and were creeping along by the side of a wall. Fenella had a powerful flashlight which she was using. I myself carried a revolver. I was taking no chances.

Suddenly, with a low cry, Fenella stopped.

"Look, Juan," she cried. "We've got it. At last."

For a moment I was off my guard. Led by instinct I whirled round - but too late. Fayll stood six paces away and his revolver covered us both.

"Good evening," he said. "This trick is mine. You'll hand over that treasure, if you please."

"Would you like me also to hand over something else?" I asked. "Half a snapshot torn from a dying man's hand? You have the other half, I think."

His hand wavered.

"What are you talking about?" he growled.

"The truth's known," I said. "You and Corjeag were there together. You pulled away the ladder and crashed his head with that stone. The police are cleverer than you imagine, Dr. Fayll."

"They know, do they? Then, by Heaven, I'll swing for three murders instead of one!"

"Drop, Fenella," I screamed. And at the same minute his revolver barked loudly.

We had both dropped in the heather, and before he could fire again uniformed men sprang out from behind the wall where they had been hiding. A moment later Fayll had been handcuffed and led away.

I caught Fenella in my arms.

"I knew I was right," she said tremulously.

"Darling!" I cried, "it was too risky. He might have shot you."

"But he didn't," said Fenella. "And we know where the treasure is."

"Do we?"

"I do. See -" she scribbled a word. "We'll look for it tomorrow. There can't be many hiding places there, I should say."

It was just noon when:

"Eureka!" said Fenella softly. "The fourth snuffbox! We've got them all. Uncle Myles would be pleased. And now -"

"Now," I said, "we can be married and live together happily ever afterwards."

"We'll live in the Isle of Man," said Fenella.

"On Manx Gold," I said, and laughed aloud for sheer happiness.

* * *

The treasure is all that is left of the lost fortune of "Old Mylecharane," a legendary Manx smuggler. In reality, the treasure took the form of four snuffboxes, each about the size of a matchbox and containing an eighteenth-century Manx halfpenny with a hole in it, through which was tied a length of colored ribbon, and a neatly folded document, executed with many flourishes in India ink and signed by Alderman Crookall, which directed the finder to report at once to the clerk at the town hall in Douglas, the capital of the Isle of Man. Finders were instructed to take with them the snuffbox and its contents in order to claim a prize of one hundred pounds (equivalent to about three thousand pounds today). They also had to bring with them proof of identity, for only visitors to the island were allowed to search for the treasure; Manx residents were excluded from the hunt.

The sole purpose of the first clue in "Manx Gold," the rhyme which begins "Four points of the compass so there be," published in the Daily Dispatch on Saturday, May 31, was to indicate that the four treasures would be found in the north, south, and west of the island, but not in the east. The clue to the location of the first snuffbox was in fact the second clue, a map published on June 7. However, the treasure had already been found by a tailor from Inverness, William Shaw, because sufficient clues to its location were contained in the story itself.

The most important clue was Fenella's remark that the hiding place was near the place "where Derby was originally run... before it was changed to Epsom." This is a reference to the famous English horse race, which was first run at Derbyhaven in the southeast of the Isle of Man. The "quite near" island to which "a secret passage" was rumored to run from a farmhouse can easily be identified as St. Michael's Isle, on which, in addition to the twelfth-century chapel of St. Michael, is a

circular stone tower known as the Derby Fort, from which the island gets its alternative name, Fort Island - "the two together is a likely conjunction which doesn't seem to occur anywhere else." The fort was represented on the map by a circle with six lines projected from it to represent the six historical cannons - "six of them" - in the fort; the chapel was represented by a cross.

The small pewter snuffbox was hidden on a rocky ledge running in a northeasterly direction from between the middle two cannons - "between these two have you got the compass?" - while Juan's initial suggestion that the clue "points to the northeast of the island" was a red herring.

The second snuffbox, apparently constructed from horn, was located on June 9 by Richard Highton, a Lancashire builder. As Fenella made clear to the murderous Dr. Fayll, Ewan Corjeag's dying words, "D'ye ken -" are a clue to the whereabouts of the treasure. In fact, they are the opening words of the traditional English song "John Peel," about a Cumbrian hunts-man, and when Juan suggested that "Bellman and True" was the "name of a firm that might help us," he was not referring to the "firm of lawyers in Douglas" mentioned at the beginning of the story but to two of John Peel's hounds, as named in the song. With these clues, the subject of the "torn snapshot," which was published as the third clue on June 9, would not have been "very hard to identify"; it was the ruins of the fourteenth-century Peel Castle on St. Patrick's Isle, and curved lines along the photograph's left-hand edge were the curlicues on the arm of a bench on Peel Hill, which looks down on the castle and under which the snuffbox was hidden. The charabanc journey to Snaefell, the highest peak on the Isle of Man, was another red herring.

The third "treasure" was found by Mr. Herbert Elliot, a Manx-born ship's engineer living in Liverpool M. Elliot later claimed that he had not read "Manx Gold" nor even studied the clues, but had simply decided on a likely area where, very early on the morning of July 8, he chanced upon the snuffbox, hidden in a gully.

The principal clue to its whereabouts was hidden in the fourth clue, published on June 14 (the vers beginning "In '85, this place made history"), in which the second word of each line spells out the following message:

"85... paces... east... north... east... of... sacred... circle... Spanish... head." The "Sacred circle" is the Meayll circle on Mull Hill, a roegalithic monument a little over a mile from the Spanish Head, the most southerly point of the island. The reference to an important event "in '85" and a Spanish chestnut, which from contemporary accounts proved a diversion for many searchers, were false leads. As for "Kirkhill Station," the clue uncovered by Juan, Fenella rightly said that there was no such place. However, there is a village called Kirkhill and there is also a railway station at Port Erin, where Juan and Fenella had had lunch before starting their search. If a line is drawn from Kirkhill to Port Erin and continued southward, it eventually crosses the Meayll circle, "the exact spot" identified by Juan.

Unfortunately, as was the case with the clues to the location of the third snuffbox, those for the fourth were never solved. The fifth and final clue, the verse beginning "Upon a rock, a sign you'll see," was published on June 21, but on July 10, at the end of the extended period allowed for the hunt, which had originally been intended to finish at the

end of June, the final "treasure" was "lifted" by the Mayor of Douglas. Two days later, as a "sequel" to the story, the Daily Dispatch published a photograph of the event and Christie's explanation of the final clue:

That last clue still makes me smile when I remember the time we wasted looking for rocks with a sign on them. The real clue was so simple - the words "sixes and sevens" in the covering letter.

Take the sixth and seventh words of each line of the verse, and you get this: "You'll see. Point of (A). Near the lighthouse a wall." See the point of (A) we identified as the Point of Ayre. We spent some time finding the right wall, and the treasure itself was not there. Instead, there were four figures - 2, 5, 6, and 9 scrawled on a stone.

Apply them to the letters of the first line of the verse, and you get the word "park." There is only one real park in the Isle of Man, at Ramsey. We searched that park, and found at last what we sought.

The thatched building in question was a small refreshment kiosk, and the path leading past it ran up to an ivy-covered wall, which was the hiding place of the elusive snuffbox. The fact that the letter had been posted in Bride was an additional clue, as this village is near the lighthouse at the Point of Ayre, the northern-most tip of the island.

It is impossible to judge whether or not "Manx Gold" was a successful means of promoting tourism on the Isle of Man. Certainly, it appears that there were more visitors in 1930 than in previous years, but how far that increase could be ascribed to the treasure hunt is far from clear. Contemporary press reports show that there were many who doubted that it had been of any real value, and at a civic lunch to mark

the end of the hunt, Alderman Crookall responded to a vote of thanks by railing against those who had failed to talk up the hunt - they were "slackers and grousers who never did anything but offer up criticism."

The fact that they were not allowed to take part in the hunt might have been a cause of apathy among the islanders, even though the Daily Dispatch offered the Manx resident with whom each finder was staying a prize of five guineas, equivalent to about one hundred fifty pounds today. This also might have accounted for various acts of gentle "sabotage," such as the laying of false snuffboxes and spoof clues, including a rock on which the word "lift" was painted but under which was nothing more interesting than discarded fruit peel.

While there never has been any other event quite like the Isle of Man treasure hunt, Agatha Christie did go on to write mysteries with a similar theme. Most obvious of these is the challenge laid down to Charmian Stroud and Edward Rossiter by their eccentric Uncle Mathew in "Strange Jest," a Miss Marple story first published in 1941 as "A Case of Buried Treasure" and collected in Three Blind Mice (1948). There is also a similarly structured "murder hunt" in the Poirot novel Dead Man's Folly (1956).

WITHIN A WALL

It was Mrs. Lemprière who discovered the existence of Jane Haworth. It would be, of course. Somebody once said that Mrs. Lemprière was easily the most hated woman in London, but that, I think, is an

exaggeration. She has certainly a knack of tumbling on the one thing you wish to keep quiet about, and she does it with real genius. It is always an accident.

In this case we had been having tea in Alan Everard's studio. He gave these teas occasionally, and used to stand about in corners, wearing very old clothes, rattling the coppers in his trouser pockets and looking profoundly miserable.

I do not suppose anyone will dispute Everard's claim to genius at this date. His two most famous pictures, Color and The Connoisseur, which belong to his early period, before he became a fashionable portrait painter, were purchased by the nation last year, and for once the choice went unchallenged. But at the date of which I speak, Everard was only beginning to come into his own, and we were free to consider that we had discovered him.

It was his wife who organized these parties. Everard's attitude to her was a peculiar one. That he adored her was evident, and only to be expected. Adoration was Isobel's due. But he seemed always to feel himself slightly in her debt. He assented to anything she wished, not so much through tenderness as through an unalterable conviction that she had a right to her own way. I suppose that was natural enough, too, when one comes to think of it.

For Isobel Loring had been really very celebrated. When she came out she had been the débutante of the season. She had everything except money; beauty, position, breeding, brains. Nobody expected her to marry for love. She wasn't that kind of girl. In her second season she had three strings to her bow, the heir to a dukedom, a rising politician,

and a South African millionaire. And then, to everyone's surprise, she married Alan Everard - a struggling young painter whom no one had ever heard of.

It is a tribute to her personality, I think, that everyone went on calling her Isobel Loring. Nobody ever alluded to her as Isobel Everard. It would be: "I saw Isobel Loring this morning. Yes - with her husband, young Everard, the painter fellow."

People said Isobel had "done for herself." It would, I think, have "done" for most men to be known as "Isobel Loring's husband." But Everard was different. Isobel's talent for success hadn't failed her after all. Alan Everard painted Color.

I suppose everyone knows the picture: a stretch of road with a trench dug down it, and turned earth, reddish in color, a shining length of brown glazed drain-pipe and the huge navvy, resting for a minute on his spade - a Herculean figure in stained corduroys with a scarlet neckerchief. His eyes look out at you from the canvas, without intelligence, without hope, but with a dumb unconscious pleading, the eyes of a magnificent brute beast. It is a flaming thing - a symphony of orange and red. A lot has been written about its symbolism, about what it is meant to express. Alan Everard himself says he didn't mean it to express anything. He was, he said, nauseated by having had to look at a lot of pictures of Venetian sunsets, and a sudden longing for a riot of purely English color assailed him.

After that, Everard gave the world that epic painting of a public house - Romance: the black street with rain falling - the half-open door, the lights and shining glasses, the little foxy-faced man passing through

the doorway, small, mean, insignificant, with lips parted and eyes eager, passing in to forget.

On the strength of these two pictures Everard was acclaimed as a painter of "working men." He had his niche. But he refused to stay in it. His third and most brilliant work, a full-length portrait of Sir Rufus Herschman. The famous scientist is painted against a background of retorts and crucibles and laboratory shelves. The whole has what may be called a Cubist effect, but the lines of perspective run strangely.

And now he had completed his fourth work - a portrait of his wife. We had been invited to see and criticize. Everard himself scowled and looked out of the window; Isobel Loring moved amongst the guests, talking technique with unerring accuracy.

We made comments. We had to. We praised the painting of the pink satin. The treatment of that, we said, was really marvelous. Nobody had painted satin in quite that way before.

Mrs. Lemprière, who is one of the most intelligent art critics I know, took me aside almost at once.

"Georgie," she said, "what has he done to himself? The thing's dead. It's smooth. It's - oh! its damnable."

"Portrait of a Lady in Pink Satin?" I suggested.

"Exactly. And yet the technique's perfect. And the care! There's enough work there for sixteen pictures."

"Too much work?" I suggested.

"Perhaps that's it. If there ever was anything there, he's killed it. An extremely beautiful woman in a pink satin dress. Why not a colored photograph?"

"Why not?" I agreed. "Do you suppose he knows?"

"Of course he knows," said Mrs. Lemprière scornfully. "Don't you see the man's on edge? It comes, I daresay, of mixing up sentiment and business. He's put his whole soul into painting Isobel, because she is Isobel, and in sparing her, he's lost her. He's been too kind. You've got to - to destroy the flesh before you can get at the soul sometimes."

I nodded reflectively. Sir Rufus Herschman had not been flattered physically, but Everard had succeeded in putting on the canvas a personality that was unforgettable.

"And Isobel's got such a very forceful personality," continued Mrs. Lemprière.

"Perhaps Everard can't paint women," I said.

"Perhaps not," said Mrs. Lemprière thoughtfully. "Yes, that may be the explanation."

And it was then, with her usual genius for accuracy, that she pulled out a canvas that was leaning with its face to the wall. There were about eight of them, stacked carelessly. It was pure chance that Mrs.

Lemprière selected the one she did - but as I said before, these things happen with Mrs. Lemprière.

"Ah!" said Mrs. Lemprière as she turned it to the light.

It was unfinished, a mere rough sketch. The woman, or girl - she was not, I thought, more than twenty-five or -six - was leaning forward, her chin on her hand. Two things struck me at once: the extraordinary vitality of the picture and the amazing cruelty of it. Everard had painted with a vindictive brush. The attitude even was a cruel one - it had brought out every awkwardness, every sharp angle, every crudity. It was a study in brown - brown dress, brown background, brown eyes - wistful, eager eyes. Eagerness was, indeed, the prevailing note of it.

Mrs. Lemprière looked at it for some minutes in silence. Then she called to Everard.

"Alan," she said. "Come here. Who's this?"

Everard came over obediently. I saw the sudden flash of annoyance that he could not quite hide.

"That's only a daub," he said. "I don't suppose I shall ever finish it."

"Who is she?" said Mrs. Lemprière.

Everard was clearly unwilling to answer, and his unwillingness was as meat and drink to Mrs. Lemprière, who always believes the worst on principle.

"A friend of mine. A Miss Jane Haworth."

"I've never met her here," said Mrs. Lemprière.

"She doesn't come to these shows." He paused a minute, then added: "She's Winnie's godmother."

Winnie was his little daughter, aged five.

"Really?" said Mrs. Lemprière. "Where does she live?"

"Battersea. A flat."

"Really," said Mrs. Lemprière again, and then added: "And what has she ever done to you?"

"To me?"

"To you. To make you so - ruthless."

"Oh, that!" he laughed. "Well, you know, she's not a beauty. I can't make her one out of friendship, can I?"

"You've done the opposite," said Mrs. Lemprière. "You've caught hold of every defect of hers and exaggerated it and twisted it. You've tried to make her ridiculous - but you haven't succeeded, my child. That portrait, if you finish it, will live."

Everard looked annoyed.

"It's not bad," he said lightly, "for a sketch, that is. But, of course, it's not a patch on Isobel's portrait. That's far and away the best thing I've ever done."

He said the last words defiantly and aggressively. Neither of us answered.

"Far and away the best thing," he repeated.

Some of the others had drawn near us. They, too, caught sight of the sketch. There were exclamations, comments. The atmosphere began to brighten up.

It was in this way that I first heard of Jane Haworth. Later, I was to meet her - twice. I was to hear details of her life from one of her most intimate friends. I was to learn much from Alan Everard himself. Now that they are both dead, I think it is time to contradict some of the stories Mrs. Lemprière is busily spreading abroad. Call some of my story invention if you will - it is not far from the truth.

When the guests had left, Alan Everard turned the portrait of Jane Haworth with its face to the wall again. Isobel came down the room and stood beside him.

"A success, do you think?" she asked thoughtfully. "Or - not quite a success?"

"The portrait?" he asked quickly.

"No, silly, the party. Of course the portrait's a success."

"It's the best thing I've done," Everard declared aggressively.

"We're getting on," said Isobel. "Lady Charmington wants you to paint her."

"Oh, Lord!" He frowned. "I'm not a fashionable portrait painter, you know."

"You will be. You'll get to the top of the tree."

"That's not the tree I want to get to the top of."

"But, Alan dear, that's the way to make mints of money."

"Who wants mints of money?"

"Perhaps I do," she said smiling.

At once he felt apologetic, ashamed. If she had not married him she could have had her mints of money. And she needed it. A certain amount of luxury was her proper setting.

"We've not done so badly just lately," he said wistfully.

"No, indeed; but the bills are coming in rather fast."

Bills - always bills!

He walked up and down.

"Oh, hang it! I don't want to paint Lady Charmington," he burst out, rather like a petulant child.

Isobel smiled a little. She stood by the fire without moving. Alan stopped his restless pacing and came nearer to her. What was there in her, in her stillness, her inertia, that drew him - drew him like a magnet? How beautiful she was - her arms like sculptured white marble, the pure gold of her hair, her lips - red, full lips.

He kissed them - felt them fasten on his own. Did anything else matter? What was there in Isobel that soothed you, that took all your cares from you? She drew you into her own beautiful inertia and held you there, quiet and content. Poppy and mandragora; you drifted there, on a dark lake, asleep.

"I'll do Lady Charmington," he said presently. "What does it matter? I shall be bored - but after all, painters must eat. There's Mr. Pots the painter, Mrs. Pots the painter's wife, and Miss Pots the painter's daughter - all needing sustenance."

"Absurd boy!" said Isobel. "Talking of our daughter - you ought to go and see Jane some time. She was here yesterday, and said she hadn't seen you for months."

"Jane was here?"

"Yes - to see Winnie."

Alan brushed Winnie aside.

"Did she see the picture of you?"

"Yes."

"What did she think of it?"

"She said it was splendid."

"Oh!"

He frowned, lost in thought.

"Mrs. Lemprière suspects you of a guilty passion for Jane, I think," remarked Isobel. "Her nose twitched a good deal."

"That woman!" said Alan, with deep disgust. "That woman! What wouldn't she think? What doesn't she think?"

"Well, I don't think," said Isobel, smiling. "So go on and see Jane soon."

Alan looked across at her. She was sitting now on a low couch by the fire. Her face was half turned away, the smile still lingered on her lips. And at that moment he felt bewildered, confused, as though a mist had formed round him, and suddenly parting, had given him a glimpse into a strange country.

Something said to him: "Why does she want you to go and see Jane? There's a reason." Because with Isobel, there was bound to be a reason. There was no impulse in Isobel, only calculation.

"Do you like Jane?" he asked suddenly.

"She's a dear," said Isobel.

"Yes, but do you really like her?"

"Of course. She's so devoted to Winnie. By the way, she wants to carry Winnie off to the seaside next week. You don't mind, do you? It will leave us free for Scotland."

"It will be extraordinarily convenient."

It would, indeed, be just that. Extraordinarily convenient. He looked across at Isobel with a sudden suspicion. Had she asked Jane? Jane was so easily imposed upon.

Isobel got up and went out of the room, humming to herself. Oh, well, it didn't matter. Anyway, he would go and see Jane.

Jane Haworth lived at the top of a block of mansion flats overlooking Battersea Park. When Everard had climbed four flights of stairs and pressed the bell, he felt annoyed with Jane. Why couldn't she live somewhere more get-at-able? When, not having obtained an answer, he had pressed the bell three times, his annoyance had grown greater. Why couldn't she keep someone capable of answering the door?

Suddenly it opened, and Jane herself stood in the doorway. She was flushed.

"Where's Alice?" asked Everard, without any attempt at greeting.

"Well, I'm afraid - I mean - she's not well today."

"Drink, you mean?" said Everard grimly.

What a pity that Jane was such an inveterate liar.

"I suppose that's it," said Jane reluctantly.

"Let me see her."

He strode into the flat. Jane followed him with disarming meekness. He found the delinquent Alice in the kitchen. There was no doubt whatever as to her condition. He followed Jane into the sitting room in grim silence.

"You'll have to get rid of that woman," he said. "I told you so before."

"I know you did, Alan, but I can't do that. You forget, her husband's in prison."

"Where he ought to be," said Everard. "How often has that woman been drunk in the three months you've had her?"

"Not so very many times; three or four perhaps. She gets depressed, you know."

"Three or four! Nine or ten would be nearer the mark. How does she cook? Rottenly. Is she the least assistance or comfort to you in this flat? None whatever. For God's sake, get rid of her tomorrow morning and engage a girl who is of some use."

Jane looked at him unhappily.

"You won't," said Everard gloomily, sinking into a big armchair. "You're such an impossibly sentimental creature. What's this I hear about your taking Winnie to the seaside? Who suggested it, you or Isobel?"

Jane said very quickly: "I did, of course."

"Jane," said Everard, "if you would only learn to speak the truth, I should be quite fond of you. Sit down, and for goodness sake don't tell any more lies for at least ten minutes."

"Oh, Alan!" said Jane, and sat down.

The painter examined her critically for a minute or two. Mrs. Lemprière - that woman - had been quite right. He had been cruel in his handling of Jane. Jane was almost, if not quite, beautiful. The long lines of her were pure Greek. It was that eager anxiety of hers to please that made her awkward. He had seized on that - exaggerated it - had sharpened the line of her slightly pointed chin, flung her body into an ugly pose.

Why? Why was it impossible for him to be five minutes in the room with Jane without feeling violent irritation against her rising up in him? Say what you would, Jane was a dear but irritating. He was never soothed

and at peace with her as he was with Isobel. And yet Jane was so anxious to please, so willing to agree with all he said, but alas! so transparently unable to conceal her real feelings.

He looked round the room. Typically Jane. Some lovely things, pure gems, that piece of Battersea enamel, for instance, and there next to it, an atrocity of a vase hand painted with roses.

He picked the latter up.

"Would you be very angry, Jane, if I pitched this out of the window?"

"Oh! Alan, you mustn't."

"What do you want with all this trash? You've plenty of taste if you care to use it. Mixing things up!"

"I know, Alan. It isn't that I don't know. But people give me things. That vase - Miss Bates brought it back from Margate - and she's so poor, and has to scrape, and it must have cost her quite a lot - for her, you know, and she thought I'd be so pleased. I simply had to put it in a good place."

Everard said nothing. He went on looking around the room. There were one or two etchings on the walls - there were also a number of photographs of babies. Babies, whatever their mothers may think, do not always photograph well. Any of Jane's friends who acquired babies hurried to send photographs of them to her, expecting these tokens to be cherished. Jane had duly cherished them.

"Who's this little horror?" asked Everard, inspecting a pudgy addition with a squint. "I've not seen him before."

"It's a her," said Jane. "Mary Carrington's new baby."

"Poor Mary Carrington," said Everard. "I suppose you'll pretend that you like having that atrocious infant squinting at you all day?"

Jane's chin shot out.

"She's a lovely baby. Mary is a very old friend of mine."

"Loyal Jane," said Everard smiling at her. "So Isobel landed you with Winnie, did she?"

"Well, she did say you wanted to go to Scotland, and I jumped at it. You will let me have Winnie, won't you? I've been wondering if you would let her come to me for ages, but I haven't liked to ask."

"Oh, you can have her - but it's awfully good of you."

"Then that's all right," said Jane happily.

Everard lit a cigarette.

"Isobel show you the new portrait?" he asked rather indistinctly.

"She did."

"What did you think of it?"

Jane's answer came quickly - too quickly:

"It's perfectly splendid. Absolutely splendid."

Alan sprang suddenly to his feet. The hand that held the cigarette shook.

"Damn you, Jane, don't lie to me!"

"But, Alan, I'm sure, it is perfectly splendid."

"Haven't you learned by now, Jane, that I know every tone of your voice? You lie to me like a hatter so as not to hurt my feelings, I suppose. Why can't you be honest? Do you think I want you to tell me a thing is splendid when I know as well as you do that it's not? The damned thing's dead - dead. There's no life in it - nothing behind, nothing but surface, damned smooth surface. I've cheated myself all along - yes, even this afternoon. I came along to you to find out. Isobel doesn't know. But you know, you always do know. I knew you'd tell me it was good - you've no moral sense about that sort of thing. But I can tell by the tone of your voice. When I showed you Romance you didn't say anything at all - you held your breath and gave a sort of gasp."

"Alan -"

Everard gave her no chance to speak. Jane was producing the effect upon him he knew so well. Strange that so gentle a creature could stir him to such furious anger.

"You think I've lost the power, perhaps," he said angrily, "but I haven't. I can do work every bit as good as Romance - better, perhaps. I'll show you, Jane Haworth."

He fairly rushed out of the flat. Walking rapidly, he crossed through the Park and over Albert Bridge. He was still tingling all over with irritation and baffled rage. Jane, indeed! What did she know about painting? What was her opinion worth? Why should he care? But he did care. He wanted to paint something that would make Jane gasp. Her mouth would open just a little, and her cheeks would flush red. She would look first at the picture and then at him. She wouldn't say anything at all probably.

In the middle of the bridge he saw the picture he was going to paint. It came to him from nowhere at all, out of the blue. He saw it, there in the air, or was it in his head?

A little, dingy curio shop, rather dark and musty looking. Behind the counter a Jew - a small Jew with cunning eyes. In front of him the customer, a big man, sleek, well fed, opulent, bloated, a great jowl on him. Above them, on a shelf, a bust of white marble. The light there, on the boy's marble face, the deathless beauty of old Greece, scornful, unheeding of sale and barter. The Jew, the rich collector, the Greek boy's head. He saw them all.

"The Connoisseur, that's what I'll call it," muttered Alan Everard, stepping off the curb and just missing being annihilated by a passing bus. "Yes, The Connoisseur. I'll show Jane."

When he arrived home, he passed straight into the studio. Isobel found him there, sorting out canvases.

"Alan, don't forget we're dining with the Marches -"

Everard shook his head impatiently.

"Damn the Marches. I'm going to work. I've got hold of something, but I must get it fixed - fixed at once on the canvas before it goes. Ring them up. Tell them I'm dead."

Isobel looked at him thoughtfully for a moment or two, and then went out. She understood the art of living with a genius very thoroughly. She went to the telephone and made some plausible excuse.

She looked round her, yawning a little. Then she sat down at her desk and began to write.

Many thanks for your cheque received today. You are good to your godchild A hundred pounds will do all sorts of things. Children are a terrible expense. You are so fond of Winnie that I felt I was not doing wrong in coming to you for help. Alan, like all geniuses, can only work at what he wants to work at - and unfortunately that doesn't always keep the pot boiling. Hope to see you soon.

Yours,

Isobel

When The Connoisseur was finished, some months later, Alan invited Jane to come and see it. The thing was not quite as he had conceived it - that was impossible to hope for - but it was near enough. He felt the glow of the creator. He had made this thing and it was good.

Jane did not this time tell him it was splendid. The color crept into her cheeks and her lips parted. She looked at Alan, and he saw in her eyes that which he wished to see. Jane knew.

He walked on air. He had shown Jane!

The picture off his mind, he began to notice his immediate surroundings once more.

Winnie had benefited enormously from her fortnight at the seaside, but it struck him that her clothes were very shabby. He said so to Isobel.

"Alan! You who never notice anything! But I like children to be simply dressed - I hate them all fussed up."

"There's a difference between simplicity and darns and patches."

Isobel said nothing, but she got Winnie a new frock. Two days later Alan was struggling with income-tax returns. His own passbook lay in front of him. He was hunting through Isobel's desk for hers when Winnie danced into the room with a disreputable doll.

"Daddy, I've got a riddle. Can you guess it? 'Within a wall as white as milk, within a curtain soft as silk, bathed in a sea of crystal clear, a golden apple doth appear.' Guess what that is?"

"Your mother," said Alan absently. He was still bunting.

"Daddy!" Winnie gave a scream of laughter. "It's an egg. Why did you think it was Mummy?"

Alan smiled too.

"I wasn't really listening," he said. "And the words sounded like Mummy, somehow."

A wall as white as milk. A curtain. Crystal. The golden apple. Yes, it did suggest Isobel to him. Curious things, words.

He had found the passbook now. He ordered Winnie peremptorily from the room. Ten minutes later he looked up, startled by a sharp ejaculation.

"Alan!"

"Hullo, Isobel. I didn't hear you come in. Look here, I can't make out these items in your passbook."

"What business had you to touch my passbook?"

He stared at her, astonished. She was angry. He had never seen her angry before.

"I had no idea you would mind."

"I do mind - very much indeed. You have no business to touch my things."

Alan suddenly became angry too.

"I apologize. But since I have touched your things, perhaps you will explain one or two entries that puzzle me. As far as I can see, nearly five hundred pounds has been paid into your account this year which I cannot check. Where does it come from?"

Isobel had recovered her temper. She sank into a chair.

"You needn't be so solemn about it, Alan," she said lightly. "It isn't the wages of sin, or anything like that."

"Where did this money come from?"

"From a woman. A friend of yours. It's not mine at all. It's for Winnie."

"Winnie? Do you mean - this money came from Jane?"

Isobel nodded.

"She's devoted to the child - can't do enough for her."

"Yes, but - surely the money ought to have been invested for Winnie."

"Oh! it isn't that sort of thing at all. It's for current expenses, clothes and all that."

Alan said nothing. He was thinking of Winnie's frocks - all darns and patches.

"Your account's overdrawn, too, Isobel?"

"Is it? That's always happening to me."

"Yes, but that five hundred -"

"My dear Alan. I've spent it on Winnie in the way that seemed best to me. I can assure you Jane is quite satisfied."

Alan was not satisfied. Yet such was the power of Isobel's calm that he said nothing more. After all, Isobel was careless in money matters. She hadn't meant to use for herself money given to her for the child. A receipted bill came that day addressed by a mistake to Mr. Everard. It was from a dressmaker in Hanover Square and was for two hundred odd pounds. He gave it to Isobel without a word. She glanced over it, smiled, and said: "Poor boy, I suppose it seems an awful lot to you, but one really must be more or less clothed."

The next day he went to see Jane.

Jane was irritating and elusive as usual. He wasn't to bother. Winnie was her godchild. Women understood these things, men didn't. Of course she didn't want Winnie to have five hundred pounds' worth of frocks. Would he please leave it to her and Isobel? They understood each other perfectly.

Alan went away in a state of growing dissatisfaction. He knew perfectly well that he had shirked the one question he really wished to ask. He wanted to say: "Has Isobel ever asked you for money for Winnie?" He didn't say it because he was afraid that Jane might not lie well enough to deceive him.

But he was worried. Jane was poor. He knew she was poor. She mustn't - mustn't denude herself. He made up his mind to speak to Isobel. Isobel was calm and reassuring. Of course she wouldn't let Jane spend more than she could afford.

A month later Jane died.

It was influenza, followed by pneumonia. She made Alan Everard her executor and left all she had to Winnie. But it wasn't very much.

It was Alan's task to go through Jane's papers. She left a record there that was clear to follow - numerous evidences of acts of kindness, begging letters, grateful letters.

And lastly, he found her diary. With it was a scrap of paper: "To be read after my death by Alan Everard. He has often reproached me with not speaking the truth. The truth is all here."

So he came to know at last, finding the one place where Jane had dared to be honest. It was a record, very simple and unforced, of her love for him.

There was very little sentiment about it - no fine language. But there was no blinking of facts.

"I know you are often irritated by me," she had written. "Everything I do or say seems to make you angry sometimes. I do not know why this should be, for I try so hard to please you; but I do believe, all the same, that I mean something real to you. One isn't angry with the people who don't count."

It was not Jane's fault that Alan found other matters. Jane was loyal - but she was also untidy; she filled her drawers too full. She had, shortly before her death, burned carefully all Isobel's letters. The one Alan found was wedged behind a drawer. When he had read it, the meaning of certain cabalistic signs on the counterfoils of Jane's cheque book became clear to him. In this particular letter Isobel had hardly troubled to keep up the pretence of the money being required for Winnie.

Alan sat in front of the desk staring with unseeing eyes out of the window for a long time. Finally he slipped the cheque book into his pocket and left the flat. He walked back to Chelsea, conscious of an anger that grew rapidly stronger.

Isobel was out when he got back, and he was sorry. He had so clearly in his mind what he wanted to say. Instead, he went up to the studio and pulled out the unfinished portrait of Jane. He set it on an easel near the portrait of Isobel in pink satin.

The Lemprière woman had been right: there was life in Jane's portrait. He looked at her, the eager eyes, the beauty that he had tried so unsuccessfully to deny her. That was Jane - the aliveness, more than anything else, was Jane. She was, he thought, the most alive person

he had ever met, so much so, that even now he could not think of her as dead.

And he thought of his other pictures - Color, Romance, Sir Rufus Herschman. They had all, in a way, been pictures of Jane. She had kindled the spark for each one of them - had sent him away fuming and fretting - to show her! And now? Jane was dead. Would he ever paint a picture - a real picture - again? He looked again at the eager face on the canvas. Perhaps. Jane wasn't very far away.

A sound made him wheel round. Isobel had come into the studio. She was dressed for dinner in a straight white gown that showed up the pure gold of her hair.

She stopped dead and checked the words on her lips. Eyeing him warily, she went over to the divan and sat down. She had every appearance of calm.

Alan took the cheque book from his pocket.

"I've been going through Jane's papers."

"Yes?"

He tried to imitate her calm, to keep his voice from shaking.

"For the last four years she's been supplying you with money."

"Yes. For Winnie."

"No, not for Winnie," shouted Everard. "You pretended, both of you, that it was for Winnie, but you both knew that that wasn't so. Do you realize that Jane has been selling her securities, living from hand to mouth, to supply you with clothes - clothes that you didn't really need?"

Isobel never took her eyes from his face. She settled her body more comfortably on the cushions as a white Persian cat might do.

"I can't help it if Jane denuded herself more than she should have done," she said. "I supposed she could afford the money. She was always crazy about you - I could see that, of course. Some wives would have kicked up a fuss about the way you were always rushing off to see her, and spending hours there. I didn't."

"No," said Alan, very white in the face. "You made her pay instead."

"You are saying very offensive things, Alan. Be careful."

"Aren't they true? Why did you find it so easy to get money out of Jane?"

"Not for love of me, certainly. It must have been for love of you."

"That's just what it was," said Alan simply. "She paid for my freedom - freedom to work in my own way. So long as you had a sufficiency of money, you'd leave me alone - not badger me to paint a crowd of awful women."

Isobel said nothing.

"Well?" cried Alan angrily.

Her quiescence infuriated him.

Isobel was looking at the floor. Presently she raised her head and said quietly:

"Come here, Alan."

She touched the divan at her side. Uneasily, unwillingly, he came and sat there, not looking at her. But he knew that he was afraid.

"Alan," said Isobel presently.

"Well?"

He was irritable, nervous.

"All that you say may be true. It doesn't matter. I'm like that. I want things - clothes, money, you. Jane's dead, Alan."

"What do you mean?"

"Jane's dead. You belong to me altogether now. You never did before - not quite."

He looked at her - saw the light in her eyes, acquisitive, possessive - was revolted yet fascinated.

"Now you shall be all mine."

He understood Isobel then as he had never understood her before.

"You want me as a slave? I'm to paint what you tell me to paint, live as you tell me to live, be dragged at your chariot wheels."

"Put it like that if you please. What are words?"

He felt her arms round his neck, white, smooth, firm as a wall. Words danced through his brain. "A wall as white as milk." Already he was inside the wall. Could he still escape? Did he want to escape?

He heard her voice close against his ear - poppy and mandragora.

"What else is there to live for? Isn't this enough? Love - happiness - success - love -"

The wall was growing up all around him now - "the curtain soft as silk," the curtain wrapping him round, stifling him a little, but so soft, so sweet! Now they were drifting together, at peace, out on the crystal sea. The wall was very high now, shutting out all those other things - those dangerous, disturbing things that hurt - that always hurt. Out on the sea of crystal, the golden apple between their hands.

The light faded from Jane's picture.

THE MYSTERY OF THE BAGHDAD CHEST

The words made a catchy headline, and I said as much to my friend, Hercule Poirot. I knew none of the parties. My interest was merely the dispassionate one of the man in the street. Poirot agreed.

"Yes, it has a flavor of the Oriental, of the mysterious. The chest may very well have been a sham Jacobean one from the Tottenham Court Road; none the less the reporter who thought of naming it the Baghdad Chest was happily inspired. The word 'mystery' is also thoughtfully placed in juxtaposition, though I understand there is very little mystery about the case."

"Exactly. It is all rather horrible and macabre, but it is not mysterious."

"Horrible and macabre," repeated Poirot thoughtfully.

"The whole idea is revolting," I said, rising to my feet and pacing up and down the room. "The murderer kills this man - his friend - shoves him into the chest, and half an hour later is dancing in that same room with the wife of his victim. Think! If she had imagined for one moment -"

"True," said Poirot thoughtfully. "That much-vaunted possession, a woman's intuition - it does not seem to have been working."

"The party seems to have gone off very merrily," I said with a slight shiver. "And all that time, as they danced and played poker, there was a dead man in the room with them. One could write a play about such an idea."

"It has been done," said Poirot. "But console yourself, Hastings," he added kindly. "Because a theme has been used once, there is no reason why it should not be used again. Compose your drama."

I had picked up the paper and was studying the rather blurred reproduction of a photograph.

"She must be a beautiful woman," I said slowly. "Even from this, one gets an idea."

Below the picture ran the inscription:

A recent portrait of Mrs. Clayton,
the wife of the murdered man

Poirot took the paper from me.

"Yes," he said. "She is beautiful. Doubtless she is of those born to trouble the souls of men."

He handed the paper back to me with a sigh.

"Dieu merci, I am not of an ardent temperament. It has saved me from many embarrassments. I am duly thankful."

I do not remember that we discussed the case further. Poirot displayed no special interest in it at the time. The facts were so clear, and there was so little ambiguity about them, that discussion seemed merely futile.

Mr. and Mrs. Clayton and Major Rich were friends of fairly long standing. On the day in question, the tenth of March, the Claytons had accepted an invitation to spend the evening with Major Rich. At about seven-thirty, however, Clayton explained to another friend, a Major Curtiss, with whom he was having a drink, that he had been unexpectedly called to Scotland and was leaving by the eight o'clock train.

"I'll just have time to drop in and explain to old Jack," went on Clayton. "Marguerita is going, of course. I'm sorry about it, but Jack will understand how it is."

Mr. Clayton was as good as his word. He arrived at Major Rich's rooms about twenty to eight. The major was out at the time, but his manservant, who knew Mr. Clayton well, suggested that he come in and wait. Mr. Clayton said that he had not time, but that he would come in and write a note. He added that he was on his way to catch a train.

The valet accordingly showed him into the sitting-room.

About five minutes later Major Rich, who must have let himself in without the valet hearing him, opened the door of the sitting-room, called his man and told him to go out and get some cigarettes. On his return the man brought them to his master, who was then alone in the sitting-room. The man naturally concluded that Mr. Clayton had left.

The guests arrived shortly afterwards. They comprised Mrs. Clayton, Major Curtiss and a Mr. and Mrs. Spence. The evening was spent dancing to the phonograph and playing poker. The guests left shortly after midnight.

The following morning, on coming to do the sitting-room, the valet was startled to find a deep stain discoloring the carpet below and in front of a piece of furniture which Major Rich had brought from the East and which was called the Baghdad Chest.

Instinctively the valet lifted the lid of the chest and was horrified to find inside the doubled-up body of a man who had been stabbed to the heart.

Terrified, the man ran out of the flat and fetched the nearest policeman. The dead man proved to be Mr. Clayton. The arrest of Major Rich followed very shortly afterward. The major's defense, it was understood, consisted of a sturdy denial of everything. He had not seen Mr. Clayton the preceding evening and the first he had heard of his going to Scotland had been from Mrs. Clayton.

Such were the bald facts of the case. Innuendoes and suggestions naturally abounded. The close friendship and intimacy of Major Rich and Mrs. Clayton were so stressed that only a fool could fail to read between the lines. The motive for the crime was plainly indicated.

Long experience has taught me to make allowance for baseless calumny. The motive suggested might, for all the evidence, be entirely nonexistent. Some quite other reasons might have precipitated the issue. But one thing did stand out clearly - that Rich was the murderer.

As I say, the matter might have rested there, had it not happened that Poirot and I were due at a party given by Lady Chatterton that night.

Poirot, whilst bemoaning social engagements and declaring a passion for solitude, really enjoyed these affairs enormously. To be made a fuss of and treated as a lion suited him down to the ground.

On occasions he positively purred! I have seen him blandly receiving the most outrageous compliments as no more than his due, and uttering the most blatantly conceited remarks, such as I can hardly bear to set down.

Sometimes he would argue with me on the subject.

"But, my friend, I am not an Anglo-Saxon. Why should I play the hypocrite? Si, si, that is what you do, all of you. The airman who has made a difficult flight, the tennis champion – they look down their noses, they mutter inaudibly that 'it is nothing.' But do they really think that themselves? Not for a moment. They would admire the exploit in someone else. So, being reasonable men, they admire it in themselves. But their training prevents them from saying so. Me, I am not like that. The talents that I possess - I would salute them in another. As it happens, in my own particular line, there is no one to touch me. C'est dommage, as it is, I admit freely and without the hypocrisy that I am a great man. I have the order, the method and the psychology in an unusual degree. I am, in fact, Hercule Poirot! Why should I turn red and stammer and mutter into my chin that really I am very stupid? It would not be true."

"There is certainly only one Hercule Poirot," I agreed - not without a spice of malice, of which, fortunately, Poirot remained quite oblivious.

Lady Chatterton was one of Poirot's most ardent admirers. Starting from the mysterious conduct of a Pekingese, he had unraveled a chain which led to a noted burglar and housebreaker. Lady Chatterton had been loud in his praises ever since.

To see Poirot at a party was a great sight. His faultless evening clothes, the exquisite set of his white tie, the exact symmetry of his hair parting, the sheen of pomade on his hair, and the tortured splendor of his famous mustaches - all combined to paint the perfect picture of an inveterate dandy. It was hard, at these moments, to take the little man seriously.

It was about half-past eleven when Lady Chatterton, bearing down upon us, whisked Poirot neatly out of an admiring group, and carried him off - I need hardly say, with myself in tow.

"I want you to go into my little room upstairs," said Lady Chatterton rather breathlessly as soon as she was out of earshot of her other guests. "You know where it is, M. Poirot. You'll find someone there who needs your help very badly - and you will help her, I know. She's one of my dearest friends - so don't say no."

Energetically leading the way as she talked, Lady Chatterton flung open a door, exclaiming as she did so, "I've got him, Marguerita darling. And he'll do anything you want. You'll help Mrs. Clayton, won't you, M. Poirot?"

And taking the answer for granted, she withdrew with the same energy that characterized all her movements.

Mrs. Clayton had been sitting in a chair by the window. She rose now and come toward us. Dressed in deep mourning, the dull black showed up her fair coloring. She was a singularly lovely woman, and there was about her a simple childlike candor which made her charm quit irresistible.

"Alice Chatterton is so kind," she said. "She arranged this. She said you would help me, M. Poirot. Of course I don't know whether you will or not - but I hope you will."

She had held out her hand and Poirot had taken it. He held it now for a moment or two while he stood scrutinizing her closely. There was nothing ill-bred in his manner of doing it. It was more the kind but searching look that a famous consultant gives a new patient as the latter is ushered into his presence.

"Are you sure, madame," he said at last, "that I can help you?"

"Alice says so."

"Yes, but I am asking you, madame."

A little flush rose to her cheeks.

"I don't know what you mean."

"What is it, madame, that you want me to do?"

"You - you - know who I am?" she asked.

"Assuredly."

"Then you can guess what it is I am asking you to do, M. Poirot - Captain Hastings" - I was gratified that she realized my identity - "Major Rich did not kill my husband."

"Why not?"

"I beg your pardon?"

Poirot smiled at her slight discomfiture.

"I said, 'Why not?'" he repeated.

"I'm not sure that I understand."

"Yet it is very simple. The police - the lawyers - they will all ask the same question: Why did Major Rich kill M. Clayton? I ask the opposite. I ask you, madame, why did Major Rich *not* kill Major Clayton?"

"You mean - why I'm so sure? Well, but I know. I know Major Rich so well."

"You know Major Rich so well," repeated Poirot tonelessly.

The color flamed into her cheeks.

"Yes, that's what they'll say - what they'll think! Oh, I know!"

"C'est vrai. That is what they will ask you about - how well you knew Major Rich. Perhaps you will speak the truth, perhaps you will lie. It is very necessary for a woman to lie sometimes. Women must defend themselves - and the lie, it is a good weapon. But there are three people, madame, to whom a woman should speak the truth. To her Father Confessor, to her hairdresser and to her private detective - if she trusts him. Do you trust me, madame?"

Marguerita Clayton drew a deep breath. "Yes," she said. "I do. I must," she added rather childishly.

"Then, how well do you know Major Rich?"

She looked at him for a moment in silence, then she raised her chin defiantly.

"I will answer your question. I loved Jack from the first moment I saw him - two years ago. Lately I think - I believe - he has come to love me. But he has never said so."

"Épatant!" said Poirot. "You have saved me a good quarter of an hour by coming to the point without beating the bush. You have the good sense. Now your husband - did he suspect your feelings?"

"I don't know," said Marguerita slowly. "I thought lately - that he might. His manner has been different. But that may have been merely my fancy."

"Nobody else knew?"

"I do not think so."

"And - pardon me, madame - you did not love your husband?"

There were, I think, very few women who would have answered that question as simply as this woman did. They would have tried to explain their feelings.

Maruerita Clayton said quite simply:

"No."

"Bien. Now we know where we are. According to you, madame, Major Rich did not kill your husband, but you realize that all the evidence points to his having done so. Are you aware, privately, of any flaw in that evidence?"

"No. I know nothing."

"When did your husband first inform you of his visit to Scotland?"

"Just after lunch. He said it was a bore, but he'd have to go. Something to do with land values, he said it was."

"And after that?"

"He went out - to his club, I think. I - I didn't see him again."

"Now as to Major Rich - what was his manner that evening? Just as usual?"

"Yes, I think so."

"You are not sure?"

Marguerita wrinkled her brows.

"He was a little constrained. With me – not with the others. But I thought I knew why that was. You understand? I am sure the constraint

or - or - absent-mindedness perhaps describes it better - had nothing to do with Edward. He was surprised to hear that Edward had gone to Scotland, but not unduly so."

"And nothing else unusual occurs to you in connection with that evening?"

Marguerita thought.

"No, nothing whatever."

"You - noticed the chest?"

She shook her head with a little shiver.

"I don't even remember it - or what it was like. We played poker most of the evening."

"Who won?"

"Major Rich. I had very bad luck, and so did Major Curtiss. The Spences won a little, but Major Rich was the chief winner."

"The party broke up - when?"

"About half-past twelve, I think. We all left together."

"Ah!"

Poirot remained silent, lost in thought.

"I wish I could be more helpful to you," said Mrs. Clayton. "I seem to be able to tell you so little."

"About the present - yes. What about the past, madame?"

"The past?"

"Yes. Have there not been incidents?"

She flushed.

"You mean that dreadful little man who shot himself. It wasn't my fault, M. Poirot. Indeed it wasn't."

"It was not precisely of that incident that I was thinking."

"That ridiculous duel? But Italians do fight duels. I was so thankful the man wasn't killed."

"It must have been a relief to you," agreed Poirot gravely.

She was looking at him doubtfully. He rose and took her hand in his.

"I shall not fight a duel for you, madame," he said. "But I will do what you have asked me. I will discover the truth. And let us hope that your instincts are correct - that the truth will help and not harm you."

Our first interview was with Major Curtiss. He was a man of about forty, of soldierly build, with very dark hair and a bronzed face. He had known the Claytons for some years and Major Rich also. He confirmed the press reports.

Clayton and he had had a drink together at the club just before half-past seven, and Clayton had then announced his intention of looking in on Major Rich on his way to Euston.

"What was Mr. Clayton's manner? Was he depressed or cheerful?"

The major considered. He was a slow-spoken man.

"Seemed in fairly good spirits," he said at last.

"He said nothing about being on bad terms with Major Rich?"

"Good Lord, no. They were pals."

"He didn't object to his wife's friendship with Major Rich?"

The major became very red in the face.

"You've been reading those damned newspapers, with tall tales and lies. Of course he didn't object. Why, he said to me: 'Marguerita's going, of course.'"

"I see. Now during the evening - the manner of Major Rich - was that much as usual?"

"I didn't notice any difference."

"And madame? She, too, was as usual?"

"Well," he reflected, "now I come to think of it, she was a bit quiet. You know, thoughtful and faraway."

"Who arrived first?"

"The Spences. They were there when I got there. As a matter of fact, I'd called round for Mrs. Clayton, but found she'd already started. So I got there a bit late."

"And how did you amuse yourselves? You danced? You played the cards?"

"A bit of both. Danced first of all."

"There were five of you?"

"Yes, but that's all right, because I don't dance. I put on the records and the others danced."

"Who danced most with whom?"

"Well, as a matter of fact the Spences like dancing together. They've got a sort of craze on fancy steps and all that."

"So that Mrs. Clayton danced mostly with Major Rich?"

"That's about it."

"And then you played poker?"

"Yes."

"And when did you leave?"

"Oh, quite early. A little after midnight."

"Did you all leave together?"

"Yes. As a matter of fact, we shared a taxi, dropped Mrs. Clayton first, then me, and the Spences took it on to Kensington."

Our next visit was to Mr. and Mrs. Spence.

Only Mrs. Spence was at home, but her account of the evening tallied with that of Major Curtiss except that she displayed a slight acidity concerning Major Rich's luck at cards.

Earlier in the morning Poirot had had a telephone conversation with Inspector Japp of Scotland Yard. As a result we arrived at Major Rich's rooms and found his manservant, Burgoyne, expecting us.

The valet's evidence was very precise and clear.

Mr. Clayton had arrived at twenty minutes to eight. Unluckily Major Rich had just that very minute gone out. Mr. Clayton had said that he couldn't wait, as he had to catch a train, but he would just scrawl a note. He accordingly went into the sitting-room to do so. Burgoyne had not actually heard his master come in, as he was running the bath, and Major Rich, of course, let himself in with his own key. In his opinion it was about ten minutes later that Major Rich called him and sent him out for cigarettes. No, he has not gone into the sitting-room. Major Rich had stood in the doorway. He had returned with the cigarettes five minutes later and on this occasion he has gone into the sitting-room, which was then empty, save for his master, who was standing by the window smoking. His master has inquired if his bath were ready and on being told is was had proceeded to take it. He, Burgoyne, had not mentioned Mr. Clayton, as he assumed that his master had found Mr. Clayton there and let him out himself. His master's manner had been precisely the same as usual. He had taken his bath, changed, and shortly after, Mr. and Mrs. Spence had arrived, to be followed by Major Curtiss and Mrs. Clayton.

It had not occurred to him, Burgoyne explained, that Mr. Clayton might have left before his master's return. To do so, Mr. Clayton would have had to bang the front door behind him and that the valet was sure he would have heard.

Still in the same impersonal manner, Burgoyne proceeded to his finding of the body. For the first time my attention was directed to the fatal chest. It was a good-sized piece of furniture standing against the wall next to the phonograph cabinet. It was made of some dark wood and plentifully studded with brass nails. The lid opened simply enough. I looked in and shivered. Though well scrubbed, ominous stains remained.

Suddenly Poirot uttered an exclamation. "Those holes there - they are curious. One would say that they had been newly made."

The holes in question were at the back of the chest against the wall. There were three or four of them. They were about a quarter of an inch in diameter - and certainly had the effect of having been freshly made.

Poirot bent down to examine them, looking inquiringly at the valet.

"It's certainly curious, sir. I don't remember ever seeing those holes in the past, though maybe I wouldn't notice them."

"It makes no matter," said Poirot.

Closing the lid of the chest, he stepped back into the room until he was standing with his back against the window. Then he suddenly asked a question.

"Tell me," he said. "When you brought the cigarettes into your master that night, was there not something out of place in the room?"

Burgoyne hesitated for a minute, then with some slight reluctance he replied, "It's odd your saying that, sir. Now you come to mention it, there was. That screen there that cuts off the draft from the bedroom door - it was moved a bit more to the left."

"Like this?"

Poirot darted nimbly forward and pulled at the screen. It was a handsome affair of painted leather. It already slightly obscured the view of the chest, and as Poirot adjusted it, it hid the chest altogether.

"That's right, sir," said the valet. "It was like that."

"And the next morning?"

"It was still like that. I remember. I moved it away and it was then I saw the stain. The carpet's gone to be cleaned, sir. That's why the boards are bare."

Poirot nodded.

"I see," he said. "I thank you."

He placed a crisp piece of paper in the valet's palm.

"Thank you, sir."

"Poirot," I said when we were out in the street, "that point about the screen - is that a point helpful to Rich?"

"It is a further point against him," said Poirot ruefully. "The screen hid the chest from the room. It also hid the stain on the carpet. Sooner or later the blood was bound to soak through the wood and stain the carpet. The screen would prevent discovery for the moment. Yes - but there is something there that I do not understand. The valet, Hastings, the valet."

"What about the valet? He seemed a most intelligent fellow."

"As you say, most intelligent. Is it credible, then, that Major Rich failed to realize that the valet would certainly discover the body in the morning? Immediately after the deed he had no time for anything - granted. He shoves the body into the chest, pulls the screen in front of it and goes through the evening hoping for the best. But after the guests are gone? Surely, then is the time to dispose of the body."

"Perhaps he hoped the valet wouldn't notice the stain?"

"That, mon ami, is absurd. A stained carpet is the first thing a good servant would be bound to notice. And Major Rich, he goes to bed and snores there comfortably and does nothing at all about the matter. Very remarkable and interesting, that."

"Curtiss might have seen the stains when he was changing the records the night before?" I suggested.

"That is unlikely. The screen would throw deep shadow just there. No, but I begin to see. Yes, dimly I begin to see."

"See what?" I asked eagerly.

"The possibilities, shall we say, of an alternative explanation. Our next visit may throw light on things."

Our next visit was to the doctor who had examined the body. His evidence was a mere recapitulation of what he had already given at the inquest. Deceased had been stabbed to the heart with long thin knife something like a stiletto. The knife had been left in the wound. Death had been instantaneous. The knife was the property of Major Rich and usually lay on his writing table. There were no fingerprints on it, the doctor understood. It had been either wiped or held in a handkerchief. As regards time, any time between seven and eight seemed indicated.

"He could not, for instance, have been killed after midnight?" asked Poirot.

"No. That I can say. Ten o'clock at the outside - but seven-thirty to eight seems clearly indicated."

"There is a second hypothesis possible," Poirot said when we were back home. "I wonder if you see it, Hastings. To me it is very plain, and I only need one point to clear up the matter for good and all."

"It's no good," I said. "I'm not there."

"But make an effort, Hastings. Make an effort."

"Very well," I said. "At seven-forty Clayton is alive and well. The last person to see him alive is Rich - "

"So we assume."

"Well, isn't it so?"

"You forget, mon ami, that Major Rich denies that. He states explicitly that Clayton had gone when he came in."

"But the valet says that he would have heard Clayton leave because of the bang of the door. And also, if Clayton had left, when did he return? He couldn't have returned after midnight because the doctor says positively that he was dead at least two hours before that. That only leaves one alternative."

"Yes, mon ami?" said Poirot.

"That in the five minutes Clayton was alone in the sitting room, someone else came in and killed him. But there we have the same objection. Only someone with a key could come in without the valet's knowing, and in the same way the murderer on leaving would have had to bang the door, and that again the valet would have heard."

"Exactly," said Poirot. "And therefore - "

"And therefore - nothing," I said. "I can see no other solution."

"It is a pity," murmured Poirot. "And it is really so exceedingly simple - as the clear blue eyes of Madame Clayton."

"You really believe - "

"I believe nothing - until I have got proof. One little proof will convince me."

He took up the telephone and called Japp at Scotland Yard.

Twenty minutes later we were standing before a little heap of assorted objects laid out on a table. They were the contents of the dead man's pockets.

There was a handkerchief, a handful of loose change, a pocketbook containing three pounds ten shillings, a couple of bills and a worn snapshot of Marguerita Clayton. There was also a pocket-knife, a gold pencil and a cumbersome wooden tool.

It was on this latter that Poirot swooped. He unscrewed it and several small blades fell out.

"You see, Hastings, a gimlet and all the rest of it. Ah! it would be a matter of a very few minutes to bore a few holes in the chest with this.'

"Those holes we saw?"

"Precisely."

"You mean it was Clayton who bored them himself?"

"Mais oui, mais oui! What did they suggest to you, those holes? They were not to see through, because they were at the back of the chest. What were they for, then? Clearly for air? But you do not make air holes for a dead body, so clearly they were not made by the murderer.

They suggest one thing - and one thing only - that a man was going to *hide* in that chest. And at once, on that hypothesis, things become intelligible. Mr. Clayton is jealous of his wife and Rich. He plays the old, old trick of pretending to go away. He watches Rich go out, then he gains admission, is left alone to write a note, quickly bores those holes and hides inside the chest. His wife is coming there that night. Possibly Rich will put the others off, possibly she will remain after the others have gone, or pretend to go and return. Whatever it is, Clayton will *know*. Anything is preferable to the ghastly torment of suspicion he is enduring."

"Then you mean that Rich killed him *after* the others had gone? But the doctor said that was impossible."

"Exactly. So you see, Hastings, he must have been killed *during* the evening."

"But everyone was in the room!"

"Precisely," said Poirot gravely. "You see the beauty of that? 'Everyone was in the room.' What an alibi! What sangfroid - what nerve - what audacity!"

"I still don't understand."

"Who went behind that screen to wind up the phonograph and change the records? The phonograph and the chest were side by side, remember. The others are dancing - the phonograph is playing. And the man who does not dance lifts the lid of the chest and thrusts the knife he has just slipped into his sleeve deep into the body of the man who was hiding there."

"Impossible! The man would cry out."

"Not if he were drugged first?"

"Drugged?"

"Yes. Who did Clayton have a drink with at seven-thirty? Ah! Now you see. Curtiss! Curtiss has inflamed Clayton's mind with suspicions against his wife and Rich. Curtiss suggests this plan - the visit to Scotland, the concealment in the chest, the final touch of moving the screen. Not so that Clayton can raise the lid a little and get relief - no, so that he, Curtiss, can raise that lid unobserved. The plan is Curtiss', and observe the beauty of it, Hastings. If Rich had observed the screen was out of place and moved it back - well, no harm is done. He can make another plan. Clayton hides in the chest, the mild narcotic that Curtiss had administered takes effect. He sinks into unconsciousness. Curtiss lifts up the lid and strikes - and the phonograph goes on playing Walking My Baby Back Home."

I found my voice. "Why? But why?"

Poirot shrugged his shoulders.

"Why did a man shoot himself? Why did two Italians fight a duel? Curtiss is of a dark passionate temperament. He wanted Marguerita Clayton. With her husband and Rich out of the way, she would, or so he thought, turn to him."

He added musingly:

"These simple childlike women... they are very dangerous. But mon Dieu! what an artistic masterpiece! It goes to my heart to hang a man like that. I may be a genius myself, but I am capable of recognizing genius in other people. A perfect murder, mon ami. I, Hercule Poirot, say it to you. A perfect murder. Épatant!"

WHILE THE LIGHT LASTS

The Ford car bumped from rut to rut, and the hot African sun poured down unmercifully. On either side of the so-called road stretched an unbroken line of trees and scrub, rising and falling in gently undulating lines as far as the eye could reach, the coloring a soft, deep yellow-green, the whole effect languorous and strangely quiet. Few birds stirred the slumbering silence. Once a snake wriggled across the road in front of the car, escaping the driver's efforts at destruction with sinuous ease. Once a native stepped out from the bush, dignified and upright, behind him a woman with an infant bound closely to her broad back and a complete household equipment, including a frying pan, balanced magnificently on her head.

All these things George Crozier had not failed to point out to his wife, who had answered him with a monosyllabic lack of attention which irritated him.

"Thinking of that fellow," he deduced wrathfully. It was thus that he was wont to allude in his own mind to Deirdre Crozier's first husband, killed in the first year of the war. Killed, too, in the campaign against German West Africa. Natural she should, perhaps - he stole a glance at her, her fairness, the pink and white smoothness of her cheek, the rounded lines of her figure - rather more rounded perhaps than they had been in those far-off days when she had passively permitted him to become engaged to her, and then, in that first emotional scare of war, had abruptly cast

him aside and made a war wedding of it with that lean, sunburned boy lover of hers, Tim Nugent.

Well, well, the fellow was dead - gallantly dead - and he, George Crozier, had married the girl he had always meant to marry. She was fond of him, too; how could she help it when he was ready to gratify her every wish and had the money to do it, too! He reflected with some complacency on his last gift to her, at Kimberley, where, owing to his friendship with some of the directors of De Beers, he had been able to purchase a diamond which, in the ordinary way, would not have been in the market, a stone not remarkable as to size, but of a very exquisite and rare shade, a peculiar deep amber, almost old gold, a diamond such as you might not find in a hundred years. And the look in her eyes when he gave it to her! Women were all the same about diamonds.

The necessity of holding on with both hands to prevent himself being jerked out brought George Crozier back to the realities. He ejaculated for perhaps the fourteenth time, with the pardonable irritation of a man who owns two Rolls-Royce cars and who has exercised his stud on the highways of civilization: "Good Lord, what a car! What a road!" He wet on angrily:

"Where the devil is this tobacco estate, anyway? It's over an hour since we left Bulawayo."

"Lost in Rhodesia," said Deirdre lightly between two involuntary leaps into the air.

But the coffee-colored driver, appealed to, responded with the cheering news that their destination was just round the next bend of the road.

The manager of the estate, Mr. Walter, was waiting on the stoop to receive them with the touch of deference due to George Crozier's prominence in Union Tobacco. He introduced his daughter-in-law, who shepherded Deirdre through the cool, darkening hall to a bedroom beyond, where she could remove the veil with which she was always careful to shield her complexion when motoring. As she unfastened the pits in her usual leisurely, graceful fashion, Deirdre's eyes swept round the whitewashed ugliness of the bare room. No luxuries here, and Deirdre, who loved comfort as a cat loves cream, shivered a little. On the wall a text confronted her. "What shall it profit a man if he gain the whole world and lose his s soul?" it demanded of all and sundry, and Deirdre, pleasantly conscious that the question had nothing to do with her, turned to accompany her shy and rather silent guide. She noted, but not in the least maliciously, the spreading hips and the unbecoming cheap cotton gown. And with a glow of quiet appreciation her eyes dropped to the exquisite, costly simplicity of her own French white linen. Beautiful clothes, especially when worn by herself, roused in her the joy of the artist.

The two men were waiting for her.

"It won't bore you to come round, too, Mrs. Crozier?"

"Not at all. I've never been over a tobacco factory."

They stepped out into the still Rhodesian afternoon.

"These are the seedlings here; we plant them out as required. You see - "

The manager's voice droned on, interpolated by her husband's sharp staccato questions - output, stamp duty, problems of colored labor. She ceased to listen.

This was Rhodesia, this was the land Tim had loved, where he and she were to have gone together after the war was over. If he had not been killed! As always, the bitterness of revolt surged up in her at that thought. Two short months - that was all they had had. Two months of happiness - if that mingled rapture and pain were happiness. Was love ever happiness? Did not a thousand tortures beset the lover's heart? She had lived intensely in that short space, but had she ever known the peace, the leisure, the quiet contentment of her present life? And for the first time she admitted, somewhat unwillingly, that perhaps all had been for the best.

"I wouldn't have liked living out here. I mightn't have been able to make Tim happy. I might have disappointed him. George loves me, and I'm very fond of him, and he's very, very good to me. Why, look at that diamond he bought me only the other day." And, thinking of it, her eyelids drooped a little in pure pleasure.

"This is where we thread the leaves." Walters led the way into a low, long shed. On the floor were vast heaps of green leaves, and white-clad black "boys" squatted round them, picking and rejecting with deft fingers, sorting them into sizes, and stringing them by means of primitive needles on a long line of string. They worked with a cheerful leisureliness, jesting amongst themselves, and showing their white teeth as they laughed.

"Now, out here -"

They passed through the shed into the daylight again, where the lines of leaves hung drying in the sun. Deirdre sniffed delicately at the faint, almost imperceptible fragrance that filled the air.

Walters led the way into other sheds where the tobacco, kissed by the sun into faint yellow discoloration, underwent its further treatment. Dark here, with the brown swinging masses above, ready to fall to powder at a rough touch. The fragrance was stronger, almost overpowering it seemed to Deirdre, and suddenly a sort of terror came upon her, a fear of she knew not what, that drove her from that menacing, scented obscurity out into the sunlight. Crozier noted her pallor.

"What's the matter, my dear, don't you feel well? The sun, perhaps. Better not come with us round the plantations? Eh?"

Walters was solicitous. Mrs. Crozier had better go back to the house and rest. He called to a man a little distance away.

"Mr. Arden - Mrs. Crozier. Mrs. Crozier's feeling a little done up with the heat, Arden. Just take her back to the house, will you?"

The momentary feeling of dizziness was passing. Deirdre walked by Arden's side. She had as yet hardly glanced at him.

"Deirdre!"

Her heart gave a leap, and then stood still. Only one person had ever spoken her name like that, with the faint stress on the first syllable that made of it a caress.

She turned and stared at the man by her side. He was burned almost black by the sun, he walked with a limp, and on the cheek nearer her was a long scar which altered his expression, but she knew him.

"Tim!"

For an eternity, it seemed to her, they gazed at each other, mute and trembling, and then, without knowing how or why, they were in each other's arms. Time rolled back for them. Then they drew apart again, and Deirdre, conscious as she put it of the idiocy of the question, said: "Then you're not dead?"

"No, they must have mistaken another chap for me. I was badly knocked on the head, but I came to and managed to crawl into the bush. After that I don't know what happened for months and months, but a friendly tribe looked after me, and at last I got my proper wits again and managed to get back to civilization."

He paused. "I found you'd been married six months."

Deirdre cried out:

"Oh, Tim, understand, please understand! It was so awful, the loneliness - and the poverty. I didn't mind being poor with you, but when I was alone I hadn't the nerve to stand up against the sordidness of it all."

"It's all right, Deirdre; I did understand. I know you always have had a hankering after the fleshpots. I took you from them once - but the second time, well - my nerve failed. I was pretty badly broken up, you see, could hardly walk without a crutch, and then there was this scar."

She interrupted him passionately.

"Do you think I would have cared for that?"

"No, I know you wouldn't. I was a fool. Some women did mind, you know. I made up my mind I'd manage to get a glimpse of you. If you looked happy, if I thought you were contented to be with Crozier - why, then I'd remain dead. I did see you. You were just getting into a big car. You had on some lovely sable furs - things I'd never be able to give you if I worked my fingers to the bone - and - well - you seemed happy enough. I hadn't the same strength and courage, the same belief in myself, that I'd had before the war. All I could see was myself, broken and useless, barely able to earn enough to keep you - and you looked so beautiful, Deirdre, such a queen amongst women, so worthy to have furs and jewels and lovely clothes and all the hundred and one luxuries Crozier could give you. That - and - well, the pain - of seeing you together, decided me. Everyone believed me dead. I would stay dead."

"The pain!" repeated Deirdre in a low voice.

"Well, damn it all, Deirdre, it hurt! It isn't that I blame you. I don't. But it hurt."

They were both silent. Then Tim raised her face to his and kissed it with a new tenderness.

"But that's all over now, sweetheart. The only thing to decide is how we're going to break it to Crozier."

"Oh!" She drew herself away abruptly. "I hadn't thought -" She broke off as Crozier and the manager appeared round the angle of the path. With a swift turn of the head she whispered:

"Do nothing now. Leave it to me. I must prepare him. Where could I meet you tomorrow?"

Nugent reflected.

"I could come in to Bulawayo. How about the café near the Standard Bank? At three o'clock it would be pretty empty."

Deirdre gave a brief nod of assent before turning her back on him and joining the other two men. Tim Nugent looked after her with a faint frown. Something in her manner puzzled him.

Deirdre was very silent during the drive home. Sheltering behind the fiction of a "touch of the sun," she deliberated on her course of action. How should she tell him? How would he take it? A strange lassitude seemed to possess her, and a growing desire to postpone the revelation as long as might be. Tomorrow would be soon enough. There would be plenty of time before three o'clock.

The hotel was uncomfortable. Their room was on the ground floor, looking out onto an inner court. Deirdre stood that evening sniffing the stale air and glancing distastefully at the tawdry furniture. Her mind flew to the easy luxury of Monkton Court amidst the Surrey pinewoods. When her maid left her at last, she went slowly to her jewel case. In the palm of her hand the golden diamond returned her stare.

With an almost violent gesture she returned it to the case and slammed down the lid. Tomorrow morning she would tell George.

She slept badly. It was stifling beneath the heavy folds of the mosquito netting. The throbbing darkness was punctuated by the ubiquitous ping she had learned to dread. She awoke white and listless. Impossible to start a scene so early in the day!

She lay in the small, close room all the morning, resting. Lunchtime came upon her with a sense of shock. As they sat drinking coffee, George Crozier proposed a drive to the Matopos.

"Plenty of time if we start at once."

Deirdre shook her head, pleading a headache, and she thought to herself: "That settles it. I can't rush the thing. After all, what does a day more or less matter? I'll explain to Tim."

She waved good-bye to Crozier as he rattled off in the battered Ford. Then, glancing at her watch, she walked slowly to the meeting place.

The café was deserted at this hour. They sat down at a little table and ordered the inevitable tea that South Africa drinks at all hours of the day

and night. Neither of them said a word till the waitress brought it and withdrew to her fastness behind some pink curtains. Then Deirdre looked up and started as she met the intense watchfulness in his eyes.

"Deirdre, have you told him?"

She shook her head, moistening her lips, seeking for words that would not come.

"Why not?"

"I haven't had a chance; there hasn't been time."

Even to herself the words sounded halting and unconvincing.

"It's not that. There's something else. I suspected it yesterday. I'm sure of it today. Deirdre, what is it?"

She shook her head dumbly.

"There's some reason why you don't want to leave George Crozier, why you don't want to come back to me. What is it?"

It was true. As he said it she knew it, knew it with sudden scorching shame, but knew it beyond any possibility of doubt. And still his eyes searched her.

"It isn't that you love him! You don't. But there's something."

She thought: "In another moment he'll see! Oh, God, don't let him!"

Suddenly his face whitened.

"Deirdre - is it - is it that there's going to be a - child?"

In a flash she saw the chance he offered her. A wonderful way! Slowly, almost without her own volition, she bowed her head.

She heard his quick breathing, then his voice, rather high and hard.

"That - alters things. I didn't know. We've got to find a different way out." He leaned across the table and caught both her hands in his. "Deirdre, my darling, never think - never dream that you were in any way to blame. Whatever happens, remember that. I should have claimed you when I came back to England. I funked it, so it's up to me to do what I can to put things straight now. You see? Whatever happens, don't fret, darling. Nothing has been your fault."

He lifted first one hand, then the other to his lips. Then she was alone, staring at the untasted tea. And, strangely enough, it was only one thing that she saw - a gaudily illuminated text hanging on a whitewashed wall. The words seemed to spring out from it and hurl themselves at her. "What shall it profit a man -" She got up, paid for her tea, and went out.

On his return George Crozier was met by a request that his wife might not be disturbed. Her headache, the maid said, was very bad.

It was nine o'clock the next morning when he entered her bedroom, his face rather grave. Deirdre was sitting up in bed. She looked white and haggard, but her eyes shone.

"George, I've got something to tell you, something rather terrible -"

He interrupted her brusquely.

"So you've heard. I was afraid it might upset you."

"Upset me?"

"Yes. You talked to the poor young fellow that day."

He saw her hand steal to her heart, her eyelids flicker, then she said in a low, quick voice that somehow frightened him:

"I've heard nothing. Tell me quickly."

"I thought -"

"Tell me!"

"Out at that tobacco estate. Chap shot himself. Badly broken up in the war, nerves all to pieces, I suppose. There's no other reason to account for it."

"He shot himself in that dark shed where the tobacco was hanging." She spoke with certainty, her eyes like a sleepwalker's as she saw before her in the odorous darkness a figure lying there, revolver in hand.

"Why, to be sure; that's where you were taken queer yesterday. Odd thing, that!"

Deirdre did not answer. She saw another picture - a table with tea things on it, and a woman bowing her head in acceptance of a lie.

"Well, well, the war has a lot to answer for," said Crozier, and stretched out his hand for a match, lighting his pipe with careful puffs.

His wife's cry startled him.

"Ah! don't, don't! I can't bear the smell!"

He stared at her in kindly astonishment.

"My dear girl, you mustn't be nervy. After all, you can't escape from the smell of tobacco. You'll meet it everywhere."

"Yes, everywhere!" She smiled a slow, twisted smile, and murmured some words that he did not catch, words that she had chosen for the original obituary notice of Tim Nugent's death. "While the light lasts I shall remember, and in the darkness I shall not forget."

Her eyes widened as they followed the ascending spiral of smoke, and she repeated in a low, monotonous voice: "Everywhere, everywhere."