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SIR ADAM DISAPPEARED

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By

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SIR ADAM DISAPPEARED

I

Adam Blockton, on the day of his curious disappearance, passed the time between half-past twelve and ten minutes past one precisely as he had passed that particular period of his life on every morning of the year except Sundays for a quarter of a century--seated in a large leather easy chair pulled up towards the bay window of the Norchester County Club. He sipped champagne from a pint bottle of old Veuve Clicquot, smoked with obvious pleasure a shabby blackened pipe, and carried on a mumbling conversation which sounded like a monologue but was really addressed to the statue a few yards away from the pavement outside--the statue of an elderly man in a long frock coat, whose singularly benevolent appearance was sufficient evidence of a life of municipal triumphs and a generously used chequebook.

On that particular morning, however, as several people afterwards testified, there was a slight flush upon the leathery cheeks of the elderly gentleman in the armchair, an unusual light, too, in his clear blue eyes. He beckoned to the only other occupant of the room, Giles Mowbray, his solicitor, a man of apparently about the same age as himself, who was searching for a newspaper at the round table in the middle of the apartment.

"Come you here, Giles," he ordered.

Giles Mowbray shuffled deferentially across to the speaker. He had been solicitor to Sir Adam Blockton since the day he had received his articles and entered his father's firm, but he sometimes felt that he knew as little about the man and his affairs now as fifty years ago. Sir Adam pointed with his pipe to the statue outside.

"Do you see the old man, Giles?" he asked.

"Seen him most mornings, Adam, for half a century."

"There is something different about him to-day," Sir Adam persisted. "Look at the old hypocrite. There's something in his face--he's got a smile coming. I believe he knows."

"Knows what?"

Sir Adam grinned and indulged in a single interjection.

"Ah!"

The lawyer had never been a man of imagination and he looked puzzled, as indeed he was.

"I cannot see any change," he confessed.

Adam Blockton replaced his pipe in his mouth, sucked it slowly and sipped his wine. The lawyer, in a moment of retrospect, meditated upon the fact that never once, in the twenty or thirty years during which he had carried out his present morning's programme, had he offered to share with anyone the contents of his carefully frozen bottle.

"You are a fool, Giles," his old friend declared abruptly.

"Maybe, Adam," was the indifferent reply.

"How long have you been my lawyer?"

"Getting on for fifty years."

"How much do you know of my affairs?"

"Nothing."

Adam Blockton chuckled.

"You speak the truth, anyway," he observed. "You know nothing of my affairs, Giles, nor does my solitary cashier, nor do those two clerks who stand behind their mahogany desks and pay out my money or draw it in. Neither does he," Sir Adam concluded, pointing with his pipe to the statue outside.

The lawyer was a trifle uneasy as he glanced through the fine, rounded window at the cold granite figure upon its pedestal.

"You are a very rich man, Adam," he mumbled. "That the whole world knows. You are almost the last man in the United Kingdom who owns a bank of his own and refuses to incorporate for fear of having to issue a balance sheet, they say," he added with a wheezy chuckle. "You are one who has kept a tight hold on his own moneybags. Some day--"

"Some day," Adam Blockton interrupted ruthlessly. "How many more years do you suppose there are for me? I have been asking that old blitherer outside. That's one reason why the grin that you can't see is there on his face. I am eighty-seven, Giles."

"You are as strong as a horse," the other declared. "Why, your father--there he stands still proud and disdainful after all these years of Norchester fogs and rains. He was over eighty when they made the drawings for that statue."

Adam Blockton had the air of one who had ceased to listen. The club steward, according to custom, came softly into the room a few moments later, filled up the glass of its most distinguished member and leaned over his chair.

"Ten minutes past one, Sir Adam," he announced deferentially. "Your cutlets are coming up."

Adam Blockton gave signs of assent and waved the man away. The lawyer, too, shuffled off. He knew his old friend better than to linger. Sir Adam, who was alone now in the room, leaned back in his chair, a queer, faraway look in his narrow, ferretlike eyes as he gazed out at that stony, unresponsive figure. It was a showery day in May and the raindrops from a recent downpour were tumbling down the window pane. Nevertheless, the face of the statue was still clearly visible. It seemed to the old man seated there in his chair, with his pipe growing cold in his fingers, that the fancied grin was also still there upon those carved lips.

The steward, in the busy luncheon-room of the club, glanced up at the clock and frowned. It was two minutes after the time when the multi-millionaire banker was accustomed to take his place and the entrée dish with its silver cover had already been reverently placed in front of the chosen chair. He turned and left the room, crossed the hall and entered the reading lounge.

"Sir Adam," he announced, "your cutlets--"

He went no further. The hall across which he had passed had been empty, the room in which he stood was empty, the easy chair was unoccupied. Sir Adam Blockton had disappeared.

II

The first few hours of this singular disappearance of its most notable member from the exclusive club in the heart of a busy city were filled with curiosity rather than apprehension. Towards evening, however, there was a development of the latter sentiment. An informal meeting was held at the club, at which were present Mr. Giles Mowbray, the solicitor, who, owing to his somewhat upset condition, was accompanied by his nephew, Mr. Martin Mowbray; Captain Elmhurst, the Chief Constable; Mr. Richard Groome, the cashier of the bank, and, standing respectfully in the background, Henry Lawford, the chief steward and manager of the club.

Mr. Giles Mowbray, still a trifle incoherent from the shock, presented the case.

"Sir Adam came in at exactly his customary time," he told the little company. "He occupied his usual chair, was served with his usual drink by Lawford here, everything was only a page out of his everyday history. He called me over to listen to one of his usual jeers against his father's statue. He seemed well enough in health but inclined to wander. I left him preparing to finish his glass of wine and I expected to see him in the dining room within a few minutes according to his day-by-day custom. That is all I have to tell you, gentlemen."

Captain Elmhurst, a slim, middle-aged man who had preserved his military appearance and manner of speech, nodded comprehendingly.

"Well, that is simple enough," he said. "Let us go back a little. Tell us what you saw of Sir Adam during the morning, Mr. Groome."

"Scarcely anything, sir," the cashier, a withered-looking little person, grey-haired, bespectacled and with a very anxious expression, replied. "Nothing unusual happened at the bank. At half-past nine punctually Sir Adam arrived. He wished me good morning, he wished the two other gentlemen associated with the bank good morning and went into his private room. There were very few letters and most of these were advertisements. In about ten minutes I received my usual summons to enter. Sir Adam was reading the *Times* and smoking his pipe.

"Nothing important for you, Groome," he said, pushing a little pile towards me. "Four or five enterprising tradesmen who desire to open an account with the firm. The rest are advertisements and prospectuses."

"Do you think," Captain Elmhurst asked, "that Sir Adam gave you all the letters he received?"

"With the exception of one which he left unopened upon the table, sir, I am sure of it."

"There were no signs of papers having been destroyed or anything in the wastepaper basket?" the Chief Constable continued. "This is an entirely informal meeting, you understand, Mr. Groome, and you will not be betraying a confidence if you give us an exact idea of the contents of the letters handed to you for attention."

"Certainly, sir--certainly," Groome replied nervously. "There were five applications to open accounts with the bank and as is our custom we sent a printed slip announcing that the firm was not seeking any further business and that we must respectfully decline negotiations."

"And the remainder of the papers?"

"Prospectuses of new companies, sir, and enquiries. Not a single letter except this one which Sir Adam left upon his desk unopened," he added, producing from his breast pocket a coroneted mauve envelope. "This I can tell you, knowing the handwriting very well, is from Sir Adam's daughter, Lady Pengwill. She married Lord Pengwill when he was the Honourable Charles Pengwill, and before he came into the title some twenty-five years ago."

Captain Elmhurst handled the letter and laid it on the table.

"Thank you very much, Mr. Groome," he said. "Are you sure that no business of importance took place this morning likely to upset Sir Adam?"

"No business ever takes place at the bank, sir," the cashier confided. "For the last few years Sir Adam's policy has been to wind up the business quietly. We have had wonderful offers from wealthy firms in a first-class position but nothing has ever changed Sir Adam's determination. Not a new account has been opened in the ledgers for nearly two years."

There was a little murmur of astonishment. Mr. Mowbray, Junior, was unable to resist asking the obvious question.

"Then what on earth do you do with your money and Sir Adam's own huge fortune?" he asked.

The cashier's expression for a moment was the expression of a dreamy child. He took off his glasses and wiped them.

"I have no means of knowing, sir," he answered.

"And I think, Martin," his uncle put in, "this is not a question we have the right to ask just now."

"Of course not," the young man agreed. "But to think that you have there the whole correspondence of a banker of enormous wealth! Not a line about investments of any sort, nothing from stock-brokers or anybody else connected with the money market! It seems odd. If Sir Adam were not such a frightfully wealthy man it would give rise to ridiculous suspicions."

"The time for this sort of conversation has scarcely arrived," his uncle said stiffly. "The question simply is--what has become of Sir Adam Blockton? No one here seems to be able to help in the least and I gather from what you told me, Lawford, that there were no replies to our enquiries posted in the hall as to whether anyone had seen or spoken to Sir Adam after he was left alone in the reading room."

"That is so, sir," the steward acknowledged. "No member entering or leaving the club saw anything of Sir Adam. The usual offices were naturally searched at once. Two of the members--Mr. Williams and Mr. Marshall--happened to meet on the steps and were talking there when I left the reading room for the dining room. They were still there when I returned and found Sir Adam had disappeared. They are absolutely certain that Sir Adam did not leave the club."

"What about his car?" Captain Elmhurst enquired.

"It arrived at half-past two, as usual," the steward replied. "It waited for half an hour, and finding that Sir Adam was not here returned to the bank and then on to the garage. I spoke to the chauffeur on the telephone a few minutes ago. He reported that he had heard nothing from his master since he had left him here before lunch."

"What members of the family are within reach?" Captain Elmhurst asked.

Mr. Giles Mowbray leaned forward in his chair.

"There's Lady Pengwill, from whom he received a letter this morning, but she lives in London. His other daughter, Lady Tidswell, lives at Wrotton Park, which is quite close."

"What about Lady Pengwill's daughter, Lady Diana?" young Mowbray enquired. "I thought I saw her in the town the other day."

"I believe that she is somewhere in the neighbourhood," his uncle admitted.

"Lady Diana," Groome announced, "is staying with her aunt, Lady Tidswell, at Wrotton Park."

"She hasn't been into the bank lately, I suppose?" Captain Elmhurst asked.

"No member of the family," Mr. Groome confided, "is allowed to visit the bank except by special appointment."

"Were there any telephone enquiries of any importance this morning? Anything at all likely to upset Sir Adam?" Captain Elmhurst suggested.

"The bank is not connected with the telephone," Groome replied.

"God bless my soul!" the Chief Constable exclaimed.

"You are comparatively a newcomer," Mr. Mowbray sighed, "and of course the conditions you have come up against do sound ridiculous."

"I understood," Elmhurst continued, "that Sir Adam was one of the richest men in England. I have heard stories of his wealth ever since I came here."

"There is no doubt about his wealth, I think," Giles Mowbray admitted. "You may remember how astonished everyone was over his first application for War Loan, many years ago, for a million pounds. Lately, however, he has led the life of a hermit. Every now and then one hears of some huge sums invested, always in very sound concerns. Many of the financial papers have openly declared that these have been made by a north country banker and have given the name of Sir Adam Blockton, and they have never been contradicted. This, however, is only vague talk. The financial affairs of Sir Adam are not our immediate concern. What we want to know is what has become of him."

"Without a doubt," Captain Elmhurst declared, "the matter is becoming one for the police."

The door of the room in which this informal discussion was taking place was suddenly opened. A young woman of most attractive appearance stood upon the threshold. She was fair-complexioned, with well-shaped features, brown-haired and with eyes neutral in the uncertainty of their colour, but intriguing in their brightness and their depth. She looked at the men gathered round the table and there was a quiver of indignation in her tone as she addressed them.

"Perhaps somebody would be good enough to tell me what this is all about?" she asked, and although her tone was brusque her voice had a smooth and pleasant quality. "They tell me below--and the thing is ridiculous--that my grandfather has disappeared."

Mr. Mowbray's mumble was confused and inarticulate. Long before it had resolved itself into speech his nephew was upon his feet--a grave young man but with an agreeable voice and manner.

"Lady Diana, perhaps you will allow me to explain," he begged. "Your grandfather certainly does seem to be--er--missing since just before luncheon-time. This is a perfectly informal meeting of one or two of his friends to discuss the matter."

The girl came a little further into the room, moving with a graceful sway, a perplexed look in her eyes, a dubious smile at the corners of her lips.

"Missing?" she repeated. "Don't tell me that my grandfather has gone in for melodrama!"

"He has given us all a shock, anyhow," the young man replied, placing a chair for the newcomer within the small circle. "This is just what has happened."

He told her concisely and in well-chosen words. When he had finished she laughed, not unkindly but somewhat contemptuously. She glanced round the circle, evidently not quite sure as to the various identities.

"But you can't any of you conceive that my grandfather, a man of absolutely fixed habits, should, without the least reason, embark upon an enterprise of this sort?" she demanded.

"Let me point out, young lady," Giles Mowbray said, leaning slightly towards her, "it is some twenty or thirty years since your grandfather has departed from his usual habit of lunching in the club here at ten minutes past one. His cutlets are invariably ready at that hour, his small bottle of wine is served to him in the lounge, where he arrives at half-past twelve and where he sits and smokes until the moment comes for him to take his seat in the dining room. He arrived this morning at his usual time in his own car, driven by his own chauffeur. He was finishing his wine when our steward here summoned him to luncheon. To anyone who knew your grandfather intimately the precision of his movements was--er--almost epic. Time passed. Everyone was naturally disturbed. There was no sign of your grandfather. Three minutes later the steward sought him in the reading room. The place was empty. No one had seen him leave the club. He has not returned to the bank, as was his invariable custom, and his cashier here will tell you that he has neither seen nor heard of him since. His car and chauffeur arrived here at two-thirty for him, waited for half-an-hour and are now in the garage. Bearing in mind all these circumstances, Lady Diana, I think that you will see that we, as day-by-day acquaintances--I will not say friends, because he had no friends--and my nephew and I, as his legal representatives, were justified in holding this informal meeting. Captain Elmhurst has attended it on behalf of the police."

Lady Diana, who was evidently a law unto herself in this world, drew a cigarette from a very beautiful gold case and calmly lit it.

"I am most intrigued," she admitted.

"Perhaps you can help us," Martin Mowbray observed.

Captain Elmhurst passed over the unopened letter which lay upon the table.

"This is the only communication your grandfather received this morning which he did not open," he confided. "Perhaps you would feel yourself justified in seeing if the contents in any way explain the affair."

Lady Diana accepted the letter a little languidly. She glanced at the handwriting with a faint grimace.

"It is from my mother," she announced.

"So we gathered. We wondered whether, under the circumstances, you would feel disposed to open it," Captain Elmhurst suggested.

"On your life I wouldn't!" she declared. "If there is anything my grandfather hates it is to have his letters or newspapers interfered with. I should be cut off with a million or two if I touched it. I am running no risks of that sort, thank you!"

"It might become the duty of the police at any moment to open it," Martin Mowbray reminded her.

"Let them do it, then, with pleasure," the young lady said, crossing her legs and sending the elderly solicitor's eyes up to the ceiling. "I don't suppose my grandfather's left even a million to the police. They have nothing to lose by it. No, I am not butting-in on this affair at all. I am not afraid of the old gentleman, mind you, but I have a deadly fear of being left out of his Will."

Mr. Giles Mowbray thought it time to assert himself.

"I am your grandfather's solicitor, as you know, Lady Diana," he said, "and I sympathise with your feelings in the matter. I will take charge of the letter for the moment."

He slipped it into his breast coat-pocket. The Chief Constable smiled slightly.

"I have every sympathy with the young lady's discretion," he observed, "but as the letter might clear up the mystery and it is scarcely likely that Sir Adam has left you a million, Mowbray, I think you might venture to break the seal."

The solicitor shook his head.

"I trust," he said, "that the necessity will not arise. If it does I shall do so in your presence."

The girl glanced round at the faces of the five men. Every one was on the whole expressionless but in each there was a touch of that queer sense of apprehension which had been conveyed in Giles Mowbray's few words.

"You don't mean to tell me," the girl asked incredulously, "that you think anything really serious has happened to my grandfather?"

Nobody returned a straightforward answer. The girl laughed scornfully.

"A pack of childish nonsense, I call this!" she exclaimed. "As though anything could have happened to the old boy!"

The young man opposite looked at her across the table. There was rebuke in his clear grey eyes, a note of rebuke in his tone.

"The circumstances connected with your grandfather's disappearance, Lady Diana, were at first inexplicable. They have now become sinister. Perhaps you do not realise that every room in the club has been searched. There is not a foot of vacant space which has not been examined. It is a great many years since anyone has seen your grandfather walk more than about the length of this room. Perhaps you can suggest, yourself, some means by which he is eluding us."

The girl refused to be rebuked. She smiled at the young man, who was certainly very good to look at.

"All right," she agreed, "I will take all that you say for granted. It was impossible for him to have left the reading room without being observed. Neither he nor his remains could leave the club; *ergo*--one of your premises must be wrong. My own impression is that my grandfather is fooling us all. He has done it before in a small way and has put his tongue in his cheek this time with a vengeance. You have done all that reasonable men could be expected to do. Let Mr. Mowbray go into his affairs and find out if there is any reason for this disappearance."

"I shall communicate with every member of the family at once," the lawyer said, "and I shall act upon their instructions. If in the meantime the police interfere, I am powerless."

"What do the police intend to do, Captain Elmhurst?" Lady Diana asked.

The Chief Constable rose to his feet.

"I shall confer with the Clerk to the County Magistrates and my own Chief Inspector," he said. "I know of no precedent for a case of this description but certainly I shall not interfere until the family have had a reasonable time to make their own enquiries. In the meantime, have you the keys of the bank, Mr. Groome?"

"They are in my pocket, sir," the cashier replied.

"I should propose, gentlemen," Captain Elmhurst continued, "that we make an unofficial examination of the bank premises."

Giles Mowbray rose from his chair. The hands which were pressed against the table in front of him were visibly shaking. His voice was harsh and strained. The shock of the day's events was beginning to tell upon him.

"I take the strongest possible exception to that course, Captain Elmhurst," he protested. "The disappearance of my old friend, Sir Adam, has not yet become a matter for criminal investigation. I decline to allow my client's papers to be tampered with in any way."

There was a moment's silence. Every one of the little party seemed to have realised the note of passionate emotion underlying the lawyer's few quavering words. Somehow or other the atmosphere had become electrical. The fear of this strange thing that had happened was beginning to make itself felt. The silence was unexpectedly broken by Mr. Groome.

"I apologise for any seeming discourtesy to Mr. Mowbray," he said, "but I welcome the proposal of Captain Elmhurst. I have long wished for an opportunity to speak to one of the family, and suggest that the condition of the bank should be looked into. In another year's time I should have reached the age when the Blocktons, for the last hundred years, have granted pensions to their servants. I have marked off the days one by one but I should never have reached the end of the year. I should have gone mad!"

Groome's measured speech came like a bomb-shell to everyone. For years he had been known by sight to most of them--a silent, suave figure who seemed to appear from nowhere and yet who was always there behind his desk at the bank ready to answer any question as to Sir Adam's whereabouts. Never once had his manner or voice varied. He had become the perfect human automaton. It was his first self-disclosure as a human being. The Chief Constable turned towards Lady Diana.

"You might be taken as representing the family here, Lady Diana," he pointed out. "Have you any objection to just taking a casual glance at the bank premises with Mr. Groome, myself, and naturally Mr. Mowbray and his nephew? It seems to me that your presence would regularise the proceeding."

Giles Mowbray shook his head.

"I refuse to come," he said. "The action is premature. I protest. Sir Adam will never forgive us."

"What about your nephew then?"

"At his own risk," the lawyer declared. "It may cost him his place in the firm. If there is any trouble with Sir Adam I shall disown him. We shall probably have a telephone message from my client at any moment and when he finds that his private affairs have become public property there will be trouble--a very great deal of trouble."

"I regret to differ from my uncle and I am willing to come," Martin Mowbray said calmly.

The girl rose to her feet and buttoned up her coat.

"I am ready," she declared. "Anything is better than sitting around here wondering what we are going to do next. I think, Mr. Mowbray, as you persist in taking my grandfather's disappearance so seriously I had better have my mother's letter back again."

The lawyer passed it to her across the table.

"You understand, Lady Diana," he warned her, "my nephew goes against my wishes. If you accompany him it may cost you a fortune. Sir Adam never permits any liberties to be taken with his belongings. If he finds that you have been prying into his affairs you will be out of his Will as soon as he can find a pen to scratch through your name."

"If you go on talking like this," the girl remarked, "I shall begin to think that you have an idea of your own as to Sir Adam's whereabouts."

The old man began to shake again in his chair. He looked at her gloomily.

"You would be entirely wrong," he muttered. "I have no idea,--I don't suppose anyone else has,--but I have known Sir Adam longer than any of you and this is what I do feel: If anything strange has happened to him he will come out of it all right."

"We all hope so," Captain Elmhurst said kindly. "Nevertheless, as the affair stands at present, I think it requires investigation."

"By whom?" the old man demanded with uneasy belligerence.

"By his friends--and by the law."

III

A shower of rain was drenching the streets when the little party arrived at the premises of Blockton's Bank, which were situated about two hundred yards away from the club. Mr. Groome, with unsteady fingers, first opened the heavy iron gates and then with a smaller key the massive front doors. One by one his companions passed on into the gloomy, vaultlike place. The cashier closed the doors after them and turned on the lights.

"It smells like a church," Lady Diana observed. "Mouldy enough for one, too."

Mr. Groome took no notice of her remark. He had worked himself up into a state of desperate calm, but every word he uttered sounded grim and portentous.

"You will allow me to show you the premises my own way," he begged. "Will you follow me behind the counters, please?"

He lifted a flap and they followed him to the far end, where the woodwork in front was heightened and there was a spy-hole window.

"This is my place," he pointed out. "From here I can check any deposits and payments and supply my clerks with any money necessary." He touched three drawers in front of him. "This one," he went on, "should contain Treasury notes, the other silver, the far one notes larger than five pounds."

He pulled them open. Deep and ample receptacles they were--but empty. Where the notes should have been there were oblong strips of cardboard secured by rubber bands but there was nothing between them. Mr. Groome passed on.

"This is where the first clerk would stand," he continued. "I will show you his drawers."

He drew another key from his bunch and opened the three. All of them were empty.

"This is the second clerk's desk," he indicated, moving on a few yards.

Again he opened three drawers, again there was the same grim emptiness.

"Where is all the cash kept at night?" Martin Mowbray asked.

"It goes into the office. Not one single penny is left in any of these receptacles."

"Supposing Sir Adam should turn up a little late in the morning?" Captain Elmhurst enquired.

"We could not pay," was the prompt reply. "I am bound to add, however, that such a thing has never happened. Since Sir Adam took over the control of the bank he has never been later than half-past nine in his office. The bank opens at ten. At a quarter to ten the two clerks come into the office and receive one hundred pounds each from Sir Adam. Years ago it used to be one thousand pounds each. I have known the time when it was five thousand. To-day the hundred pounds is seldom touched."

"Blockton's Bank!" Martin Mowbray muttered to himself.

"Gentlemen, you will now allow me to show you the remainder of the premises here," the cashier went on.

"What about the old man's office?" Diana asked. "All my life I have wanted to go in there and I have never been allowed to cross the threshold."

"We will visit that last, if you please," Mr. Groome begged.

He led them into a further recess of the bank, the nature of which was concealed by folding oak screens. These he pushed on one side. Behind them was a row of chairs, six empty desks--nothing else. There were disfigurements upon the wall where fittings seemed to have been removed. Apart from that there remained not even a cupboard.

"The screen was first erected," the cashier continued, "to give an impression of space beyond. As you see, there is nothing. Now I will show you Sir Adam's private office."

They followed him to the heavy, old-fashioned oak door, the upper panels of which were of glass, covered with faded red silk. Groome unlocked and threw it open. He turned on the electric light and they all looked round curiously. Somehow, the room, although its contents were still in good condition, seemed to preserve an air of great antiquity. The two fauteuils and the divan of worn leather, the square heavy table, the two high-backed chairs which faced one another on either side of it, one obviously for Sir Adam himself and the other for a possible client, the mirror on the mantelpiece, were all Georgian--not only undeniably of that period but with the air of having brought with them some part of the atmosphere of those days. The deep red Turkey carpet covered every inch of the floor. Upon the table there stood only a huge inkstand and a black oak case of stationery. Over the chimney-piece was an oil painting which seemed to be a picture of the statue opposite the club. There was no other attempt at decoration in the room. Martin Mowbray looked round him in puzzled fashion.

"What about the safes, Mr. Groome?" he asked.

The cashier shook his head.

"There are none up here of any account," he said solemnly.

"But where on earth is the money, deeds and all that sort of thing?"

"I will show you," the other replied.

He moved over to a spot near the hearth-rug and raised a flap of the carpet. Beneath it in the oak flooring was a brass ring attached to a trap door. Groome raised it and, feeling for a moment underneath, turned on an electric light. Diana leaned eagerly forward, an action which she was to regret for many weeks to come.

"I want to look at the money chests," she explained.

She stooped a little lower and peered into the vault. Almost immediately her shriek rang out even above the sound of the falling door, the brass ring of which had slipped from Groome's nerveless fingers. Diana had staggered back against the table, her hands stretched out in front of her, covering back as though seeking to escape from some terrible sight. Groome stood like a waxen figure, his face utterly destitute of colour, blank, undiluted panic in his hollow eyes. He, too, swayed on his feet and caught at the edge of the mantelpiece for support. His groan was thrilling enough but it lacked the clear note of dramatic horror which had vibrated in the girl's voice. The whole company, for a few seconds, seemed spellbound. Then Martin Mowbray pulled himself together. He leaned forward and caught hold of the ring.

"Don't!" the girl shrieked. "Don't! It's horrible!"

The young man sank on to his knees and his fingers gripped the ring. He glanced at Elmhurst.

"Look after Lady Diana," he enjoined. "We've got to know what's down here."

He threw back the door. The cellar below might have stood for a chamber of horrors, for its walls were lined with a number of black upright boxes shaped like coffins, and only comprehensible when one realised that there were names painted in white letters upon each. The electric light was insufficient to penetrate the distant corners, but if possible the obscurity of the object which lay in the middle distance lent it even a deeper horror. It was only after a few moments of terrified concentration that the two men on their knees realised that they were staring at the figure of a human being all crumpled up, as though he had fallen or been thrown from the topmost of the short flight of stairs leading from the office to the floor of the cellar, or arrived there as the result of one terrific blow. The agony of sudden death was lurking at the corners of his mouth and in his staring eyes. By his side, where it had dripped from him, lay a pool of blood. The Chief Constable and Martin Mowbray were staring at one another. The same thought had blazed its way into the consciousness of both of them.

"It isn't Sir Adam," the young lawyer gasped.

Elmhurst shook his head.

"Twice his size," he muttered. "Drop the door."

Mowbray hesitated but did as he was told. Both men stood up. The Chief Constable plunged into direct speech.

"There has been a tragedy here," he announced. "It looks like a murder. But listen, Lady Diana. The victim is not your grandfather."

"Not Sir Adam?" she cried.

"No. It is impossible to say who it is but it is not Sir Adam. This has become my affair now. The best thing for you to do would be to go away. This is a man's job. Young Mowbray can stay with me."

She sank nervously into one of the high-backed chairs, gripping the arms with her fingers. Speech for the moment was quite impossible.

"Groome, I must rely upon you," the Chief Constable continued. "Will you ring up the police station? Say I want an inspector and two men here at once, also the police doctor and an ambulance."

The cashier nodded. His queer little voice seemed more subdued than ever. He was moistening his lips and struggling for breath.

"It wasn't Sir Adam, did you say?"

"Nobody I ever saw before," Mowbray assured him.

"A stranger to me, too," Elmhurst declared.

The cashier tottered to a chair and sat there for a moment, his hands covering his face, rocking himself gently and mumbling. Then he rose to his feet.

"I shall have to go next door. No telephone here," he faltered.

He disappeared, closing the door behind him. Diana took a little breath and rising to her feet laid her hand on Martin Mowbray's arm.

"Sorry I was such a fool," she said. "It was a nasty sight to look down on unexpectedly. You are right, though. It isn't my grandfather. It is no one I ever saw before, either. Do you think-- is there anything I could do, Captain Elmhurst? I hate it, but I have my certificate for nursing."

"Not a thing," was the prompt reply. "An affair of this sort needs professional attention. All that I beg of you is to get away as quickly as possible before the police and the doctor arrive."

Diana lingered for a moment. There was an ugly thought in her mind.

"What about the rest of the cellar?" she faltered. "There may have been a fight. Sir Adam--"

Captain Elmhurst shook his head.

"My dear young lady," he interrupted, "take my advice and get away from here. It is possible, of course, that there may be more discoveries; but I promise you, if they are connected with your grandfather, you shall know at once. You are staying, I believe, with Lady Tidswell. You shall know all there is to be known without a moment's delay."

Martin Mowbray passed his arm through hers and led her towards the exit. The door of the bank itself had been left unlocked and the little wave of wet air which flowed in as he opened it was like a breath from Paradise. The girl threw back her head and drew it in.

"I am not often an idiot like this," she assured him.

"Any woman in the world would have been upset," he replied, his tone full of sympathy. "Here, get into my car, please. The chauffeur will take you anywhere you wish. I will go back to the club as soon as possible and telephone you. This hushing-up business is over now. The police have the case. Much simpler."

She gave him a feeble little smile of thanks and took her place in the coupé. The young man waited until the car had started, then he called over the policeman from the other side of the road.

"Constable," he explained, "there is a little trouble in the bank. Captain Elmhurst, the Chief Constable, is there and has sent for an inspector. Will you stay where you are, please, and see that no one else enters?"

The policeman was an exceedingly curious person and he looked longingly at the building.

"Nothing I could do inside?" he asked.

"Nothing," was the curt reply. "Stand out here and wait."

IV

Martin Mowbray had played Rugby football for England and cricket for his county. He was thirty years old and in as good condition as a man can be who spends a portion of each day in an office. Nevertheless, after the Inspector had completed his investigations and the body of the dead man was lifted and carried up the stairs into Sir Adam's office, he felt the perspiration wet upon his forehead and a nasty inclination towards sickness as he turned away with a shudder from the hideous spectacle. The police surgeon stopped to speak to him after the ambulance men had passed out with their burden followed by the Chief Constable.

"Dead, I suppose?" Martin asked.

"Stone dead," was the prompt response.

"No chance of it being accidental?"

The surgeon raised his eyebrows.

"The wound at the back of his head might have been accidental," he replied, "but the bullet which passed through his shoulderblade and into his heart was murder right enough."

"Murder! In the vault there?" the young man exclaimed incredulously.

"Looks like it. I'll tell you more about it, Martin, after I have completed my examination up at the mortuary. I have lost a quarter of an hour already whilst the Inspector was busy. I'll tell you anything you want to know later in the evening. So far as I have gone at present," he added a little more deliberately, "I should say that he had been shot first and then thrown down, but that is all speculative."

"He didn't look like a burglar--his clothes, I mean, and that sort of thing," Mowbray observed.

"His clothes are as good as yours or mine," the surgeon answered. "A good deal better than most of mine. That is the Inspector's job, of course, but I did just turn down the collar--couldn't see the name, but it was Savile Row."

"A stranger, of course?"

"A stranger to me, at any rate," the surgeon acquiesced. "Everything up till now is speculation. I must get off with the ambulance. I am leaving the Inspector and sergeant behind. Gilson is there, too, searching for fingerprints. See you later."

He hurried out. Martin glanced down into the vault where the Inspector was standing with folded arms looking curiously up the flight of steps.

"Want any help, Inspector?" he asked.

"Not at present, sir. One or two curious things here if you'd like to come down."

"I'll be there in a moment."

Mowbray turned round and crossed the office to where Groome was sitting, his face covered with his hands, moaning slightly to himself.

"Horrible affair, Groome," Martin remarked.

The cashier's reply was inaudible. He slowly removed his hands from before his face, however, and a little exclamation broke from Mowbray's lips. The man seemed to have aged a dozen years. There were black lines under his eyes, his lips were twitching and in the eyes themselves horror still lingered.

"You didn't recognise the poor fellow, I suppose?"

Groome shook his head feebly.

"They had covered up his face with an ambulance cloth when they crossed the room," he confided. "Thank God they had! I had to look. There was nothing but white cloth. I have never seen a dead man, Mr. Mowbray."

"I have--several," the young lawyer told him, "but I have never seen one that has been left like that. You caught a glimpse of the body before the police came?"

Groome covered his face once more with his hands.

"I don't remember," he groaned. "It was a vision. I have a book at home--a volume of Dante--Doré's illustrations. There is a face there like it."

"It was not like anyone you have seen in life?" Mowbray persisted.

"No man's face in life could have looked like that," Groome muttered.

"It did not remind you of anybody?"

The man lurched sideways in his chair. Mowbray was just in time to break his fall. He laid him on the floor and called down to the Inspector.

"Fanshawe, could you spare your sergeant for a moment? The old man here, Groome, has fainted. Send him across the way for Dr. Jonson and let him get some brandy."

"Up you go, Bob," the Inspector ordered. "Come right back, mind."

The sergeant came running up the stairs, passed across the gloomy bank premises and into the street, pushed his way through the little knot of curious people who were being kept back by the policeman on duty and crossed the road. Mowbray did his best at first aid and opened the window slightly. Then he made his way to the top of the stairs leading down to the vault. The place was fairly well lit by the various electric lamps, but it presented a drear and dismantled appearance. Two sides were occupied entirely by what seemed to be a row of black steel lockers, the other two were piled with packing cases and reams of paper and in a corner was a rough table, three or four balls of string, a bracket lamp, some ink and pens and a chunk of sealing wax. Exactly opposite the staircase from the bank parlour was a screen.

"What is behind there, Inspector?" Martin enquired.

The former crossed the floor and pulled the screen on one side.

"What do you think of that, sir?" he asked, pointing to another flight of stairs.

"The devil!" Mowbray exclaimed. "Where do they lead to?"

"I have not yet investigated the matter, sir. The Captain will be back in a few minutes. I thought it best to wait. I am wondering if they may not lead to the premises occupied by Sir Adam Blockton. They say he lived here."

"Seems queer if they do," Mowbray remarked. "Groome, the cashier, assured us only an hour or so ago that he had been over the three rooms occupied by Sir Adam and he said nothing about a private entrance from the bank. Did you look at the stairs?"

"I did not, sir," the Inspector replied. "That is to say, I did not examine them closely. What with Captain Elmhurst being on his way back and the rumour I heard of Sir Adam's disappearance, I thought it better to point them out to him personally before I commenced anything on my own account."

"Better send for your fingerprint man again," Mowbray told him, "and don't let anyone get playing about with that handle."

The Inspector nodded approval.

"That's all right, sir," he said, "but the fingerprint man was disappointed with what he found in Sir Adam's office. That's why he went off so quickly."

"I know where you can get some more recent ones," Mowbray confided. "Over at the club. If you stay here I will drop in there myself and tell them not to touch the chair Sir Adam sat in. I will telephone, too, to the Town Hall for Gilson to come back. First of all I'd better go back and have a look at poor old Groome."

He remounted the staircase and stepped into the bank parlour. The doctor had arrived and was bending over the cashier. He glanced round at the sound of footsteps.

"Ordinary faint," he reported. "The fellow's heart is weak. He will be all right as soon as we can get him home. I have sent for a taxi. They all seem to know where he lives."

"Look after him well," Mowbray begged. "There are several very important questions the police will want to ask him."

"Let him alone for to-night," the doctor advised. "I'm not saying there is any particular danger but he might slip off at any time."

The young man nodded and passed on out of the bank premises. The door was standing ajar but with two police constables now guarding it. The little crowd outside had partially dispersed or been moved on. Martin crossed the street to the club and made his way to the steward's room. Lawford was writing out menus for dinner.

"Any news, sir?" he asked anxiously.

"None at all. I stepped across to ask you not to have any of the furniture touched in the reading room, especially the armchair in which Sir Adam was seated."

Lawford rose to his feet, evidently disturbed.

"I'm sorry, sir," he said. "The room has been put to rights within the last half-hour."

"The devil!" Mowbray muttered. "I thought no one ever went in there, Lawford."

"They don't very often, sir," the man admitted. "As a matter of fact," he went on, "I'm afraid it is my fault. I happened to go in this afternoon and I noticed the chair was out of line with the rest of the furniture and I put it back in its place. I hope there was nothing wrong in that, sir."

"Nothing wrong, but it may be unfortunate. Let's have a look."

Martin Mowbray led the way across the hall into the reading room. The furniture was all in strict order. He bent over the chair.

"Looks as though someone had been polishing the mahogany sides here," he remarked.

"That is very likely, sir," Lawford answered. "I often carry a duster with me when I go round in the afternoon. I believe I did give it a rub-up. Sir Adam is not as careful as he used to be and he sometimes drops a little of his wine about."

The woodwork and the leather arms of the chair had obviously been cleansed. Mowbray looked at them thoughtfully.

"I suppose," he asked, "that glass--"

The steward smiled at him reproachfully.

"The glass has been washed long ago, sir."

"And the bottle?"

"If it is anyone else's fingerprints you are thinking about, Mr. Mowbray," Lawford pointed out, "it would be of no use looking upon the bottle for them, as I served the wine myself and refilled Sir Adam's glass. Still, the bottle is down in the cellar."

Mowbray tapped a cigarette upon his case and lit it.

"Sir Adam did not read a newspaper, I suppose?" he asked.

"I have never seen him look at one or an illustrated paper in my life," the man replied. "If you will come this way, sir, I will show you where the bottle is, if you would like to see it."

Martin Mowbray followed the steward into the back premises. The empty bottles of the day were all in a partitioned case. The steward indicated a half-bottle standing in one of the compartments.

"That is the one, sir," he pointed out. "I know because it is the only pint of champagne we served to-day."

Mowbray wrapped his handkerchief around his hand and lifted up the bottle gingerly by the top of the neck. He turned it round and looked at it from all angles for a moment or two. Then he replaced it.

"I see, Lawford," he muttered. "Well, you can get me a whisky-and-soda. I don't think that bottle will be much use to Gilson or any of us."

The steward seemed a little distressed as they left the place. He brought Mowbray his whisky-and-soda a few moments later and the look of concern still lingered on his face.

"If I had had any idea, sir, that there might be a question of fingerprints, I should have been careful not to touch anything," he said. "You will pardon my suggesting it though, sir. There must be fingerprints in Sir Adam's parlour,--he came directly here as usual this morning,--and perhaps on the car."

"Quite so, Lawford," Mowbray assented. "But can't you understand that it isn't Sir Adam's fingerprints alone that we are looking for? I don't suppose they would be of the slightest use,

anyhow. What the Inspector would like to get hold of are the fingerprints of someone who might have come into personal contact with Sir Adam in the club here."

"I'm afraid there was no one anywhere near him except your uncle, sir," Lawford reflected. "There would have been no time for anyone to have entered the room and got away again without being seen during the two or three minutes that I was away."

"I don't suppose there would," Martin agreed. "Yet, on the other hand, if we accept that fact we are face to face with another impossibility. If Sir Adam was not assisted or hustled or carried out of the room he must have left it of his own accord. It is certain that he is not in the club. It is certain also that he did not leave the club, as those two men were talking upon the steps during the period of time when it might have been possible for him to have done so. What about that, Lawford?"

The steward shook his head.

"For the moment, sir," he admitted, "I can think of no explanation whatsoever. You will excuse my mentioning the fact, though," he went on diffidently, "but Sir Adam was not quite himself this morning. I had occasion to go into the reading room once and he was sitting looking at the statue and talking to himself."

"Talking to himself, eh? Bad sign."

"It almost appeared as though something had upset him, sir."

They had reached the steps of the club. Martin Mowbray lingered there with his hands behind his back.

"You will excuse me, Mr. Mowbray," the steward ventured. "I noticed that the letter you were speaking about with the other gentlemen, as being the only one which Sir Adam had not opened, was upon the table whilst you gentlemen were talking in the Committee Room. After you had left it had disappeared."

"Quite a gift that of yours, Lawford," the young man remarked. "Quick at observation, aren't you? However, in this case it doesn't seem important. The letter was from Lady Diana's mother and she took it away with her. I am going over to the bank for a few minutes now. Something pretty terrible seems to have happened over there, although I do not see how it could be connected with Sir Adam's disappearance. You will know where to find me if you want me. I shall probably drop in here again."

The steward made his little bow.

"I do hope you will let us know, sir, if there is any news of Sir Adam," he begged. "Somehow or other he was not what you might call popular amongst the servants here but we seemed all to have got used to him. At his age, too, one cannot help feeling a little anxious."

"You shall have the news as soon as we have any," Martin promised with a farewell nod.

Martin Mowbray pushed his way through the remainder of the little crowd who were still loitering on the pavement, passed the two policemen who stood on guard at the doors and entered the bank. Captain Elmhurst was seated on the topmost step of the stairway leading down into the vault. He turned his head at Mowbray's approach.

"Any news at the club?" he asked.

"None."

"Not a word about Sir Adam?"

"Not a word. How about things here?"

"I have sent for the old man who looked after him," Elmhurst confided. "Seems Sir Adam wouldn't have a woman near the place except first thing in the morning to come and clear up after he had gone to the bank. This old fellow--Dyson, his name is--used to come at seven, make his tea and cook his breakfast and potter around until it was time to open the bank. Then he came back again at six-thirty, cooked the dinner, put his master to bed and cleared out again. He was messenger here once but now he is simply doorkeeper."

"Where did you find out all this?" Mowbray enquired.

"From Crawshay, the younger of the two clerks. He has just gone."

"Did he know anything about those stairs?"

"He knows about them all right but he is as dumb as a mute. The old man did seem to be able to put the fear of God into them all--Groome included."

One of the policemen knocked at the door of the parlour and made his appearance.

"The man named Dyson whom you sent for, sir," he reported.

A grizzled-haired, tired-looking man of apparently between fifty-five and sixty years of age, with the remains of a military carriage, came forward and saluted. His manner was respectful but he was very much on his guard.

"You have been acting as Sir Adam Blockton's servant, have you not?" Elmhurst asked as he pointed to one of the high-backed chairs.

"For anything I know I still am, sir."

"Of course. We are in a little trouble, however, and you must help us. Sir Adam is not to be found and something has happened down in this vault between his apartments and the bank which requires explanation. You understand that?"

"Yes, sir."

"You know, perhaps, that I am Chief of the Police for Norchester?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then you understand that you must answer my questions."

"That I am not so sure about, sir," was the dogged reply.

Elmhurst's eyebrows went up. The man's manner was not ingratiating.

"Explain what you mean by that," he ordered.

"When I entered Sir Adam's service," Dyson went on, holding his cap in his hand and staring fixedly at it, "he offered me good wages and an easy job. I could scarcely believe my senses when I added things up. 'There is just one condition, Dyson,' he said, seeing I looked a bit dazed. 'You will never answer a single question about me, my habits or my surroundings.' I was not making a long job about that, sir. I said straight out that wild horses wouldn't draw a word from me. There's a many been curious and asked questions about Sir Adam. Not one answer have they ever had from me."

"That's all right, Dyson," the Chief Constable admitted, "but you see I represent the police and when I ask you a question it has to be answered. If you persist in your refusals I shall have to send you before a magistrate and you will be sent to prison."

"And to prison I'll go, sir," the man declared, "before I'll break my word."

"I hope," Captain Elmhurst remonstrated, "that you will reconsider that when you understand the circumstances. Sir Adam has disappeared."

"He'll be here at six-thirty to change for dinner, sir--which reminds me that I must be getting up into his room."

"Supposing he's not there at six-thirty?"

"For five-and-twenty years, sir, he's been ready on the tick, except for the few nights he has happened to be out of Norchester and they didn't amount to anything," Dyson told him. "He will be there to-night and if I had been answering questions about his doings I couldn't face him."

"Supposing you leave Sir Adam alone for a time, Elmhurst," the young lawyer suggested. "Surely Dyson cannot mind telling us where those stairs lead to and by whom they were used."

Dyson considered the matter.

"If you have the law on your side, sir, you will find that out in no time," he declared. "You don't find out from me, though."

Elmhurst smiled a little grimly.

"Why, you're becoming more reticent every moment, Dyson," he observed.

"You're a policeman and you have a right to ask any questions you choose, I imagine, sir," the man replied. "Sir Adam would never mind my telling you what time he took his meals, that he always changed for dinner, that he drank a half a bottle of wine or a measured whisky-and-soda and that he went to bed every night on the tick of ten. I've heard him tell other people those things but I have never heard him tell strangers about them stairs. No more shan't I."

"Looks to me," Captain Elmhurst warned him, "as though you want to come and pay us a visit at the Borough Gaol."

"When my turn comes and the law says so I shan't resist," was the stubborn reply, "but in Sir Adam's lifetime I am going to keep my word to him."

"How do you know that Sir Adam is alive?" Martin Mowbray asked quickly.

For a moment the man was taken by surprise. He recovered himself almost at once.

"There ain't anything ever likely to happen to him, sir," he declared. "Twenty-five years it is I've waited on him and never a dose of medicine has he needed or taken. He's had his wine and his nightcap regular, he's slept well through the night, he's drunk his tea in the morning and eaten his breakfast afterwards. A man who is in that state of health doesn't go off sudden-like."

"Not of his own accord," Captain Elmhurst commented softly.

Dyson's face became grimmer.

"You're not going to tell me, sir, that anyone has done him an injury," he said.

"We know just as much about it as everyone else concerned," the Chief Constable continued. "We know that Sir Adam was in the reading room of the club at ten minutes past one this afternoon, we know that at thirteen minutes past he was not in the room and not a soul has seen him since. We have searched the club premises in vain. It was almost impossible for him to leave the room without being seen by one of the other members. It was quite impossible for him to have left the club and yet he is not there. That is the mystery we are trying to solve, Dyson, and you don't seem much inclined to help us."

The man smiled.

"I'll help you with a bit of information if you're in earnest, Captain," he said, "and you, Mr. Mowbray--you being his lawyer. The old gentleman is having a bit of fun with you. He's that way inclined. I've known him at it more than once. If you will excuse me I'll be getting upstairs. Five minutes late is a thing he never would forget or forgive and I'm not taking any risks."

"I shall come with you," Captain Elmhurst announced. "So will Mr. Mowbray. We are even more anxious to meet Sir Adam than you."

"You can do as you like about that, gentlemen," Dyson replied. "It's not my place to interfere, if you insist. You can explain to Sir Adam--"

"Er--would not that be the nearest way?" Captain Elmhurst suggested, leaning over the trap door and waving his hand towards the screen opposite.

Dyson ignored him. He marched out of the bank and along the few yards of pavement. He produced a latchkey and opened the heavy front door just beyond the iron railings. For the moment he seemed to have forgotten his manners for he passed into the hall and mounted the oak stairs opposite without even a look over his shoulder. The two men followed him into a plainly furnished man's bedroom. It contained very little furniture but every piece was massive and Georgian. An open door led into the bathroom. The bedstead was a four-poster with beautifully carved pillars. The room was unoccupied but upon the counterpane of the bed was set out a soft-fronted shirt and plain dinner suit, and a pair of patent shoes stood on the floor. Dyson glanced at them as though to feel sure that nothing had been forgotten. Then he looked

at the clock and without a word disappeared into the bathroom. In a moment or two they heard the water running. Captain Elmhurst compared the clock with his watch.

"Five-and-twenty past six," he said. "Well, we shan't have long to wait."

The water began to run into the bath. In a minute or two Dyson reappeared, having turned off the faucets. Mowbray was tapping gently against the panelled walls.

"I am not very good at internal architecture," he remarked, "but I should think that stairway must lead into this room."

"You will be able to ask Sir Adam himself in a minute or two, sir," the man replied.

Captain Elmhurst threw himself into an easy chair. Mowbray remained standing and watching the hands of the clock. The moment came. Half-past six struck. There was silence in the room--silence below. Martin Mowbray, who was a young man of imagination, found something curiously thrilling in the sight of the simple preparations which had been made, the changing expression on Dyson's face and the tense silence. No one spoke. Dyson walked to the window and looked out. He came back and standing near the door seemed to listen. He dragged an old chronometer from his waistcoat pocket and looked at it. Then he glanced at the small clock. Neither of the two intruders said a word. Five minutes passed--ten minutes--the three-quarters of the hour struck. Then Elmhurst broke the silence.

"Dyson," he said, "this is the first proof you have had of your master's disappearance, but perhaps this time you will believe us. We wish no harm to Sir Adam. We should be the last to induce you to risk a good place by breaking orders, but you see,--here is the confirmation of what we have been telling you. Something has happened to Sir Adam. He has been your master for a great many years. You must be just as anxious as we are to have the matter cleared up."

The man seemed somehow to have shrunk. He had lost his calm, almost dignified air of assurance. He walked once more to the window. He came back and moved the position of the black tie laid out upon the bed. When he looked up his face was drawn and haggard.

"All these years," he muttered half to himself, although he had turned towards the Chief Constable. "All these years and never a moment late."

"Something strange has happened without a doubt," Martin said kindly, "but it is by no means a certainty, Dyson, that it is anything serious. Your master may have decided to play a little trick upon us as you suggested and been taken ill or he may have received news which we have not been able to trace and been obliged to go away, but it is our duty to find him--Captain Elmhurst on behalf of the police, and myself because I am his lawyer. I believe it is yours, as his personal servant, to help us."

"What sort of questions did you wish to ask, sir?" Dyson enquired and his voice had entirely lost its belligerent note. It was the voice of an old and weakly man.

"We want to know about that staircase. We also wish to know whether it was possible for Sir Adam to have received a visitor some time this morning--it might even have been before the bank opened--a young man whom no one else saw."

Dyson moved across the room towards the panel next to the one which Mowbray had been tapping. He ran his fingers up and down the bevelled edge for a moment, paused and pressed.

Then he stooped down and repeated the operation at the bottom of the oblong design. There was a little click. The panel slid open. Behind it was concealed a door with a Yale keyhole. Dyson unlocked it and pushed it open. The two men looked over his shoulder into the vault below.

"Sir Adam frequently made use of this means of reaching his office, gentlemen," he confided. "Mr. Groome was the only one who knew for certain about the entrance. The two young clerks might have guessed, but Sir Adam had tied up their tongues as he had done mine until now."

"And what about that visitor?" Mowbray asked.

"I know nothing about any visitor this morning," was the dogged answer. "When Sir Adam had finished his breakfast I laid out his evening clothes, cleared away his breakfast in the dining room, did a bit of tidying up--Mrs. Griggs being away--and took my place as usual in the bank until closing time. Sir Adam followed me about a quarter of an hour later. I was due to return here at a quarter past six. I arrived this evening at precisely that time. I--forgive me, gentlemen--I am not feeling well," the man faltered. "Twenty-five years! There are his clothes, the bath's ready--towels and soap all in their place--and Sir Adam is not here."

"We'll find him," Mowbray said kindly. "Sit down for a minute, Dyson. Tell us this--when you arrived this morning you came in by the entrance which we have just used?"

"Certainly, sir. I have the key for the front door."

"And when you left to go on duty into the bank, what did you do then?"

"I left by the same way, sir. I had to unlock the iron gates, throw open the doors and sit down on the bench."

"Which way did Sir Adam leave?"

"He left by the same door, sir. I helped him on with his overcoat--he always insisted upon wearing that although it is only a step or two--and brushed his hat before I went off."

"You had no indication that any visitor was expected this morning?"

"None, sir."

"There were no signs in the dining room or in this bedroom of Sir Adam having received any visitor last night?"

"No signs at all, sir. Only one chair had been occupied, only one whisky-and-soda drunk, only the ashes from Sir Adam's pipe in the tray."

"It seems rather purposeless, but I must ask you one more question, Dyson," Captain Elmhurst persisted. "Sir Adam seemed in his usual spirits last night, at any rate when you woke him this morning, when you dressed him? There were no farewell words or instructions when he left?"

"There was nothing different about Sir Adam," Dyson said firmly. "He was exactly the same as he has been every morning. It was impossible for him to have received a visitor without that person coming to the door of the bank house in the ordinary way. There was no one else, no one who knows how to deal with this other door but Mr. Groome, by guesswork, perhaps, and myself."

They closed up and left the place in silence. Seven o'clock was striking as they reached the street.

"I now suggest," Martin Mowbray said, "that we step across to the club to get one of Lawford's special strong Dry Martinis and then I'll come round with you to your show and hear what the doctor has decided."

"And perhaps more important still," Elmhurst put in, "to see if there was anything in that young man's effects which will help us to identify him."

"I'm with you," Mowbray agreed, passing his arm through his companion's, "but first of all our little visit to the club."

VI

The visit to the club was duly paid with satisfactory results. Afterwards the two men drove round to the prison where they were received by the Inspector.

"Dr. Steward has only just finished in the mortuary, sir," the latter announced. "He would like to see you. Afterwards I have some suggestions waiting for your approval."

"We will see the doctor at once," Elmhurst agreed. "Does he want us in the mortuary?"

"I think he would rather come in to you here first."

The police surgeon presented himself within the next few minutes. He had changed his linen overalls and was prepared to depart.

"Nothing more that I can do, Captain Elmhurst," he reported. "The dead man's age would be about thirty-seven, he was fairly healthy and I should judge that he had lived in hot countries for part of his life. The direct cause of death was without doubt a bullet wound which seems to have actually penetrated the heart. He must have died instantaneously. It would appear to me-- I have the notes all written down for your perusal afterwards--but it would appear to me that the wound was inflicted from some distance by a marksman of accuracy, as the course of the bullet shows signs of a trajectory."

"What about the head injury?"

"The wound at the back of the head," the surgeon continued, "might have been caused by a fall or it might have been the result of a blow with some blunt instrument of which so far there is no sign whatever. It is impossible to give a final decision about that unless the possible weapon were produced, but under the circumstances I don't think we need go further than the bullet wound for the cause of death. I see no alternative but to call it murder, as from the position of the wound suicide is out of the question. The other considerations are not in my line of country, of course, but it is perfectly obvious that the young man was in a good position of life. His nails and feet were excellently cared-for and the nails must have been manicured within the last few days. His clothes have the name of a Savile Row tailor upon the tabs and his silk underwear has also the name of a well known firm of Bond Street outfitters. That, however, the Inspector will tell you about. As I said, it is not my line of country."

"Wait a moment, doctor," Captain Elmhurst begged. "There is one point you will certainly be asked about in the Coroner's Court and a little previous knowledge might help us. You were there when the body was found. Could you reconstruct the crime? Do you think that the man was advancing down those stairs and was shot by someone in the bank parlour behind, or was he climbing the stairs and shot by someone who might have been hiding in the vault?"

"From the spread-eagled nature of the fall," the surgeon told them, "it is exceedingly difficult to say. Either might have happened. There is no reason why the man should not have spun round even in the moment of death and his collapse might then have become a matter of gravitation. I will send my notes round to you later, before they go into the books if you like. In the meantime, I have a case waiting, unless you wish to examine the body. I must warn you

that it is not a pleasant sight and unless you were well acquainted with the young man's appearance identification would be difficult."

"I have not the slightest desire to examine the body," Martin Mowbray declared. "I saw it once almost immediately after Lady Diana and it was quite enough for me."

"One moment," Elmhurst intervened. "You know that the inquest will be adjourned, doctor, and it will be necessary for you to apply the usual treatment?"

"I have all that in my mind," the surgeon replied. "Good night, gentlemen."

He hurried off and his place was taken by the Inspector, who produced his book.

"This will be a very difficult case, sir," he began, addressing the Chief Constable. "At the present moment there is no evidence of any quarrel or of any other person having been in conflict with the murdered man. He may have been, of course, making an ordinary burglarious attempt upon that curious series of safes; but if so he must have been shot before he commenced his work, as there is no sign of any one of them having been tampered with nor in the very few possessions contained in the dead man's pockets was there anything even faintly resembling a burglarious implement. The only unusual article in his possession was a large bunch of quaintly shaped keys. The vault has been thoroughly searched, without result. The young man's presence in it seems to have been as objectless as the murder itself, unless he was there as a thief."

"Well, that's all very well so far, Inspector. What is your idea of handling the affair?"

"Identification must be the first thing to work for," was the prompt reply. "Identification may lead to motive. At present we have nothing to go on whatever. Identification, however, should not be difficult. We have the tailor's name and the date the clothes were supplied. The haberdasher's evidence in support can also be easily obtained. I should like, sir, to send these clothes up to the tailor by special messenger to-night."

The Chief Constable nodded.

"What about his personal belongings?"

The Inspector unlocked a cupboard, brought out a little canvas bag with a label attached and turned it upside down upon the table. The articles revealed consisted of a wrist watch of good make, several odd keys which were a little tarnished from lack of use and a larger bunch of keys of unusual design. There was also a gold chain of the type which is kept attached to a trouser button, with a thin gold cigarette case and a lighter. Neither bore any initial or crest and the cigarette case was empty. There was a pocketbook which contained a page cut out of the A.B.C. and a sum of money amounting to about thirteen pounds. There was also a return first-class ticket to London. There was a handkerchief of good quality, but again without initials. There were no letters or cards.

"There you are, sir, that's the lot," the Inspector concluded. "None of these things disclose any traces of fingerprints but I am not worrying about that for I fancy that identification should be easily established. If you agree to my sending or taking these things up to London, sir, I have not the least doubt that we shall discover the identity of the murdered man. As for the murderer, I am afraid that may be a little more difficult, especially under the present extraordinary circumstances."

"On the other hand," Martin Mowbray remarked, "one thing should help the other. The extraordinary disappearance of Sir Adam seems as though it must be connected in some way with the tragedy which has happened to this young man. You don't get a murder and a disappearance like this within a few yards of one another without making an effort at any rate to link them up."

Elmhurst lit a cigarette and considered for a moment.

"What do you think, Martin?" he asked. "I am in favour of letting the Inspector take these things up to London to-night. He can get back by to-morrow afternoon or he can telephone us immediately he knows the name and address of the dead man. We can get to work then at once upon his relatives if he has any."

"I would not presume to interfere," Mowbray declared. "This is purely, it seems to me, a routine business. We certainly ought to be able to get to know the name and address of this young man from his tailors."

The Chief Constable was for a moment absorbed.

"I think, Inspector," he decided after a brief reflection, "that before you leave London it would be as well for you to speak to me on the telephone. I may decide that it would be advisable for you to call round at Scotland Yard."

The Inspector was clearly disappointed. His Chief patted his arm.

"I should not think of taking such a course," he explained apologetically, "if this were a straightforward case, but there are one or two points about it, or rather connected with Sir Adam's disappearance, which suggest to me that we might need help. I will keep it to ourselves if I possibly can. At the same time--"

He rose to his feet in some difficulty as to how to proceed. He was placed, he felt, in an unusual position and he realised that whilst this strange murder case might be capable of a very obvious explanation, the matter of Sir Adam's disappearance contained far more complicated possibilities.

"Anyhow, Inspector," he wound up, "you can get the report from the tailor and the hosier and we will see what happens here. I won't send you to Scotland Yard unless I feel it to be my bounden duty."

The door closed upon the man's respectful word of thanks. The Chief Constable pushed the cigarettes across the table and collapsed into an easy chair.

"Much doing at the office just now, Martin?" he asked.

"Any quantity of conveyancing work," the young man replied. "That is not much in my line. I am not busy personally. If this had not turned up, I was thinking of going down to Brancaster for a few days' golf."

"As things are, of course you won't do it," his friend begged. "On the face of it this affair is puzzling, but tantalisingly simple. One has the feeling that Sir Adam's disappearance might be explained at any moment and also this young man's death. But think of this, Martin--think it out for yourself: This man is found dead in the vault. There is no shadow of doubt about that. Even if the body were brought there after the murder, the issue would remain the same. One of

these highly respectable people whom we have been cross-questioning must have been telling us point-blank lies."

There was a sudden light in Mowbray's eyes.

"I wondered when we should both face that!" he exclaimed. "Now tell me--"

Elmhurst stretched out his hand.

"I'm not going to tell you anything, Martin," he interrupted, "and I don't want you to tell me anything, either. We must think it out separately, step by step. Who is telling the lie and why? Don't let us compare notes yet. We should only confuse one another. When you have asked yourself that question long enough, Martin, I think you will find it quite worth while giving up that trip to Brancaster."

Martin Mowbray laughed scornfully.

"I'll tell you something, Elmhurst," he confided. "There isn't any golf in the world would move me from this spot at the present moment. I'm going to have a mouthful of dinner with my uncle, see how the old man is and ask him a few questions which he probably won't answer, and then I'm off to Wrotton Park."

"The Tidswells?"

"Yes. I promised I would either telephone or go over for an hour after dinner, and I hate telephoning."

The Chief Constable played thoughtfully for a minute with his upper lip, from which his military moustache had long since disappeared.

"I sent a message over there an hour or so ago," he confided.

"What--to Sir George?"

"No, to Lady Diana."

"The mischief you did! What about?"

Elmhurst hesitated for a moment.

"Look here, Martin," he said, "I don't want to come the official over you--in fact I am going to answer your question--but I warn you a murder is a very much more serious affair than the freakish disappearance of an elderly gentleman and involves a good many more grave responsibilities for a person in my position. I sent a note over to Lady Diana begging her to return by the messenger, a sergeant of police on a motor-bicycle, the letter she took away addressed to Sir Adam."

"Stop me when I get impertinent," Martin Mowbray begged. "What made you do that?"

"I think that it is a letter which should at once pass into the keeping of the police," Captain Elmhurst pronounced. "It may be of no consequence. On the other hand any communication addressed to a person who has disappeared and who must be in some way connected with the visit of that poor fellow lying in the mortuary is a police matter."

Martin reflected for a moment.

"I suppose you're right," he admitted. "Supposing she has opened it?"

"We should have no complaint to make," Elmhurst replied. "On the other hand I hope that she hasn't."

"You must remember," Martin persisted, "that Sir Adam had not opened it himself. That seems to make it almost impossible that it could explain in any way his disappearance."

"Quite true," Elmhurst agreed, "but, you see, of course, in a case like this, one has to think of every possibility--however unreasonable. Why should not that letter contain an intimation to Sir Adam that someone known to Lady Pengwill was paying him a visit?"

"Possible, of course," the other was compelled to acknowledge.

"It might have been someone," Elmhurst went on, "whom Sir Adam was determined not to see. This is all guesswork, naturally, but he might have been a blackmailer."

"How did he get into the vault?" Martin asked bluntly.

"There you have got me," Elmhurst admitted. "That is stark mystery and nothing else to be said about it, unless that bunch of keys answers the question. But still the first thing one would look for, bearing in mind the fact that a murder has been committed within a dozen yards of the old man's chair, is the contents of his morning's letters. Well, we know the rest of them. This one was not opened. Therefore I say that the police ought to open it at the earliest possible moment. A hundred-to-one chance, if you like, but I will admit that half the murders in the world have been discovered through one of these clever detective chaps taking a hundred-to-one chance."

"Sound reasoning," Martin acknowledged, rising to his feet. "I must get along. The old boy likes his dinner punctually."

"You see, it really does not matter very much," Elmhurst concluded, rising and walking with his visitor to the door, "if Lady Diana has opened it. She would pass on the information to us as a matter of course. The only disaster would be if the letter had disappeared in some way, and we were unable to satisfy ourselves that we had not missed the hundred-to-one chance."

"More of the policeman about you than I ever realised," Martin declared cheerfully. "Don't worry about the letter. If your sergeant returns without it I am perfectly certain Lady Diana won't be obstinate when I have explained matters."

"You see that she's not, young fellow," Elmhurst enjoined with a farewell wave of the hand.

VII

The butler at Wrotton Park admitted Martin Mowbray with a deferential word of greeting.

"We are a very small company here just now, sir," he remarked as he took Mowbray's hat and coat from him. "Lady Tidswell has not been very well the last few days and is keeping to her room. Lady Diana is occupying the green suite in the west wing and she left word for you to be shown up there. The young gentlemen and Major Morton from the barracks have gone over to the cinema at Norchester."

"Lady Diana is expecting me, I believe," Mowbray observed.

"I received your telephone message myself," the man replied. "Lady Diana has been expecting you for the last hour. She has been a little upset by a message from Norchester, and she is anxious to consult you."

Mowbray remained silent. The man showed him into a very pleasant sitting room overlooking the park, and disappeared as soon as he had announced the visitor. Diana, who was lounging in an easy chair drawn up towards a log fire, greeted him with an air of relief.

"Hope I haven't kept you waiting?" he asked.

"So long as you've come that's all right," she answered. "Tell me--is there any news?"

"None whatever of Sir Adam. I suppose it is Sir Adam you are thinking of," he remarked as he drew up a chair to her side. "The other affair, too, remains a mystery and a very serious one."

"Do you know that I received, an hour or two ago, an official letter from the Chief Constable," she told him, "begging me to return to him the letter from home which I took possession of this afternoon?"

"Yes, I knew that," he admitted. "I was with Elmhurst up till a short time ago. He told me that, as the other affair had developed and was naturally connected with your uncle's disappearance, the police will have to attach all correspondence addressed to Sir Adam."

"I should have thought if anyone disappeared like my grandfather," the girl said, "that his lawyers--you and your uncle--would take charge of his affairs, together with the relatives. I don't see why the police want to interfere at all."

"Yes, that's all right," Mowbray agreed, "but there's a bigger tragedy even than your grandfather's disappearance to be dealt with and that is entirely a police matter. This fellow--whatever his name may be--met with his death on the bank premises within a few yards of Sir Adam's private office."

"Well, I didn't send the letter," she said a little stubbornly.

"Did you consult Lady Tidswell?" Mowbray asked.

The girl shook her head.

"We have not dared even to tell Aunt about Sir Adam yet," she confessed. "She really is very unwell indeed. She has not been out of her room all day."

"That leaves you, of course, the oldest member of the family on hand," Mowbray reflected. "Have you opened the letter?"

"Not yet. I waited until you came."

"I don't see any possible reason for not opening it," Mowbray declared. "It's a hundred-to-one chance, of course, but it might have happened that your mother was asking some young friend to call upon Sir Adam. There's always a chance that a letter arriving the same day as a tragedy like this might be concerned with it. In any case, if they wished to the police could take over all Sir Adam's correspondence. They would probably pass over nearly the whole of it to us to be dealt with, but they would examine every communication to be sure that there was nothing which might help them in establishing the identity of the murdered man."

Diana yawned slightly.

"You are being terribly legal," she complained.

He looked at her quickly. There was the same tantalising little smile upon her lips which had mocked him once before. Somehow, at that moment, it almost irritated him.

"Look here," she continued, "couldn't you for one second forget that you are Mr. Martin Mowbray of the firm of Mowbray and oh! half-a-dozen others? I forget their names. Couldn't you forget that you are my lawyer and just tell me what you think would be a reasonable thing for a young woman with a moderate moral sense, with a moderately just outlook on life, but not handicapped by any undue leaning towards principles, to do? I should like to read that letter but if I analyse my motives I am afraid they are chiefly motives of curiosity. You see, I know my mother pretty well. What would you do--as a man, mind, not a lawyer?"

The reappearance of the smile this time was effective.

"Well, honestly," he told her, "as a man I should throw away all those high moral scruples which make a lawyer so inhuman a person, I should open the letter, satisfy my curiosity, seal it up again and let Captain Elmhurst have it. He is only asking for what are his rights, but under the circumstances I don't see why you should not read it first, if you want to."

The door was quietly opened and the butler presented himself.

"Excuse me, if you please, milady," he said. "Captain Elmhurst is on the telephone and would like to speak to Mr. Mowbray."

Martin rose at once to his feet. Diana nodded acquiescence.

"There may be news!" she exclaimed eagerly. "You had better go."

He followed the butler to a telephone cabinet in the hall. By some means the connection had been interfered with and it was five minutes or so before he heard Elmhurst's voice.

"This is Mowbray. What is it, Elmhurst?" he asked.

"Since you left," the latter confided, "my sergeant of police has returned. Lady Diana declines to give up the letter for the moment."

"Well, she's a self-willed young woman, I should say," Mowbray admitted. "I have not been here very long but I've gone so far as to tell her that whether it is opened or not you have a right to see the letter and I think she had better hand it over. Can't do more, can I?"

There was a moment's silence.

"No, I don't see that you can," Elmhurst replied, "but the more I think of the ugly side of this business the less I like it. You know what time counts for in these matters. Clues of every sort which are wide open at the beginning have the knack of closing up if there is any delay. I have almost made up my mind to send for Scotland Yard to-morrow. That new fellow they have there--Snell--is just the man for a job of this sort. In any case, I want the letter. Will you just hammer that into the young lady, please? You don't need to threaten her, but between you and me if she hesitates any longer I shall come over myself to-morrow and demand it. If she makes any difficulty I shall apply to the Court. Wrap it up as much as you like but let her know that."

"I will. Is that all?"

"Quite enough for you, young fellow," Elmhurst told him. "I know Lady Pengwill is the wife of a coming Lord Chief Justice and that the family influence is enough to blow me into the North Sea, but I want that letter. Au revoir, Martin. I shall be expecting you some time before midnight--in fact, I shall sit up for you. Good night."

Elmhurst rang off. Mowbray made his way back again to Diana's sitting room. He was not greatly disturbed by the Chief Constable's insistence. Diana, he felt, showed every sign of reasonableness. She would, without a doubt, hand over the letter even if she insisted on reading it first. As a matter of fact, his own curiosity on the subject had begun to work and he was not at all displeased at the idea of learning what Lady Pengwill had to say to her father. He entered the sitting room. He thought at first that it was empty, for Diana had deserted her seat. A young woman dressed in black, however, who had evidently been waiting for him, came from a distant corner.

"You are Mr. Mowbray, are you not?" she asked.

"I am," he admitted.

"I am Lady Diana's maid," the girl said. "She asked me to wait here until your return and give you this note."

She handed him a square envelope addressed in large characteristic writing. With a curious sense of apprehension he tore open the flap and read the few lines.

Dear Mr. Mowbray,

I am terribly sorry but I have a sudden violent headache and I must ask you to excuse me. I have taken some aspirin and gone to bed. We can speak again of the matter we were talking about some time to-morrow when I shall go into Norchester. Please excuse me: I am really feeling very ill.

Sincerely yours,

DIANA PENGWILL.

Mowbray hesitated only for a moment. He walked over to the writing table, drew out some notepaper and scrawled a few words across a half-sheet of it. He wrote in smothered anger but with restraint.

Dear Lady Diana,

I earnestly beg of you not to make so fatal, I even venture to add so undignified a gesture. As your legal adviser and as your friend--if you will permit me to imagine myself as holding that position--I assure you most earnestly that the police have the right to see the letter and under those circumstances you can do no possible good by withholding it from them, and your continued refusal to do so would involve the use of measures which I am sure would be distasteful to Captain Elmhurst and undignified for you.

Please come down and speak with me again.

Yours,

M.M.

He folded up the letter and addressed it. The maid was looking distressed.

"Lady Diana begged me not to disturb her again under any circumstances, sir," she said.

"You must take her this letter," Mowbray insisted. "It is important."

The girl left him unwillingly. It was a quarter of an hour before she returned. She handed him another large square envelope, this time not even addressed. One single line--no more:--

The letter is destroyed.

The curtness of those four words, the ugly suggestiveness which lay underneath them, kept Mowbray for several moments passionately seeking for some other form of protest. Then he realised the impossibility of it all. He thrust the note into his pocket and opened the door. The butler was waiting in the hall. The lights of his car were already lit. The man leaned forward in explanation.

"I thought I'd better turn your lamps on, sir, as the other car is out to-night. You will find the gates on the north side of the park open."

Mowbray drove off with a mechanically uttered farewell. He was by no means an impressionable young man and at that time he was unable fully to understand his own peculiar sense of disquietude.

VIII

About half an hour later Martin Mowbray, who without any particular reason had driven back to Norchester at a speed far exceeding his usual rate of progress, was seated in a comfortable easy chair in the Chief Constable's den. There was a whisky-and-soda by his side, a box of cigarettes and a jar of tobacco. Elmhurst, who had been answering an official telephone call, looked round to find to his surprise that his guest had not moved since his arrival, touched his drink or shown any interest in the tobacco.

"Hello!" he exclaimed. "What's up? Looks as though you had brought bad news."

Martin made no immediate reply. The Chief Constable lit his own pipe.

"News of any sort," he continued, "would be a relief. So far it has been stalemate after about five minutes to every clue we have tried to follow up. Don't tell us you are in the same position, Martin."

"Worse still," the young man groaned. "I don't know that I have anything to tell you at all."

For a moment Elmhurst felt very official indeed. He looked at his visitor sternly. Something about the latter's expression, however, aroused his sympathy. The Chief Constable became a human being again.

"You look as though you have taken a knock, Martin," he said. "Well, we all come up against it now and then. I fancied from the first that that young lady could have told us a little more than she did."

"You are probably wrong, then," was the curt reply. "I don't think Lady Diana knows a thing about it."

"What about the letter?" Elmhurst asked point blank.

"The girl had a right to take the letter away," Mowbray declared slowly, with the air of one who is setting out the case for reconsideration. "It was written by her mother and was evidently some sort of a private communication to Sir Adam. She took the letter away with the consent of all of us."

"That's quite right, of course," Elmhurst agreed, "but as circumstances have turned out the police demand to know the contents of that letter. It was the last communication addressed to Sir Adam before he disappeared and he left it unopened. If we are ever to get to the bottom of this affair we must search for a clue in every possible direction. That letter is blatantly important. Are you going to tell me, Martin, that she refuses to part with it?"

"Worse," Mowbray answered. "She has destroyed it."

"Without telling you the contents?"

"Without telling me the contents," Mowbray repeated. "You can have the whole story. Here it is."

He told Elmhurst all that had passed between him and Diana. When he had finished he took a long drink of the whisky-and-soda by his side.

"There you are. Now you know the whole story," he went on. "We agreed that she should open the letter, read it and hand it to me on your behalf. Your telephone message came. I left the room to receive it. When I came back there was no Lady Diana. She sent me two notes by her maid, one to say she had retired with a headache. When I protested I received a message--a single line. Look at it, if you like," Mowbray concluded, throwing the half-sheet on the table.

The letter is destroyed.

"Most inspiring," the Chief Constable observed. "Hope for us at last, young fellow."

"I don't see where."

"Whatever was in that letter," Captain Elmhurst reminded his visitor gravely, "the law will demand that Lady Diana reveal it. It is contempt of Court if she refuses: it is the chance of prosecution for perjury if she tells a fib. You know the law as well as I do, Martin. What do you think about it?"

"I think it's hell."

"I think it's a little glimpse of the other place," Elmhurst disagreed. "The two things, of course, are related: the disappearance of Sir Adam and the murder of this young man. The girl would never have acted as she has done if she had not realised that the solution of both crimes is in that letter. She didn't want it known--well, we won't guess at her reasons. She took the feminine view. She destroyed the letter. It won't help her. As a matter of fact, it relieves us of some responsibility--you as a lawyer and me as a police official. She will be subpoenaed. The first question she will be asked at the inquest will be, 'Is it true that you received a letter from your mother to Sir Adam, on the day of his disappearance and of this further tragedy, which was entrusted to you, as a relative, by the police, and that you destroyed it?' Well, there you are. How is she going to get out of that?"

"There is one more thing to be considered," Martin remarked.

"Well?"

"Why shouldn't Lady Pengwill be subpoenaed and asked the contents of the letter?"

Captain Elmhurst shook his head, smiling.

"You are not a criminal lawyer, are you, young fellow?" he observed. "Lady Pengwill can give any reply she likes. She could deny having written the letter, swear that it was not her handwriting. There is no proof against her anywhere and the letter is destroyed. The girl destroyed the letter after she had seen what was written. That's where her trouble lies. You will excuse me, Martin--we are more or less old friends--but is Lady Diana anything special to you?"

"Of course not," Martin Mowbray denied vigorously. "I met her to-day almost for the first time in my life. The fact that I admire her has nothing to do with the case."

"Well, don't look so unhappy about it," Elmhurst begged, rising and refilling his glass. "This is a nasty business but whatever the young lady has done she has obviously done for the sake of someone else or for the family. She will realise that she has to tell the truth in time and she will do it. I congratulate you, Martin, if you are serious," he went on, patting the young man's shoulder. "The money does not mean so much to you, I know, but she is a very charming and

unusual girl. Now, go home to bed. We've had enough worry about this for one day. Tomorrow the great ball will start rolling. The London lawyers will be down. There will have to be some sort of inquest arranged for. Then the Public Prosecutor will be stroking his nose. On top of it all we shall get half the newspapers in London sending men down here. I telephoned to your uncle an hour ago. They are going to open the bank as usual. You will probably have to tap some of those money chests in the vault."

"I don't see who there is to attend to things in the banking business unless old Groome pulls himself together," Martin reflected.

"Your uncle, or one of the firm, will have to deal with that. Anything might turn up, even to a run on the bank, if the doors are shut. That's not our business, though. Not mine, at any rate. I've got all I can do to deal with the young man in Savile Row clothes and Bond Street linen and a bullet in his heart. Fanshawe has gone up to London to-night so as to be there when the shops open. Unless the information he obtains from the tailors is absolutely definite I shall tell him to bring a Scotland Yard man down with him. He won't like it but it can't be helped."

"The old man may have turned up by to-morrow," Mowbray remarked as they walked down the hall together. "It seems just as incredible to think that he should have been able to find a place in which to hide himself at three minutes' notice as that he should have been able to plug a bullet into a man's heart at something like twenty paces."

"Take my advice," Elmhurst said. "I'm used to these sudden puzzles and if you once begin to ask yourself questions and worry about them it means no sleep and a bad headache in the morning. Try and forget it."

He opened the front door and they stood for a moment upon the step.

"Good advice, Elmhurst," his young friend admitted. "I'll take it if I can."

He waved his hand, stepped into the car and pressed the starting button. His Rolls-Royce glided softly round the avenue and purred its way out on to the street. Elmhurst returned to his den and was in the act of mixing himself a final drink when his telephone rang. He took down the receiver.

"Chief Constable speaking. Who is it?"

A man's very polite voice replied.

"Very sorry to trouble you so late, Captain Elmhurst. I'm Tomkins, the secretary to the hospital. We had a patient brought in here this afternoon--a Mr. Groome, cashier at Blockton's Bank."

"Well?"

"The night nurse was down a short time ago, sir. She says that he is very restless and she thinks she ought to send for the doctor again who first examined him. He is asking all the time for you or for Inspector Fanshawe."

"Is he dangerously ill?" Captain Elmhurst asked.

"I would not like to say, sir," the secretary replied, "but I am inclined to think that he is. In any case, I thought I ought to tell you."

"I'll be round in five or ten minutes," Elmhurst promised as he rang off.

IX

Norchester was justly proud of its hospital. The night nurse who met the Chief Constable and took him to the private room which Groome was occupying was an exceedingly intelligent young person.

"I have sent for the doctor who brought the patient in, Captain Elmhurst," she confided, "although our house physician here does not consider that he is in any immediate danger. He slept for a short time this evening but since he woke up he has seemed very anxious to see someone from the police station. I thought, under the circumstances, I had better let you know."

"Quite right," Elmhurst agreed.

The nurse showed him into the room. Groome was sitting up in bed and he welcomed his visitor with an eager little gesture. The latter took the chair by the bedside which the nurse drew up for him.

"Thought I would like a word or two with you or the Inspector, sir," Groome explained, "in case I felt another of those nasty attacks coming on. Any news of Sir Adam yet?"

"Not a word. You haven't any fresh ideas yourself, I suppose?"

"No, sir."

"And you are still positive that no visitor was passed into Sir Adam's room before he left for lunch?"

"Absolutely certain, sir. He left at exactly the same time every morning within my memory--half-past twelve to the tick--closed his office door and locked it with his own key when he went out. He didn't say a word to any of us--he never did--he passed out to his car and that's the last I saw of him or ever expect to again in this world."

"I wouldn't admit that, Groome," was the cheerful rejoinder. "I am expecting to hear of him every minute. Odd things do happen sometimes, you know, outside these mystery thrillers."

"Nothing quite so odd as this, sir," the cashier went on. "I sent for you, sir, because I thought you ought to know something in case Sir Adam didn't return and in case anything happened to me. Maybe I have exceeded my duty, maybe I haven't. I did what I thought was right and I should never have breathed a word to anyone but for this trouble."

The man paused and his visitor waited until he had recovered his breath.

"It's about those safe lockers. There's most of them feel as though they were full but they're not. If I get over this bout I'll tell you why I started--'prying,' is what he would have called it. Anyway, I've got a key to his office and I have been down in the vaults sometimes during his luncheon hour. For a year and more something has been going on. When I don't know. Why I don't know. By whom I don't know. But all I can tell you is that gradually many of those lockers have been tampered with and some of their contents taken away."

"This is a very serious statement," the Chief Constable said gravely.

"Look at me, sir," Groome went on. "I was a strong man six or seven years ago. It is because this is such a grave affair that my nerve has gone--I have left off sleeping. I can't eat, I can do nothing but think. Someone, with or without Sir Adam's knowledge, has been helping himself to the contents of those safes. Listen, Captain Elmhurst, I have opened one of them. It should have contained something like sixty thousand pounds' worth of English notes, Bank of England notes and a number of bonds. There is nothing in it to-day but a few old ledgers shoved in to give the thing weight. I found that out months and months ago and then I stopped searching. I daren't go on."

"Don't you think you ought to have confided in someone?" Captain Elmhurst asked.

"In whom, sir? This is not an ordinary bank, Blockton's isn't. There are no directors, no partners. Every penny that's there belongs to Sir Adam. To whom could I go? No one but Sir Adam himself, and you know what he would have said, sir, whether what I had found out was for his good or for his evil. He would have pointed to the door. He would not have thanked me if I had saved him from being robbed. He would have remembered nothing except that I had pried upon him. I am an elderly man and the pensions are entirely at Sir Adam's disposal. He would have had no pity on me. Nothing to do but let him find it out for himself."

"Who do you think took away those notes and bonds, Groome?"

The man was a long time getting his breath but there was no uncertainty about his voice--thin and quavery though it was.

"Sir Adam himself, sir. I have thought and I have thought and I have thought and there is no other answer. Sir Adam himself."

"There is no sense, Groome, in a man robbing himself," Captain Elmhurst pointed out.

Groome swallowed hard and took a few seconds' rest.

"There is no sense in Sir Adam Blockton's disappearance, Captain Elmhurst. There is no sense in my being stricken like this when I might have been of some use to all of you and helped you get on the right track with what's been going on. It's all improbable and impossible but it's brought me to my grave, or very, very near it."

There was a tap at the door and the nurse entered quietly. She gave one look at her patient's face and leaned quickly over him. She turned to Elmhurst and there was a note of urgency in her tone.

"Not another word, please, sir," she begged. "I am afraid--it is too late, now."

She pressed a little bell marked Urgent. Elmhurst rose to his feet and stole away.

In the corridor Elmhurst encountered an old friend, a famous surgeon, who had been in to pay a night visit to a patient on whom he had operated earlier in the day. He raised his eyebrows as he recognised the Chief Constable.

"This is no place for you, my friend," he said. "What are you doing here at this time of the night?"

"I was sent for by the secretary," Elmhurst confided. "One of the patients here had a heart attack to-night and asked for me."

"You mean Groome, the cashier at Blockton's Bank?"

"That's the man."

"Pretty bad he is, I'm afraid," the surgeon observed as they descended the stairs side by side. "By the by, is there any truth in these rumours about Sir Adam?"

"Well, it appears that he didn't turn up at the club for lunch," Elmhurst replied, "or rather he turned up and then he never went into the luncheon room. Since then no one has seen him. It seems rather absurd to call it a disappearance, from the police point of view, at any rate, but I don't know what else you can say."

"He's a whimsical old stick," the surgeon remarked. "There really isn't anything so wonderful in a man departing from his usual habits and not being seen for half a day. His father had a queer vein in him, they say. That old fellow that you've been to visit ought to have been able to give you an idea what's become of him. He must have been in the bank for forty years, I should think."

"I think I'll just have a word with the secretary," Elmhurst said as he wished his companion good night. "He seems to want to speak to either you or me."

The surgeon glanced at the young man who had just issued from his office.

"It is you he wants, I think," he said. "Good night again, Elmhurst."

The secretary called the latter into his room.

"The night sister has just telephoned down to ask if you would wait for five minutes, Captain Elmhurst," he reported. "I'm afraid poor old Groome is very ill. He seems to want to speak to you but the nurse and doctor are both with him and for a moment--" he broke off in his speech. "If you wouldn't mind waiting just a moment, sir."

Elmhurst nodded, accepted a cigarette and took up the evening paper. In a minute or two the telephone rang. The young man answered it and presently laid down the receiver.

"That was Mr. Groome's nurse, sir," he announced. "The doctor says he is very sorry but he is afraid that there is no intelligible statement which the patient could make. Their impression is that he is sinking."

"Poor old fellow," Elmhurst said. "No use my waiting, then?"

"None at all, sir. They wouldn't allow you in. Would you like me to telephone, if anything should happen?"

Captain Elmhurst shook his head.

"I'm afraid the poor fellow distressed himself enough as it was," he said. "I won't bother him any more to-night. The only thing is, would you mind seeing either the nurse or the doctor and begging them, if he should attempt to make anything in the nature of a statement, to help him on with it or take it down?"

"I will do my best, sir," the secretary promised.

"I shall wait for another half-hour," Elmhurst decided, "in case by any chance he should ask for me."

Upstairs, in the private ward, the nurse was silently preparing for the greatest unsolved miracle the world has ever offered to its passing millions. The doctor sat apart with folded arms and knitted brow. The nurse presently came over to his side. She said nothing but he understood her gesture. He walked over to the bedside. The last cashier of Blockton's Bank was passing peacefully away. The lines of his face seemed somehow to have disappeared. An expression of repose, almost contentment, seemed to have straightened them out. The lips were slightly parted in a transient smile. If indeed there had been more which he had desired to say, the burden of his secret had passed from his consciousness. The doctor, a few minutes later, faced Elmhurst without a qualm.

"Sorry," he reported. "It was not any use sending for you. He just slipped away looking as though he had never had a care in the world."

Elmhurst rose to his feet.

"Well," he said, "we have to do our duty, doctor, but I am very glad indeed you didn't disturb him. I expect we shall blunder through somehow or other."

The doctor paused to light a cigarette. He was a very human person, notwithstanding the philosophy engendered by his profession.

"I don't know how much he told you, Captain Elmhurst," he said, "or how much he left untold, but I am sure of one thing--if there had been anything serious left on his mind he would never have died with that smile upon his lips."

Inspector Fanshawe, with a neatly tied brown-paper parcel under his arm, presented himself at ten o'clock the following morning at the premises of Messrs. Ludlum, the well-known tailors in Savile Row. He handed his card to the reception clerk who came forward to meet him.

"I am an Inspector," he announced, "attached to the Norchester Police Station. I have brought a garment here to see if you are able to identify the owner."

The young man looked at him in surprise.

"You had better see Mr. Ludlum," he decided. "Come this way, please."

Mr. Ludlum was a precise elderly gentleman none too well pleased at being interrupted in the task of opening his morning's letters. An emissary of the police, however, had to be treated with respect. The Inspector said as little as possible and produced the coat.

"We are anxious to ascertain," he confided, "whether you can tell us the name of the customer for whom this garment was made."

Mr. Ludlum shook the coat out with a professional air, glanced at the tab and nodded.

"That should be quite easy," he remarked. "Let me see, Jenkins would be the cutter for this. Ask Mr. Jenkins to step this way."

The clerk, who had remained in attendance, hurried off. Mr. Ludlum glanced at his visitor curiously.

"Is this a criminal investigation?" he enquired. "My clients are not as a rule concerned in any affairs of that sort."

"An accident has happened to the wearer," the Inspector replied, "as you would probably be able to see, if you examined the garment closely. It is important that we establish his identity at once."

"I should think we ought to be able to help you there. Jenkins," Mr. Ludlum went on, turning to the man who had just appeared in his shirt-sleeves and with a tape measure around his shoulders. "This is some of your handiwork, I think. Can you tell me for whom you made it?"

The cutter glanced at the number.

"It's a four-year-old coat, sir," he announced. "We made that for Captain Denham."

"Can you tell me how to get in touch with him?" the Inspector asked.

The tailor smiled.

"Nothing easier," he declared. "He has rooms in the Albany--Number 7, I think, from memory--and a place in Leicestershire. If he's in town now you will probably find him in at this hour of the morning."

"I'll take the coat round to him at once, sir," the Inspector decided.

Mr. Ludlum stroked his moustache. He was obviously curious.

"Queer sort of thing to imagine the captain mixed up with the police in any way," he remarked. "Comes of a very good family, you know. Plenty of money and all that sort of thing. Customers of the firm for over two generations."

The Inspector, who seemed to have become afflicted with sudden deafness, took up his parcel, saluted and made his way to number 7, the Albany--a journey which took him a matter of three minutes. The manservant who answered the bell was of the Jeeves type and inclined to be a little brusque.

"Captain Denham is not in the least likely to see anyone at this hour of the morning," he declared. "If you will give me your card or tell me your business, I shall be taking him his tea in a few minutes."

"I am an Inspector in the Norchester Police Force," Fanshawe announced, producing his card. "My business is somewhat urgent."

The valet stepped aside.

"Police, eh?" he observed, looking at the caller and believing him. "Certainly I will call Captain Denham."

He closed the door, invited the visitor to take a seat, disappeared for a few moments and promptly returned.

"The Captain will see you if you will come this way."

The Inspector was shown into a very comfortable sitting room leading out of a bedchamber. Captain Denham, a handsome young man, was in his dressing gown and smoking a cigarette. He looked with frank curiosity at his early-morning caller.

"Did I understand John to say that you are from the police?" he enquired.

"That is so, sir. I am trying to find the owner of this coat."

He untied the string and passed the garment over. The other scrutinised it gravely through his eye-glass.

"Upon my word, it does look like one of my old suits," he observed. "John!"

The valet who had been in the next room hurried out.

"Recognise this coat?" his master enquired.

John glanced at it for a moment and coughed.

"Why yes, sir," he admitted. "It's an oldish suit but it's certainly your coat."

"How did you get hold of it?" the young man asked.

"It was being worn by a person who has met with an accident in Norchester," the Inspector confided. "We are anxious to establish his identity."

Captain Denham glanced at his valet, who was looking a little disconsolate.

"I say, is this a case that's likely to get into the papers?"

"I should think it possible," the Inspector answered. "The police are anxious to know why the name of the original wearer has been cut out and who the wearer was on the night before last."

Captain Denham shook his head. He looked reproachfully at the valet.

"John," he said, "I told you this was risky. It's all very well to cut out the name; but anyone can go to the tailors, and of course they will tell him for whom it was made."

"Perhaps you will tell me, sir, how it left your possession?" the Inspector enquired.

The young man coughed.

"Well, I expect I'll have to," he replied. "It's a thing I have never done before, although I don't suppose that matters, but I had a rotten week at Newmarket just lately and bookies don't like your being short at the commencement of the season. I was still a couple of hundred behind when I had raised every penny I could. I talked it over with John here and he reminded me that I had about forty suits of clothes, some of which I had scarcely ever worn, and suggested a complete clear-out of my wardrobe and a visit to Hobbs."

"Who is Hobbs?" the Inspector asked.

"Hobbs is the largest dealer in secondhand clothes in the world," Captain Denham explained. "Half the clothes you see worn on the stage come from him and I shouldn't think there's a day passes but he buys up the entire wardrobe of someone or other who has popped off. A ghoul-like business, perhaps, but there you are. It is the first time I have ever had dealings with the fellow, I can assure you, but I told John to do the best he could and sure enough he brought me in three hundred of the best before the banks closed that day."

The Inspector was not altogether successful in concealing his disappointment. He folded up the garment and remade the parcel. Captain Denham wished him good morning and vanished into his bedroom.

"Can you give me Hobbs' address?" Fanshawe asked the valet when they reached the hall.

The man smiled.

"That's easy enough. Number 17a, Chandler Street. It was quite a good parcel of clothes I sold them so no doubt they will remember it. Whether they will remember to whom they sold this particular suit or not is another matter."

The Inspector paused for a moment on the threshold of the opened front door.

"Three hundred pounds, I think Captain Denham said," he remarked. "That must have meant a great many suits of clothes."

"Besides the suits," the valet confided, "there were several overcoats and there were some underclothes and shirts which the Captain never fancied, included. However, there was no secret about the transaction. The Captain gave me a note which I handed on to the firm to say that his valet was offering the clothing with his consent. I wish you luck, I'm sure, Inspector," he added as he stood back to allow the other to pass out. "One of the assistants may remember to whom they sold the suit--a very nice suit it was, although the master never had any fancy for stripes. Good day, sir."

The Inspector was obliged to take a firm stand at the well-known establishment of Messrs. Hobbs. The young man of whom he first made enquiries declined to have anything to do with the matter.

"We buy from and sell secondhand clothes to gentlemen," he admitted, "and although we don't see any harm in it they don't like their business talked about. I cannot tell you anything about the coat, sir."

Fanshawe handed him a card.

"You had better not talk to me like that," he said. "I am a Police Inspector and I am here on serious business. Do you mind fetching one of your principals?"

The salesman read the card, stared at the Inspector and bustled off. Soon he reappeared with a little gentleman of responsible appearance who was rubbing his hands and looking slightly anxious.

"What's this, what's this?" he asked. "Do I understand that you are from the police, sir?"

"Police Inspector Fanshawe is my name," was the brusque reply. "I have brought a coat which I understand was sold to you with a number of other suits by a Captain Denham of the Albany."

The little man pounced upon the coat, shook it and held it up.

"You don't expect me to be able to say yes or no to that, sir, I am quite sure," he protested. "We have been known to buy a thousand suits a day. We don't say where they come from, we don't tell anyone--not even the police--unless we've got to. It's not business. As to telling you who bought that coat, even if it was sold from here, you might as well expect us to tell you offhand how many pairs of trousers we've got in stock."

"I must ask you to give me your serious attention, Mr. Hobbs," the Inspector said. "This is a police affair and I should advise you to treat it as such. You have, I suppose, something like half a dozen salesmen in this department--perhaps more. I expect you to ask them one by one whether they recognise this garment and whether it has ever been through their hands."

"Look here," the elderly gentleman observed with a cunning smile. "You don't know much about the secondhand clothes business, Mr. Inspector. I'll bring the salesmen, if you like, and you shall ask them and I will lay twenty to one that nobody remembers ever having seen that coat before. It's their job to forget. They sell secondhand clothes. It's what they're paid for. They're paid to forget, whereas other people are paid to remember."

"Send for three or four of your assistants at once," the Inspector ordered. "I will question them myself."

Mr. Hobbs smiled. He waved his hand, called another man by name, despatched a messenger for others. They came along, two or three of them, with tape measures round their necks.

"Here are some of my salesmen," he pointed out. "The rest will come as soon as they are disengaged. Ask them what you want."

The Inspector handed over the garment. They all looked at it carefully.

"Did any one of you sell that coat?" he asked.

They were quite emphatic on the point that they had never seen the coat before. Others of the salesmen came along one by one. The memories of all of them were complete blanks.

"It is not a reasonable question, Inspector," Mr. Hobbs, who was standing in the background, declared. "Each of my salesmen, when he has a customer, would probably have to show five or six suits before he made a sale. If he has twenty customers during the day that means a hundred suits that go through his hands."

"I am to take it that not one of you has ever seen this coat before, then?" the Inspector persisted drily.

"I wouldn't say that, sir," one of the seniors protested. "I expect it is the same with the others as it is with me--we just don't remember it. You should see where our secondhand clothes are packed. They are not catalogued or anything. We just take them out and show them and put them back if we don't make a sale. There's no reason why we should remember them. Is it sense to take up our time asking?"

"The police have a right to take up your time at any moment they choose," the Inspector pronounced sternly. "I am going to Scotland Yard when I leave here and I shall tell them my impressions--which are that you have all made up your minds beforehand that you are not going to remember anything that may help the police in their work. I expect half the clothes you sell go to people who want to escape recognition."

"Ah, no, no, Mr. Inspector," the principal remonstrated as he walked by his side towards the door. "But don't you understand this? The people who sell their clothes to a secondhand dealer are ashamed of it and the people who buy clothes from a secondhand shop are ashamed of it. That's because they are all snobs, but it is the truth. That's why I don't think that you will ever trace that coat. Good morning, Inspector."

Mr. Hobbs returned to the middle of his emporium with a smile upon his face. He addressed the little group of young men.

"What business do you think we should do," he asked, "if we told the police all they wanted to know? Captain Denham, he may have sold me clothes--I never heard of them. You might have sold that coat, any one of you, but you couldn't remember it. We forget our sellers, we forget our buyers and that way the business pays. Get to your work, gentlemen. There are two or three customers in the place who are not receiving attention."

XI

Sir Theodore Markham, Bart., head of the firm of Markham and Sons, was a man of great influence and note in the City of London. He was the senior partner of perhaps the best known and most respected firm of solicitors in the City and amongst his clients were many famous men of the day. It was a great tribute to the esteem in which Sir Adam Blockton was held that he should have travelled down to Norchester himself on receipt of the urgent telephone call from Giles Mowbray. The two men were seated together in the reading room of the County Club, and Mowbray, taking a very exceptional liberty, had locked the door to ensure a few minutes of complete privacy.

"You will permit me to say how much I appreciate your coming like this, Sir Theodore," he said. "Nothing but a most extraordinary sequence of circumstances would have given me the courage to beg for your presence at an hour's notice. To tell you the truth, we are almost at our wits' end to know what action to take."

"Everything I have heard is most confusing," Sir Theodore confessed. "Of course, old Sir Adam was a crank--we all know that--but his is still a great name in the City and, apart from the fact that I am one of his executors and my firm are your town agents, I felt, from the way you worded your message, that if I could be of any assistance I had better come. Lady Pengwill rang us up this morning but of course we could say nothing."

"I am not proposing to bore you with too many details," Mowbray assured him. "You are seated in the very chair now that seems to have its part in this tragedy. Twenty-four hours ago Sir Adam Blockton was occupying it. He was summoned to his lunch. The steward came to fetch him. He had certainly been in that chair two minutes before. He had disappeared. Nothing in the way of search by all of us here and later by the police has been of the slightest avail. Adam Blockton might as well have stepped off the edge of the world."

"God bless my soul!" Sir Theodore exclaimed. "Still, you cannot believe that anything serious has happened to him. It's only twenty-four hours ago, anyway."

"Other things have happened in those twenty-four hours," the lawyer continued. "Yesterday afternoon my nephew was round at the bank discussing future arrangements with the cashier. The bank is practically at a standstill, so far as business is concerned. The cashier, the only one who knew anything about affairs, never recovered from the shock of Sir Adam's disappearance and died last night. Before he died he told the Chief Constable that the strongboxes in the vault, to which he alone had access and which were believed to contain every form of security to a vast amount, are some of them empty. As regards the working capital of the bank, the accounts have been closed down and down till there's very seldom a cheque presented at all or any business done. The two clerks have control of a few hundred pounds between them and if a cheque should be presented for a larger amount--well, we don't know where to go for the money. Neither my nephew nor myself, although I am one of Sir Adam's executors, feel that we could deal with the matter of the strongroom without some member of the family being present. The Chief Constable hesitated to give us authority, and a formal application to the magistrates would certainly be considered premature. In the meantime, as I daresay you have read in the morning papers, a young man whom no one in

this part of the world has ever seen before has been found dead in the vault with a bullet in his heart."

"It is the most extraordinary story," Sir Theodore admitted. "Should I seem to be fantastic if I asked for a sherry-and-bitters at once? I have had a rapid drive down here and, as a matter of fact, I only opened my *Times* half an hour ago. The murder, of course, gives a most unpleasant flavour to the whole business."

Mr. Mowbray rang the bell, unlocked the door, gave the order and obtained the required refreshment. Sir Theodore drank his glassful at a gulp. Mr. Mowbray, who had ordered one for himself, dealt with his more leniently.

"The Coroner's inquest on the body of the stranger is fixed for to-morrow," he recounted. "No one has been able to identify him, but Captain Elmhurst, our local Chief Constable, sent an Inspector up to London last night with the coat the dead man had been wearing, which was made by a Savile Row tailor. The name of the maker was there but the name of the wearer had been cut out. The Inspector telephoned an hour ago to say that the coat had been made for a gentleman in the Albany but that his valet, with his master's permission, disposed of a quantity of his clothes lately to a secondhand dealer, and from them, the Inspector reports, he could get no satisfactory information. Quite properly he then visited Scotland Yard and is bringing a detective down with him to help us."

"This is indeed a most extraordinary story," Sir Theodore repeated. "But frankly I am more interested in our client, Mowbray. The man might have been, in fact it seems certain that he was, engaged in some burglarious exploit. It doesn't seem to connect up with Sir Adam's disappearance in any way. That is what I want to concentrate upon. Where is Sir Adam? Is it true that some of his safes have been tampered with? Has he gone out of his mind or anything of that sort? His estate must be prodigious, far too large to--"

"Forgive my interrupting, Sir Theodore," Mr. Mowbray begged, "but we are up against an urgent problem which must be dealt with at once. That is why I took the liberty of telephoning to your house so early this morning. There are just those two clerks left at the bank, neither of whom has been treated with the slightest confidence. One of them came to my house last night to know what to do. I suppose I ought to have said 'Don't open the doors'--and then I remembered. Old man Blockton, he was sixty years at the bank, his father longer than that, his grandfather sixty years. To put up the shutters seemed too awful. I told them to open as usual and I sent a few hundred pounds across in case any small cheque should turn up."

Sir Theodore smiled ironically.

"A few hundred pounds," he murmured, "to Blockton's!"

"You will go there with me directly after lunch, I hope, Sir Theodore," Mowbray went on. "You will understand then. Since ten o'clock this morning no client has entered the bank nor have any local cheques been presented. Through the midday exchange, however, there arrived a draft for five thousand pounds, brought round by a messenger from another local bank."

"The devil!" Sir Theodore exclaimed. "Signed by the old man?"

"Signed by Adam Blockton. I would swear to his signature anywhere, but apart from that, Paul Reynolds lives here, the greatest handwriting expert in the country, as you know. I sent for him. He had one look at it. Without hesitation he pronounced it to be a genuine signature."

There is no disputing Paul Reynolds' opinion. He has never been wrong in his life. It is payable to Walter Ruffin and properly endorsed. It came from the *Crédit Lyonnais* in Paris. It was sent over to Blockton's Bank through the National."

"What did they do about it, those young men that you say are there?" Sir Theodore enquired.

"Well, according to the local custom here," the solicitor pointed out, "it should have been sent in between twelve and one when local cheques are exchanged from one bank to the other. The time limit, I think, is the closing hour at the bank, that is to say, if the money is provided before four o'clock the cheque is honoured. The senior of the two clerks asked for the cheque to be presented again just before closing time."

"What about Sir Adam's chequebook? Has that turned up?"

"Very little of Sir Adam's personal property has been found," Giles Mowbray replied, "but in one of the drawers of his desk we came across a perfectly new chequebook on Blockton's Bank, with one cheque missing. That cheque is the one which has been presented for five thousand pounds. The amount is filled in properly and the name of Ruffin is there on the counterfoil."

"What is the trouble, then?" Sir Theodore asked. "Why not pay it?"

"Simply this. We don't know where the bank money is. A thousand pounds is all that has been seen in the bank for more than a year. Groome, the cashier, as I have told you, died last night from shock. Just towards the end,--he may have been raving; I am inclined to think myself that he was,--he told us what I have told you about the steel lockers in the vault. Now, I am one of Sir Adam's executors and you are the other. With or without a magistrate's order I think that we should be justified in opening the lockers and taking out enough money to honour that draft."

Sir Theodore for a moment or two seemed dazed. A thin, precise-looking man with aristocratic features and carriage, he had more the appearance of a cabinet minister than a solicitor. Giles Mowbray watched him anxiously.

"You see, the point is," the latter continued, "nothing may have happened to Sir Adam, but are we to let a cheque drawn by himself for such a sum as five thousand pounds on his own bank be returned dishonoured? What I suggest is this, Sir Theodore: that we open the strongroom up this afternoon, produce the money, get the draft or have it photographed and pass it on to Scotland Yard. It ought to be useful to them. Mr. Walter Ruffin must have a real existence, with an account at the *Crédit Lyonnais*."

"Yes, yes, I see," Sir Theodore assented. "I think you are right. It is a pity there is not a member of the family here, but after all, it is not of much importance. When can we go to the bank?"

"As soon as we have lunched."

"Then let that be soon," Sir Theodore begged.

Giles Mowbray led the way into the dining room, followed by Sir Theodore. A dozen of the lunchers rose to their feet, anxious to speak to the former, but he waved them back again and made his way to a retired corner.

"Of course," he went on, "the whole town is crazy about this business. We have disconnected our telephone at the office and I simply have nothing to say to anyone. I have read a great many of these mystery stories, but a disappearance like this I have never come across."

"Our only hope must be," Sir Theodore observed, crumbling up his roll, "that Sir Adam's millions have not disappeared, too."

"That is impossible," Mowbray declared. "For twenty or thirty years Adam Blockton has lived the same simple, cheese-paring life in his couple of rooms over the bank. In all that time I think he has only been absent for about a fortnight. Everyone knew that he was wilfully liquidating the business. He has had offers from every bank in the town and a great many London firms to take him over and every one has met with a point-blank refusal. The worst of it is that he took no one into his confidence. I knew no more what he was doing than the man in the moon. Neither did Martin, my nephew, who I think was rather more of a favourite with him. The place has been run for the last year on the most rigidly economical lines. The man who was Sir Adam's only regular domestic servant donned a livery at ten o'clock and became the bank doorkeeper. He had a Rolls-Royce and a chauffeur and although it is so close he drove up here to lunch every day and in the summer he took a drive in the country. Beyond that the chauffeur had nothing to do. The car never left the garage."

"But how could he get out of this place without being seen?" Sir Theodore asked, glancing round the room.

Giles Mowbray was as near distraction as any man can be and remain polite.

"Sir Theodore," he said, "I have been asked that question a thousand times in twenty-four hours. I have only one answer. I don't know."

"Is there anything to connect the attempted burglary with Sir Adam's disappearance?"

"Nothing."

"Do you believe the late cashier's story that some of those steel lockers are empty?"

"Why not? There are enough of them, if they were full, to hold securities of sufficient value to buy the whole of the City."

Sir Theodore went off at a tangent.

"Who was the first man to discover Sir Adam's disappearance?" he asked.

Mowbray beckoned to the steward, who was hovering in the background. He came at once to the table and bowed respectfully.

"This is Sir Theodore Markham, Sir Adam's London solicitor, Lawford," Mowbray said. "He has just asked me who was the first person to discover Sir Adam's disappearance."

"I was, sir," Lawford declared with a deferential bow. "Sir Adam was a man of extraordinarily precise habits. His luncheon was placed upon the table here every day at ten minutes past one. I went in to him and told him that his cutlets were served. He nodded in his usual fashion and I left, expecting to see him in his place within two minutes. In three minutes I went out to see what had happened. Sir Adam had left his chair. He was nowhere in the room. He could not have left the club. He was not in the club. Those are the conclusions, sir, that are forced in upon us."

"Well, they save a lot of idle questions, anyway," Sir Theodore observed drily.

The steward obeyed a summons from his desk and hurried away with a murmured word of apology.

"Been with you long, that fellow?" Sir Theodore enquired.

"Twenty-two years," was the quiet reply. "He was a pageboy here, then waiter, afterwards head waiter, now manager. He has a most respectable wife but no family. I should not be saying too much if I were to declare that he was a man of impeccable character."

"If I ask any more questions," Sir Theodore remarked, "I shall get to look as flummoxed as you do! Excellent joint of lamb, this, Mowbray. I'm going to devote myself to my luncheon. Your Bernkasteler, too, is excellent."

"We have," his host told him, "in Lawford a marvellous steward."

"In a few minutes," Sir Theodore confided, "I shall finish my luncheon with a little of that excellent Cheddar cheese I see upon the sideboard. I shall also drink one more glass of this wine. I shall then be at your service. Until that time, I pronounce ten minutes' silence on the subject of Sir Adam's disappearance. They say that you can never think and digest at the same time. Nevertheless, I am going to do my best."

Giles Mowbray accepted the respite with a sigh of relief.

XII

Everything appeared to be as usual when, half an hour or so later, Giles Mowbray ushered his companion into the bank. Dyson was there in his brown livery to open the swing doors, the two clerks were standing in their accustomed places and Martin Mowbray came out to them at once from the private office. He shook hands with Sir Theodore, who was looking curiously around.

"Well," he said, "rather a small affair, of course, but there is nothing here to hint at tragedies. So this is Blockton's Bank to-day. I remember when that extension was opened and there were a dozen clerks at work here."

"One by one they have gone, as the business declined," Giles Mowbray observed, "and mark you, Sir Theodore, it declined simply because Sir Adam wished it so. If the Lord Mayor of the City had come in to open an account within the last few years, Adam would only have shaken his head sagely and said that the bank were not extending their business. He could have had Armstrong's huge cotton mills ten years ago when they built their new factories, on terms which would have meant a small fortune for any bank, and he refused. However, we have told you all that, Sir Theodore. Is there anything fresh, Martin?"

"In a way there is," the young man replied. "Come inside a moment, will you?"

They followed him into the private office. He made his way to the writing table, pulled out the second drawer on the left and laid it before them.

"Sir Adam seems to be living up to his reputation for meticulous neatness," he remarked, "or else this drawer should be evidence of his impending departure. In the first partition here is that private chequebook with a counterfoil duly filled in, as I expect my uncle has told you, to a man called Walter Ruffin for five thousand pounds."

Sir Theodore handled the chequebook and nodded.

"In the second partition," Martin Mowbray went on, "I found this."

He produced a rather rust-stained but elaborate key. Attached to it was a label: "Master Key of all lockers, to be used only in case of my illness or my inability to attend to my own affairs."

"This becomes interesting," Sir Theodore murmured.

"Here in the third partition," Martin continued, "is this envelope. You see upon it, written in Sir Adam's handwriting--'A copy of my Will with Codicils drawn up and added to at various subsequent dates.'"

"That's all right," his uncle acquiesced. "The original is at the office."

A sudden interruption arrived. There was an imperative tapping upon the door. Martin Mowbray crossed the room hastily and threw it open.

"Lady Diana!" he exclaimed.

Diana Pengwill swept into the room. Martin closed the door behind her. She looked around from one to the other, suddenly recognised Sir Theodore and held out her hand.

"Sir Theodore, you remember me, I'm sure," she said. "I am Diana Pengwill. Is there any news, please?"

Sir Theodore greeted her impressively.

"I am afraid not, Lady Diana," he replied. "Nothing has been heard of your grandfather and the position has become, I think I may call it, acute."

"Dear me! Something fresh. What is it?"

"Considering what we know of your grandfather's great wealth, Lady Diana, I think you will agree with me that the situation is a peculiar one. Legally, Mr. Mowbray and I, who are executors, are not entitled to conclude that your grandfather, because he has disappeared, has also departed from this life. We have no right to interfere with his papers, correspondence or accounts."

"Then why should you?" the girl asked coolly. "I don't believe in grandfather's disappearance at all. He was always a buffoon. This is probably one of his tricks."

"But my dear young lady. . ." Sir Theodore protested. "Do let me give you this chair. No? Well, I was just going to say that the position is this--a cheque has been presented, drawn upon the funds of the bank, or rather upon your grandfather's private account, signed by him for five thousand pounds. We cannot quite make up our minds what to do with it."

"Why, pay it, of course," the girl answered. "So long as you are sure it is his signature, why shouldn't you?"

Sir Theodore coughed.

"So far," he ventured to point out, "we have not been able to discover any further assets belonging to the bank than a thousand pounds, which might be regarded as petty cash and a portion of which the two clerks used to play shuffleboard with each day and hand back intact at night. Even that has disappeared now and the few hundred pounds which are in their tills have been provided by Mr. Mowbray here."

Diana threw herself into an easy chair and laughed softly.

"Are you all crazy?" she exclaimed. "Do you mean to say--you, Mr. Giles Mowbray and you, Sir Theodore, my grandfather's executors, who will presently have the handling of all his wealth--do you mean to say that you hesitate about paying a paltry sum like five thousand pounds?"

"That is all very well, Lady Diana," Giles Mowbray rejoined, and his tone began to give evidence of his frayed nerves, "but we have not been able to find five thousand pounds. We have no right to look, anyway. We have to go beyond our powers if we open a single one of those safes. There is no evidence that your grandfather is dead. Until the statutory period has elapsed we are his executors for the future. We have no right to touch a penny for the present."

"Anyone connected with the bank," Diana protested, "would be justified in paying a cheque signed by my grandfather--whatever the amount was."

"You go and tell those two young men that," Giles Mowbray suggested. "So far as my memory serves me they have two hundred pounds to play with. They are all that is left of the

bank. Mr. Groome--perhaps you did not know that, Lady Diana--it is a very sad thing, but he died last night."

"Poor fellow!" the girl exclaimed. "I'm sorry--although it can't be much of a change for him. He looked half-dead standing behind that wire thing. I never saw him smile. I never saw him when his eyes were not weary. After all, though, I have only been in the bank two or three times. Are those the keys of the safes?" she asked, pointing to the little collection upon the table.

"This is the master key of all of them, according to the label," Martin replied.

"We shall have to decide almost at once what is to be done about the cheque," Sir Theodore intervened. "Supposing we open one of the more important-looking safes. In these very peculiar circumstances I am willing to take the risk of associating myself with the enterprise. I know the Court we shall be up against if anyone should at any time object to our premature action, and I am perfectly certain that we run no risk of being censured. I propose that we all investigate the safes."

"I agree," Giles Mowbray declared emphatically. "A little more of this business would make lunatics of us all. Lady Diana, I hope you have no objections?"

"Not at all," she answered. "I am all for it."

"Then, Martin, open the trap door and we will go down," his uncle directed.

The young man did as he was told. Sir Theodore looked over his shoulder into the vault.

"Is this the place where the murder was committed?" he asked.

"You are going to walk over the exact spot where the body was found," was the rather sober reply. "This way, please."

Martin descended the stairs and turned on the lights. They all followed him. Sir Theodore looked around him with interest.

"Most extraordinary," he said half to himself. "And that door opposite, by the side of the screen that is leaning against the wall?"

"That leads to Sir Adam's apartments. If you choose to stay and attend the inquest to-morrow, Sir Theodore, you will find that the evidence seems to denote that the man was killed somewhere about the four or fifth step, where you are now, and that the bullet was fired from somewhere round the bottom of the steps the other side of the vault. There were other wounds, but the doctor's evidence indicates that they might have been occasioned by falling on the slippery floor after he had been shot."

Sir Theodore continued to look about him with unabated curiosity.

"Why all that large quantity of brown paper and string on the bench in the corner between the two rows of lockers?" he asked.

"I have asked Dyson, the man upstairs, about that," Martin replied. "He could tell us nothing. He thinks an occasional parcel was sent away because the string sometimes has been cut and the sealing wax used, but he imagines that nearly all the certificates and bonds which Sir Adam was holding were kept by the brokers in London."

"Very unusual, I should have thought," Sir Theodore murmured.

"Everything here is unusual," Giles Mowbray rejoined irritably. "It seems as though nothing that ever happened in this damned place was ever done as it would have been in any other institution. My brain cannot stand much more of it. Let's decide which of the safes we shall open."

"Supposing we leave it to the young lady," Sir Theodore suggested. "Now then, Lady Diana, any one of them."

The girl tapped one with her knuckles.

"This has had letters painted upon it," she pointed out. "'Thomas Stafford--Lindley Hall.' That's somewhere near Wroton Park."

"Thomas Stafford has been dead some time," Martin remarked. "He has a son, though. We'll see what's inside."

He fitted the key into the lock and turned it. They all leaned forward eagerly. Sir Theodore only remained in the background, but his superior height enabled him to look over the others' shoulders. The door opened without any difficulty. There were three shelves, two little cupboards and four drawers. The shelves were empty, the drawers were empty; so were the cupboards.

"My God!" Giles Mowbray gasped.

"As a matter of fact," Martin reflected, "it must be eighteen or twenty years since Thomas Stafford died, and I know that his son changed his banking account directly afterwards. Let us try another one. There is one here which looks as though nothing had ever been painted on it."

He fitted in the key and once more the door swung open. The interior was fitted up in exactly the same manner. He opened the drawers and the cupboards. All were empty. His uncle raised his hand to his forehead. It was suddenly damp.

"Go on, Martin," he begged. "Try two or three more. Take 'em straight along."

The young man pointed with his forefinger to the name painted upon the next one.

"The Right Honourable the Marquis of St. Leonards," he whispered. "Lord Lieutenant of the County."

He threw open the door. The cupboards and drawers were empty and the shelves bare. After that he proceeded with his task in grim silence. In twenty minutes half the lockers in the place had been opened. Every one of them was empty.

"Try the old man's locker, Martin," his uncle suggested in a voice which he himself scarcely recognised as being his own. "There's his name in big capitals and you've got the key. Try that."

Martin did as he was bidden, opened the door and pointed to the empty cupboards and the bare shelves. There was not a vestige of any sort of document or paper in any of the safes except an occasional old ledger of no possible significance. Then a sudden quaint sort of fury seemed to fall upon his uncle. He snatched the key away from Martin and from locker to locker he passed along the whole row, turning the key like a madman, throwing the doors open until he came to the last one. Everywhere was the same result. Not a deed, not a

mortgage, not a certificate, not a coin, not a single banknote. It was a drama of emptiness. Giles Mowbray flung the key on to the bare floor and staggered towards the stairs.

"I shall choke if I stay in this damn' place any longer! I'm going up," he muttered.

They all followed him into the bank parlour. They found him there, seated in the stately Georgian chair at the desk, his head buried in his hands. Sir Theodore, swinging his monocle by its cord, stood a little away from the others looking up at the oil painting above the mantelpiece. He seemed to be by far the least perturbed, although he had suddenly remembered a bill of costs amounting to several thousand pounds.

"This is a strange business," he said at last, "but to my thinking, the discovery we have just made does something to clear up the mystery. It is perfectly obvious that Sir Adam, for some reason or other, has been getting rid of his securities batch by batch. Naturally, it would take him a long time, during which the bank has been kept open as a matter of form. As soon as he has finished, away goes Sir Adam. That is no longer an inexplicable thing. When a man has disposed of several million pounds' worth of his belongings he is very apt to dispose of himself in some fashion or another. Don't you think so, Mowbray?"

Giles Mowbray raised himself with an effort. There was a livid streak in his florid cheeks and he seemed suddenly to have aged.

"Well, I suppose that's one way of looking at it, Sir Theodore," he admitted. "I can't seem to realise anything yet. All the years I have known Sir Adam he has never once asked me to step down into the vaults. I remember there was a time when he did hold a good many mortgages of my clients' but they have all been paid off years ago. Martin--what about the rooms upstairs?"

"The police have searched them," his nephew replied. "They had a perfect right to, under the circumstances. They do not seem to have found anything of the slightest importance--certainly no documents or bonds."

"I should have in the two clerks for a moment," Sir Theodore suggested. "It may be only a matter of form, but I think it should be done."

The two young men duly made their appearance. Sir Theodore addressed the one who seemed to be the elder.

"I am going to ask you one or two questions, Mr.--let me see, what is your name?"

"Haskell, sir."

"Mr. Haskell. If your companion there wishes he, too, can answer. Have either of you been down in the vaults?"

"Never since I came to the bank, sir," Haskell replied.

"Never," his junior echoed.

"Have you ever heard of anyone going down--Mr. Groome, for instance, to bring up any bonds, documents, mortgages of any sort, that were wanted by clients?"

"Never, sir."

"Had you reason to believe that there was a reserve stock of money down there?"

"I always believed that there must be a reserve stock somewhere, sir," Haskell replied, "but I had no idea whether it was in the vaults or whether Sir Adam kept it in his apartments. I think I must have believed that it was in the vaults."

"Just so," Sir Theodore murmured. "A very reasonable assumption. Thank you, gentlemen. Well, I think there is nothing more to ask you. I should like--"

There was a tap at the door. Haskell answered it briefly, then he turned round to Giles Mowbray.

"It is the bank messenger with reference to the draft for five thousand pounds," he announced.

"Ask him to wait for a moment," was the somewhat hesitating reply. "You can go now, both of you."

The two clerks left the room. Sir Theodore was the first to break a somewhat strained and nervous silence.

"My brother executor," he said, addressing Giles Mowbray, "what are we going to do about this?"

"God only knows," the old man at the desk muttered.

Sir Theodore patted him on the shoulder.

"We must face the situation," he insisted. "I do not mind admitting that a half-hour ago, before our astonishing visit to the vaults below, I should not have hesitated. I should have asked you to go with me to the manager of the bank who had presented the draft and paid it. At the present moment I must confess that I am bewildered. Sir Adam's millions may have gone from the vaults here, but they cannot have disappeared into thin air; and when one thinks of his career, his father's and his grandfather's before him, the idea of letting a draft for five thousand pounds be dishonoured seems to be rather a ghastly proposition. Whatever you say, Mr. Mowbray, I will stand in with you. We must make a decision, though, and make it quickly. Shall we pay this draft and debit the amount to the estate--I suppose there will be an estate of some sort--or shall we let it be dishonoured?"

Giles Mowbray struck the desk in front of him with his clenched fist.

"We have been left," he declared, "in an unconscionable position. If that old devil--God, it's only a few hours ago I saw him leering up at that statue of his father's with just that devilment in his face which seemed as though he were up to some game! He wrote the cheque, he cleared out his vaults, he has done the disappearance, he must pay the price. Send the draft back. Haskell must mark it 'Refer to Drawer.'"

Sir Theodore had been looking at the oil painting and he seemed troubled.

"It is a terrible thing to have to confess," he acknowledged, "but I do not see, I really do not see how it is to be avoided."

Diana sprang suddenly to her feet. She came up to the table. She, too, a moment before had been gazing up at the picture.

"But it must be avoided!" she exclaimed passionately. "I never heard anything so dreadful. Adam Blockton's cheque dishonoured just because we don't know exactly where he is or what

has become of his money! You can't do that. That old man," she went on, looking up once more at the picture, "would turn in his grave at the thought."

"My dear young lady," Sir Theodore pointed out gravely, "five thousand pounds is a great deal of money. Remember, we have no clue as to what has become of Sir Adam and those safes below may mean a drama which has been going on all these years and of which we have remained in ignorance."

"Well, you know he can't have spent his money," she argued. "Mr. Mowbray, think of the years you have known my grandfather! You cannot let a cheque of his be dishonoured just because we do not know exactly where he is. Tell them to hold it over. Give us time to do something. I will go to the bank in the morning."

Giles Mowbray smiled grimly. He knew quite accurately the state of the Pengwill finances. Sir Theodore, too, shook his head. There was a knock at the door. Haskell re-entered.

"Excuse me, Mr. Mowbray," he said, "but the bank messenger can wait no longer."

"I'll send him away," Martin Mowbray declared, slipping out of the room.

"You are going to let the cheque be dishonoured!" Diana exclaimed. "You call yourself his friend--and you, Mr. Mowbray!"

Sir Theodore shook his head.

"Make no mistake, young lady," he begged. "Sir Adam Blockton had no friends."

"You, at least, then?" she cried, turning to Giles Mowbray.

"My dear Lady Diana," the latter replied drearily. "I can only echo Sir Theodore's words. Your grandfather had no friends. He asked for none, he desired none. He lived the most detached life of any man I have ever heard of. He spoke to no one if he could help it. He accepted no civilities. He never offered any. I do not know what has become of his money, I do not know what has become of him, but I tell you this--if he were to walk in here alive to-day, I assure you that he would be astonished if, under all these circumstances, any one of us had taken a risk and found those five thousand pounds. He would probably sit down and try to think out a way to avoid repayment."

She turned her back upon both of them. Sir Theodore, with a swift movement, was first at the door. He detained her for a moment.

"Lady Diana," he pleaded, "you are being a little severe upon us. We are only behaving as any two men of reasonable intelligence would behave under these extraordinary circumstances. If a miracle should happen, and Sir Adam makes a normal reappearance into life and this vast fortune of his re-materialises, what difference will it have made to him if, in his absence--"

"If you will kindly open the door, Sir Theodore," she interrupted. "At once, please. You know and I know that whether my grandfather is dead or alive it is a sin to dishonour his memory. If you please!"

She almost wrenched the door handle from his fingers. He stepped back with a grave little bow. The two clerks, who were putting on their hats and coats, stared at her in amazement. Dyson held open the outside door, his cap in his hand. She passed out speechless into the rain-drenched streets.

XIII

Captain Elmhurst was not greatly impressed by the famous Scotland Yard detective whom Fanshawe had brought down with him from headquarters and who was now seated in the historical easy chair of the reading room of the club. He was a fairly bulky young man with flaxen complexion, heavy face and sleepy eyes with thick eyelids. If indeed he possessed intelligence it was carefully concealed. His appearance, too, was not improved by a somewhat singular taste in clothes. He wore a loosely cut suit of a shade between ginger and snuff-colour, and his overlarge collar was evidently chosen more for comfort than appearance. His name was Inspector Snell and, rather against the Chief Constable's wishes, he had begged to be allowed to visit first the club from which Sir Adam Blockton had disappeared. He had, too, a habit of repeating to himself, in what seemed almost a monologue, information which he had been given.

"So this is the chair in which the banker was seated three minutes before his disappearance," he reflected. "The steward of the club, wasn't it, who announced his luncheon, left him sitting here and three minutes later returned to find that he had disappeared?"

"That is the story," Captain Elmhurst remarked. "I see you have got it pat already."

"My friend Fanshawe told me all that I know," Inspector Snell confided. "We had a long talk about the whole affair, coming down in the train."

"I should have thought you would have been more anxious to examine the scene of the murder, before you tackled the question of Sir Adam's disappearance," Elmhurst remarked. "However, since you are here, I suppose you would like to have a word or two with the steward himself?"

The Inspector nodded but did not seem in any way eager.

"Perhaps it would be as well, so long as I am here," he agreed. "He has been with you a long time, hasn't he?"

"Twenty-two years," Elmhurst confided. "He is quite the model steward, I can assure you. Had heaps of offers to leave the club, they say, but never seemed to want to."

"Wife and family, I suppose. Settled down and that sort of thing?" Snell suggested.

"Precisely, but no children. His only weakness seems to be cricket. We have generally to give him a half day off when there's a county match on."

"Twenty-two years," Snell repeated. "Quite a long time. Who was chairman of the committee when he was engaged?"

"Good heavens, I don't know," Elmhurst replied. "I wasn't here then. You would like to know that?"

The Inspector was mildly apologetic.

"I just thought I would like to know where he was before."

"I can tell you that even though I was not here," Elmhurst answered. "He started life as a pageboy here, became a waiter, then head waiter, afterwards steward and manager. However, you would probably like a word or two with him yourself."

"Yes, just a word, if you don't mind."

The Chief Constable rang the bell.

"Is Mr. Martin Mowbray in the club?" he asked the waiter.

"Not at present, sir."

"Is the steward about?"

"He is in his room, sir."

"Ask him to step this way for a moment," Elmhurst begged.

With his usual air of deference and looking as neat as though he had stepped out of a bandbox, Lawford, without noticeable delay, duly presented himself. Inspector Snell sat up and glanced at him listlessly.

"Just been hearing of your wonderful record here, Lawford," he said. "You must have become very much attached to all the members."

"I have indeed, sir," the man answered respectfully. "The place has grown to seem like home to me. I shall be sorry when the time comes for me to leave."

"Not thinking about leaving, are you?" Snell asked.

"Not at present, sir. Certainly not," was the quick reply. "So long as I am able to work and give satisfaction I never want to look for another situation."

"It must have been a great shock to you--this disappearance of Sir Adam's," Snell went on. "He was quite one of your best patrons, I understand."

Lawford's reply, although perfectly respectful, was lacking in enthusiasm.

"He was a difficult gentleman, sir," he said. "I always did my best for him."

"I expect everyone has been asking you this sort of question, Lawford," the Inspector went on in his drowsy apologetic tone, "but I've got to go through with it, you know. You didn't notice anything peculiar about Sir Adam yesterday morning, I suppose?"

"Nothing, except that he seemed to be muttering to himself rather often and to be particularly interested in the statue just opposite. He made me move the blind a little, once, because it obstructed his view. The statue was of his father, as I daresay you know, sir."

"I fancy I have heard that," Snell admitted. "You had no sort of conversation with him, I suppose, when you told him that his luncheon was served? You didn't stay to help him from his chair, for instance, or anything of that sort?"

"I knew better," was the quiet reply. "He used a stick occasionally in walking, a stout ash stick. It was rubber shod, but he was quite capable of getting about with it."

"And he said nothing to you when you announced that luncheon was ready, or when you came back," Snell observed.

"When I came back, sir, Sir Adam was not here," Lawford reminded his questioner.

"Of course not, of course not. Stupid of me. What wine did Sir Adam generally drink in the mornings?"

"Clicquot, sir. We always had to keep a few pints in stock of the oldest vintage on the market. The half-bottle he was drinking was '21."

"Did he manage the whole pint?"

"Always, sir. There was perhaps a tablespoonful remaining when I announced lunch, and I poured it into his glass."

The Inspector smiled.

"And had he drunk it when you returned and found his chair empty?"

"He had, sir. The glass was empty."

"Good old sportsman," Snell murmured. "Well, it is a queer business. Looks to me as though the old gentleman were playing a trick upon you all. Thank you very much, Lawford."

"Nothing else you would like to ask me, sir?"

"I don't see that there is anything else I can ask at present," the Inspector replied placidly. "Somehow, the old gentleman must have got out of his chair and into the street during those three minutes. Could be done, I suppose, especially if he had a strange car waiting near."

"You must ask the hall porter about that, sir. I don't think anyone has thought of it before."

"Is Johnson on duty?" Captain Elmhurst asked.

"I think he is, sir. He was tidying up just outside the lavatory when I came in."

"Send him here a minute, will you?"

"Certainly, sir."

Lawford took his leave. A moment later there was a knock at the door and a red-haired young man in a page's uniform which seemed a little too small for him made his appearance. Captain Elmhurst called him over.

"We are still worrying about Sir Adam's disappearance, Johnson," he said, "and this gentleman would like to ask you a question."

"Certainly, sir."

"Did you see Sir Adam come into the club yesterday morning?" Snell asked.

"Yes, sir."

"Did you see him go out?"

"I'm afraid I didn't, sir. I must have been close around, too. I didn't leave the hall except for a moment when the lavatory bell rang and Mr. Holden wanted clean towels."

"I wonder what became of his hat," Snell reflected.

"I have no idea, sir. He never left his hat in the hall. He always took it with him into the reading room."

"Why was that?"

The youth grinned.

"A gentleman took his hat by mistake one day, sir, and it was three days before it was returned and he never parted with it again. Such a fuss he made of it!"

"He certainly seems to have been an oddity," Snell observed. "Tell me, Johnson, if anyone drove up in a car and you were on duty, would you go down to open the door for them?"

"Of course, sir, if I heard it."

"Anyone drive up in a car that morning besides Sir Adam?"

"Certainly, sir. Three or four. About one o'clock I was running up and down the steps all the time."

"Were there any strange cars outside?"

Johnson hesitated for a moment.

"There was one, sir. A big closed car."

"Where was it standing?"

"Halfway between our railings and Donnithorne's Yarn Warehouse next door."

"You don't think any of the club members came in it?"

"I'm sure they didn't, sir," was the prompt reply.

"Do you know what time it left?"

"I can't say, sir. It was gone when we all began to search the place for Sir Adam."

"Why didn't you tell us before that there was a strange car outside?" Captain Elmhurst asked severely.

"No one asked me, sir," the youth pointed out, "and I didn't think of it myself. It wasn't exactly outside our place, either."

Inspector Snell cleared his throat.

"Well, you'd better rub up your memory about that car, Johnson," he said. "You will find when there is a formal enquiry you will be asked some questions about that. It is a valuable piece of evidence. That will do for the present."

The youth took his leave. Captain Elmhurst looked across at the detective dubiously. The latter was rolling a cigarette with some papers and from a pouch of tobacco which he had taken from his pocket. His attention seemed to have wandered.

"A handsome building, this club, Captain Elmhurst."

"Quite a fine place," Elmhurst admitted. "Norchester is a rich city, you know, Inspector. The architect didn't have to think about money particularly when it was built."

"How long ago was that?" the Inspector asked.

"Some thirty-five years ago, I should say. You will have to ask one of the older members."

"Local architects?"

"I believe so."

Snell leaned over from the chair in which he was seated and tapped the wall by his side.

"H'm," he observed. "Solid enough, anyhow. Well, if you say the word, Captain Elmhurst, I am ready to go over to the bank."

"You wouldn't like to call in next door and ask if they had any visitors yesterday morning in such a car as Johnson described, first, would you?"

Snell shook himself lazily.

"It might be worth while later on," he remarked.

"Abduction of an elderly baronet," Snell murmured to himself as he took the place by Captain Elmhurst's side in the latter's car. "Quite a little drama, you know, Captain. Enormously rich, he was, I'm told."

"Supposed to have been many times a millionaire," Elmhurst replied. "He has let the bank run down to nothing now. You will be astonished when you see it. Two clerks, a cashier and a doorkeeper have been the entire staff during the last few years."

"Lived over the premises, didn't he?"

The Chief Constable nodded.

"Had an old woman come in to do for him, and Dyson, the doorporter, to valet him. Queer sort of household you'll find it when you begin to make enquiries. He has had every meal in the place or over at the club, except on the few occasions he has been away, for twenty to twenty-five years; and his way from his own premises into the bank, which he used practically every morning of his life, was through the vaults. He had a private staircase from his rooms leading into the vaults and a staircase on the other side leading into the bank parlour."

"That's where the murder took place?"

"Yes. I was beginning to wonder, Inspector, when you were going to show a little curiosity about that. The murder is an accomplished crime and the inquest is to-morrow. I should have thought that would have been more in your line than the disappearance of Sir Adam."

"Perhaps you're right," the Inspector murmured.

"You see, the disappearance took place about--well, say twenty-seven hours ago. That is less than a day and a half, Inspector. You have to let things run for a bit. We cannot take anything for granted. We have made enquiries, naturally, but there are a good many people who say that we shall see Sir Adam in his usual place at the club to-morrow for lunch. The time isn't long enough yet to make it a certainty that there is any ugly business about."

"You are certainly right, sir," Snell admitted. "I don't know what keeps putting the disappearance first into my mind. However, I have not wasted much time yet. I will just check over Fanshawe's evidence, which seems to me very carefully taken down, in the vaults there, and we will be ready for the inquest to-morrow. In the meantime--you will forgive me, I know, Captain Elmhurst, if I seem a trifle independent-like, but one gets ideas--yes, one gets ideas sometimes, and one cannot work against them," the Inspector concluded thoughtfully.

XIV

In the bank parlour Elmhurst and his companion found a small but interested group of the principals in what the morning press were alluding to in thick black headlines as Norchester's Double Tragedy. Both Giles Mowbray and his nephew were there, Sir Theodore was occupying Sir Adam's beautiful Georgian chair and Fanshawe was seated on the staircase leading down into the vaults.

"Sorry if we have kept you waiting," Elmhurst apologised. "I meant to bring the Inspector over here at once but I found it rather hard to drag him away from the club."

They all greeted Snell politely, although it was obvious that, as one of Scotland Yard's most brilliant detectives, he scarcely came up to their expectations.

"Entirely my fault, gentlemen," he confessed. "Rather an interesting place, that reading room with the statue outside and the chair in which the old gentleman had been seated. However, here I am, ready to help if there is anything I can do."

"You have heard the story of the position in which we are placed, I presume?" Sir Theodore enquired.

Snell nodded assent.

"Fanshawe has been through it with me once or twice," he admitted. "An interesting case it appears to be, if I may say so."

"Whereabouts would the Inspector like to start, I wonder?" Martin asked.

"Well, sir," Snell suggested, "I have had a look at the room from which Sir Adam disappeared. I should rather like to see the vaults now where the murdered man was found."

"Have you visited the mortuary yet?" Martin enquired.

"Not yet," was the quiet reply. "Dead men don't run away and I thought I should like to have a look round here first."

Sir Theodore rose to his feet. Fanshawe turned on the lights. They all trooped down into the vaults. At the bottom of the stairs Elmhurst paused.

"You see the chalk marks, Inspector?" he pointed out. "That is exactly the place in which the dead man was found. Fanshawe traced them out very carefully when the body was removed."

"Very sound work," Snell admitted. "Very sound."

His examination of the spot, however, was, to say the least of it, cursory. From that moment, he sank still further in the estimation of the Chief Constable. Nothing but a strict respect for discipline, in fact, kept the latter from confiding his opinion to Fanshawe and the remainder of the little company. The famous detective from Scotland Yard wandered about in the vaults, literally with his mouth open, tapped the sides of the various lockers, peered into their emptiness, examined the rolls of brown paper on the bench, the string, and the sealing wax--like a man in a dream. For a long time he asked but one question and that seemed utterly without significance.

"What has become of the sum of money which Sir Adam allowed the two clerks to play around with?"

"Disappeared," Mr. Mowbray, Senior, confided. "Absolutely disappeared. In fact my firm have supplied the bank with a few hundreds in case of need."

Captain Elmhurst found it hard to conceal his impatience.

"You are not forgetting, are you. Inspector," he remarked, "that you are on the spot now where the murder was committed and it is the murder which is more particularly your concern."

The Inspector's left eyelid seemed to have drooped a little lower. There was a note of faint weariness in his reply.

"You are quite right, sir," he admitted, "but at some point or another these two unusual happenings probably touch."

"The Inspector can examine the ledgers, if he knows anything about bookkeeping," Mr. Mowbray suggested.

Snell shook his head.

"I am very ignorant of bookkeeping," he confessed. "Any unusual features about the position, however, I should be glad to take note of."

"I should think," the lawyer declared, "that there has never been anything more unusual than the conditions under which the firm of Sir Adam Blockton has continued in existence."

"In what way?" Snell queried.

"Fifty years ago," Mr. Giles Mowbray expounded, "Blockton's Bank had an account with practically every one of the principal manufacturers in the town and district. One by one these accounts have been closed. One by one the great county families have withdrawn their securities until scarcely a family except the Tidswells of Wrotton Park appear to have an account open. That account, I may add, is overdrawn. There is a doubt about several other accounts in the country districts where the entries seem confusing but they are trifling and in each case the balance is against the investor. Why the bank has remained open all these years seems to be a complete mystery. They owe nothing to the public--the public owes nothing to them. Two or three thousand pounds would cover all their possible indebtedness. The same sum, I should think, would cover any amounts owing to them, except perhaps the Tidswell account. Here we are then arrived at this conclusion: The bank owes nothing. It has no debts. It has no assets. It has no liabilities. It has no reason for existence. It is the grim shadow of a once great commercial undertaking; yet day by day Sir Adam, punctual to the minute, sat in his office and waited for business which he knew would never come. Day by day those clerks occupied themselves with cross-word puzzles or whatever fancied industry their brains could conceive. Day by day the cashier behind his desk idled himself into a state of mental collapse."

"I had an idea," Inspector Snell said thoughtfully, "that a cheque, a large cheque, had been presented for payment."

There was a moment's silence. Uncle and nephew exchanged quick glances. Sir Theodore cleared his throat.

"I don't know how you got hold of that piece of information, Inspector," he said, "but you are quite right. I happened to be present here in the office when the cheque was presented. It was for five thousand pounds."

"A large sum," Snell meditated. "I do not wish to seem inquisitive--"

"You have a right to be inquisitive," Sir Theodore interrupted. "The cheque was referred to drawer."

"One moment, if you please," Martin intervened. "It is true that the messenger took it away but on my own responsibility and at my own risk I took what I believe no one, not even the ghost of Sir Adam, will consider a liberty. I interviewed the manager of the bank through which it came and I paid it. I did so entirely on my own. The responsibility remains with me."

Snell's face was empty of any definite expression yet somehow or other he seemed interested. He appeared to be on the point of speech when Sir Theodore broke in.

"You paid it, Martin?" the latter exclaimed. "What on earth made you do that?"

"Can't tell you," the young man confessed. "I just felt like doing it. I had the feeling that that old man would pop up again some day and that though it would have been his own fault he would have gone off the deep end when he knew that a Blockton's cheque had been marked dishonoured. You see, Inspector," he went on, turning to Snell, "Blockton's have more than a local reputation for wealth and commercial probity. They were a great banking firm a hundred years ago and the old man, for all his queer ways, was proud of it. I happen to have a private fortune--"

"Yes," his uncle interrupted sarcastically, "and Lady Diana Pengwill happens to be a very beautiful young woman!"

"I am not sure," Sir Theodore said quietly, "that you have not done a very decent and Christian thing, young fellow. Of course it was rather forcing a decision to have a cheque like that plumped down before you just after we had discovered that the whole of the assets of the bank seemed to have disappeared; but I don't mind admitting that I should not have slept a wink to-night with the knowledge that we had let that cheque be returned dishonoured."

"Martin can do what he likes with his own money, of course," his uncle observed. "It's all to the credit of the firm, anyway."

"Inspector Snell," Sir Theodore went on, "seems to be taking rather a line of his own in this matter and I see no reason why we shouldn't take him a little further into our confidence. Most of the books have gone round to the accountants, but so far as we could gather there are no signs of losses in the most intelligently kept ones. The question, therefore, which perplexes us is: What has become of the great fortune which is known to have belonged to the family through these generations? If anyone were to tell me that Sir Adam had gambled it away I should reply frankly that I did not believe it."

"Never took a chance in his life, the old blighter!" Mr. Mowbray muttered.

"There's an old document here which you may like to examine, little though it has to do with the present strange position, but in this document it announces that five hundred thousand pounds were paid to Diana Blockton upon her marriage to the Earl of Pengwill thirty years ago and five hundred thousand pounds were paid to Anna Blockton when she married George

Tidswell, who at that time was High Sheriff of the County--Tidswell of Wrotton Park. It is perfectly certain that payment of these large sums did not disturb Sir Adam's finances in the least. 'The whole of my fortune,' that man whose stone statue is outside and who was himself the son of the great founder of the House of Blockton, wrote in his Will, 'is to pass into the possession of my son Adam Blockton, with my earnest injunction that he avoids speculation, conducts the business of the bank in a calm and dignified fashion, and keeps the fortune which I have left at his disposal so far as possible in the hands of the family, making generous bequests to them as may become necessary.'

Inspector Snell nodded thoughtfully.

"It seems hard to believe," he admitted, "that the Adam Blockton who inherited a great fortune from the man who wrote those words, and who seems to have lived here the greater part of his life, has been a secret gambler."

"I agree with you, Inspector," Sir Theodore declared. "I am also not at all sure that you have not acted wisely in showing more interest at the commencement of your investigations in the disappearance of Sir Adam than in the tragedy of that murdered man. We have three problems to be solved by one of us or perhaps by all of us acting in concert. The first and the most important in my mind is: What has become of Sir Adam Blockton? The second is: Who was the murdered man who is lying in the mortuary, whose corpse you have presently to inspect, and by whom was he murdered? Thirdly: What has become of the great fortune which the whole world believes was at one time, at no very distant date, in the possession of Adam Blockton? I consider that these three problems en bloc present an extraordinarily fascinating and provocative study. The solution of them will require the ingenuity of the highly trained detective, the brains of the shrewd lawyer and the knowledge of life of the man of the world."

"An excellent diagnosis," Mr. Giles Mowbray pronounced. "You have put the case in a nutshell, Sir Theodore. You agree, I am sure, Mr. Snell?"

Snell inclined his head.

"Certainly," he acquiesced. "I have had the pleasure of hearing Sir Theodore in Court more than once. He has what is sometimes a little rare there--the gift of lucidity. By the by, Mr. Mowbray, might I ask whether Sir Adam's Will has also disappeared?"

"It is a pertinent question," was the lawyer's reply. "The Will has not disappeared. It has been in the possession of my firm for twenty or twenty-five years without any alteration that we know of. It is there now."

"It might be very helpful," the Inspector suggested.

"I quite agree," Sir Theodore assented, "but it cannot be dealt with until the Courts give a decision as to whether Sir Adam is dead or alive."

"In the meantime," Snell remarked, "things may happen. We might waste a great deal of time in fruitless work."

"You must remember," Martin intervened, "that the Will was drawn up more than twenty years ago. The bank then was in a very different position."

"Of course," Sir Theodore reflected, "it might be possible to apply to the Courts to have the Will privately read."

"If the Will had been made recently," Mr. Giles Mowbray declared, "I should be in favour of adopting such a course. As it was made twenty years ago or more, I can see no reason for any premature action in the matter."

Snell rose lazily to his feet.

"Well, gentlemen," he said, "except for any hint we might have been able to gather from a study of the Will I don't think I have any more questions to ask before I get on with what I call the spade-work."

"As, for instance?" Martin enquired.

"I should like to be allowed a free hand to wander about on these premises," the detective acknowledged. "I should like to see the sleeping apartment of Sir Adam, to investigate his clothing, and to have the run of any of his personal belongings--letters or anything of that sort. I have already examined the vaults. I have formed a vague theory as to how the shooting of the murdered man took place, and later on this evening I should like to pay a visit to the mortuary. While we are here, may my friend Fanshawe and I spend a short time in Sir Adam's apartments? And I should like, too, to ask a few questions of the woman who came daily and the porter of the bank who valeted and looked after Sir Adam."

"Quite reasonable," Mr. Mowbray assented. "Inspector Fanshawe, will you take your confrère in hand? Dyson is still in the bank and the woman is also waiting."

"The woman, I understood you to say, sir, has not been questioned at all?" Snell enquired.

"She was away for a few days," Martin explained, "burying a cousin at Bridport. She arrived here this afternoon and she has been waiting at the bank in case we wanted to talk to her."

"Perhaps just a word or two," Snell murmured.

The two Inspectors left the room, closing the door behind them. Captain Elmhurst permitted himself a little grimace.

"If this is a typical specimen of the modern sleuth," he observed, "I cannot say that I am much impressed."

"He certainly is not the obvious type," Martin agreed.

Sir Theodore was polishing his monocle with the corner of his silk handkerchief.

"Appearances are sometimes deceitful," he remarked a little tritely. "The Chief Commissioner has a certain amount of faith in him, I believe."

Mr. Giles Mowbray, whose appearance clearly denoted his dissatisfaction, rose from his place.

"What I do not like about the fellow," he grumbled, "is that he doesn't seem clear-headed. Of course, what you said about the importance of solving the mystery of the old man's disappearance is quite all right in its way, but there is another point of view. One of the most mysterious murders is there to be dealt with and he does not seem to talk or think of anything else except Sir Adam. I should like to see him show a little more interest in that poor devil whose body is lying in the mortuary and get after the man who shot him."

"Straightforward methods, eh?" Sir Theodore said, preparing for departure. "If you ask me, I think the fellow is not quite such a fool as he seems. There is the inquest to-morrow, you

know. Every mortal thing he could hear about the murder he will hear over again there. I shouldn't say he was a chap to waste his time."

Martin nodded approvingly.

"Hadn't occurred to me, Sir Theodore," he remarked, rising to his feet. "Maybe you're right."

The two Inspectors found only Dyson waiting for them in the hall of the bank. He rose to his feet and saluted.

"This is Inspector Snell from Scotland Yard, Dyson," Fanshawe said. "He would like to ask you a few questions. What has become of Mrs. Griggs?"

"She will be here in ten minutes, sir," Dyson replied. "She went across the street to have a few words with her daughter."

Snell nodded amiably.

"I understand that you looked after Sir Adam for a great many years?"

"Yes, sir," the man assented. "I used to look after him. It was not very much he required."

"Old service man, aren't you?"

"Queen's Own, sir. Ten years in India."

"Full pension?"

"Yes, sir--and earned it."

Snell seemed for a moment to be studying him with more than his usual concentration. Dyson, though he was still erect and carried himself like an old soldier, had lost not only the spirit of youth but the spirit of middle age. His eyes were sunken, his mouth tired, and their only expression was one of fatigue.

"Rather a shock to you, this business, Dyson," he observed.

"It has been a great shock, sir. There is no further news, I suppose?"

"Not yet," Fanshawe replied.

"You must not worry too much," Snell said kindly. "We shall find him all right. I shall not require to ask Dyson any questions," he went on, turning to his companion. "You have done all that is necessary in that way and there is the inquest to-morrow. If we could go up into Sir Adam's apartments we need not keep him any longer."

Fanshawe was a little surprised but he made no remark. Dyson opened the door and showed them out on to the pavement. Fanshawe, who was in possession of the keys, led the way along the few yards of pavement, unlocked the huge oak front door with its shining brass knob, and ushered his companion into the narrow adjoining house which had been occupied by Sir Adam. Even the electric light which they turned on in the hall, at the bend of the stairs and in the dining room, seemed inadequate to banish the cold, uninviting aspect of the rooms. The pictures on the walls, some of which, as Snell realised afterwards, were old masters, seemed unkindly and morose. The lines of beauty were absent from most of the solid Victorian and Georgian furniture. The whole atmosphere of the apartment in which Sir Adam seemed to have spent so many of his years was sinister and unfriendly. It was hard to conceive that less than forty-eight hours ago a man had smoked his pipe and drunk his glass of whisky in the easy chair which was drawn up to the edge of the hearth-rug.

"A dreary room," Snell observed.

"Wouldn't be so bad with a big fire going," his confrère replied. "It's all fine furniture, mark you, and those pictures glowering at you from the walls are not to be sneered at. I have heard fine tales about how much they are worth. However, there you are. Now I'll show you the bedroom next door," he added. "There's his wardrobe, there's what they call his 'escritoire,' there's everything that belongs to him."

Snell looked around him.

"This is the room, I suppose, then," he enquired, "with the secret staircase leading down into the vault?"

"That is so."

"Do you mind," Snell asked, "opening the panel and showing me how the whole thing works?"

His companion obeyed. Snell stood on the top stair and looked across at the dimly seen ladder staircase on the other side of the vault.

"I rather fancy myself with the right type of revolver," he observed, "but it's pretty good shooting to put a bullet through a man's shoulderblade into his heart from here. That accounts for the trajectory, I suppose."

"You will hear all about that at the inquest."

Inspector Snell seemed a little weary. He leaned against the wall and looked around him again.

"There's one other light, isn't there?" he enquired.

Fanshawe stooped and turned it on. The place was now dimly but adequately illuminated. The Inspector surveyed it for several minutes, still leaning against the wall, although his eyes seemed thoroughly awake and the droop of that left eyelid just then was certainly less marked.

"Those individual safes must have cost a pretty penny," he remarked. "They look like giant lockers in a golf club-house."

"They're solid enough," his companion assured him. "Many of them have the names of the old county families who kept their securities here painted on them."

Snell descended to the stone floor and walked across to the chalk marks where the murdered man had lain. Then he walked back again, carefully pacing his steps.

"How long did you say the doctor thought the man had been dead?" he asked.

"Some little time. We worked it out that the murder itself might have happened any time between nine o'clock at night and the time the bank opened the next morning."

"And Sir Adam was seated all the morning in the bank parlour only a few yards away. Pretty good nerve, as he must have known that the corpse was there the whole of the time."

"He had nerve enough for anything," Fanshawe asserted. "A dry as dust, monkey-faced sort of creature, Sir Adam. I can't imagine him scared of the Devil himself."

"And he went in to lunch," Snell continued, "leaving that nasty mess there."

"Must have."

The visitor from Scotland Yard nodded and returned to the rooms.

"I'm beginning to get it into my head," he said. "Of course your stuff will come out at the inquest, Fanshawe, and the doctor will be there, so I shan't bother you with many more questions. What were the old gentleman's habits in the evening?"

"Changed for dinner every night of his life, ate pretty hearty, drank a couple of glasses of light wine, smoked a pipe and took a drop of whisky before he got into bed."

"What about his clothes that he wore the night before last?" Snell enquired.

"They're up at the Town Hall, the whole drawerful of them. They will be on view to-morrow at the inquest. Not a stain on them or a fingerprint."

"And what about the gun?"

"We've searched every inch of the place. Not a sign of it."

"Or cartridges?"

"Or cartridges."

There was a tap at the door. Fanshawe crossed the room and opened it. An elderly grey-haired woman, neatly dressed and of highly respectable appearance, presented herself. Fanshawe escorted her to an easy chair.

"This is Mrs. Griggs," he announced. "You will probably see her at the inquest to-morrow, but if there is any question you would like to ask her I am sure she would be glad to tell you anything she could."

"Well, as Mrs. Griggs was away," Snell observed, "I don't suppose there is very much she can tell us. When was the last time you saw Sir Adam?"

"Friday morning, when I came to clear up, sir," she replied. "I had just heard the news about my cousin then and I begged for leave to go to the funeral and return to-day."

"Pretty much as usual then, I suppose?"

"He never varied much, the old gentleman didn't."

"And you have been with him for how long, Mrs. Griggs?"

"Twenty-six years," she answered. "Half a lifetime, so to speak."

"Twenty-six years," Snell repeated thoughtfully. "Did he strike you as being a kind-hearted man?"

"No, sir, he did not," she admitted. "I have never known him go out of his way to say a kind thing about anybody or do a kind action, for that matter, which is a hard thing to say if anything should have happened to the old gentleman. It is the truth, all the same. He gave his Christmas box and his holiday money once a year, but he gave it without a smile, and as to his old clothes--I have a son they would just have fitted but I nearly lost my place once when I ventured to give him a pair of socks that I had darned six times."

"Bad as that, eh?" Snell murmured.

"He was not a pleasant gentleman, dead though he may be," Mrs. Griggs declared. "At the same time, one is bound to be honest and he was not a man I should have put down as likely

to do anyone else an injury. He was fair in his way, though mean."

"I am not asking you questions in the name of the law now," Snell said quietly, almost casually. "This is just a friendly conversation, Mrs. Griggs. I am not a lawyer and I doubt whether I shall be at the inquest to-morrow when you are in the box, so you can answer me quite frankly if you want to and if you don't I shan't press it. You say that you do not think he was the sort of man who would do anyone else an injury? You do not think, then, that he was the sort of man who would commit a murder?"

Mrs. Griggs hesitated for a few moments.

"Well, sir," she acknowledged, "if he believed that that man down in the cellar was a burglar he would shoot and he would be as likely to kill him as not," she said. "He had courage, had Sir Adam. He was as brave as they made them--hard-fibred, heartless."

"That's just how it looks to an ordinary person," Snell reflected. "Sir Adam, awakened by a noise, opens the door here, disturbs the burglar who had just come down the stairs from the bank parlour. Sir Adam calls out to him. The man turns round, meaning to escape. Sir Adam shoots and kills him. That's all right. But why make a secret of it? A wealthy banker who discovers a robber in a cellar full of safes has a perfect right to shoot. Why make a secret of it and then disappear is what I cannot understand."

Mrs. Griggs nodded her head vigorously.

"That's what does seem to want a bit of explaining, sir," she admitted.

"I sometimes think," the Inspector mused, "that criminals and men like Sir Adam with a little kink in them, as he must have had, do these things just to make it difficult for us poor policemen, whose job it is to find out about them. Sat there all the morning in his office, a matter of twenty feet away from a man he had either killed himself or knew to be lying there dead. Not a word to the clerks or the hall porter or to his cashier. Just as usual, they say he was that morning. Off to the club for his lunch, drank his bottle of wine and there down in the vault all the time was this dead body. It's puzzling, Mrs. Griggs. Now wouldn't you admit that yourself, if you were a detective? Puzzling."

"You're right, sir," Mrs. Griggs agreed. "How you gentlemen find out about these things sometimes I can't imagine, but this is a fair knock-out."

Inspector Snell rose to his feet, walked the length of the room and back again. He paused to admire the sideboard--a beautiful Jacobean piece of furniture, although not in the best of condition. Then he turned round as though he had suddenly remembered his companion.

"Well, thank you very much, Mrs. Griggs," he said. "I have nothing more to ask you. I daresay you will be tired of questions by this time to-morrow."

The woman prepared to take her departure.

"It won't be the first time as I have been in a Coroner's Court, sir," she confided. "It was not exactly a murder case before--it was an accident--but I'll never forget how those insurance people did try to badger me. Good night, sir."

Fanshawe opened the door and Mrs. Griggs took her leave. Snell made his way once more down the staircase into the vault. He hesitated for a moment, then he moved over to the bench

with its rolls of paper and string and sealing wax. From there he glanced at the staircase leading into the bank parlour.

"Queer to think of the old boy down here making parcels of his own property to send away somewhere."

"It's queerer still," Fanshawe pointed out, "to imagine where he was sending them to and why he didn't let the clerks do it all. Of course, what's bothering the lawyers so much is that he seems to have sent them away without making any entry about it."

"The old fox must have been up to some queer trick! Looks as though he or someone had had one of these rolls of brown paper down with the idea of using it, I suppose, and then changed his mind and put it back again," he remarked, leaning over the bench to examine the roll in question.

Inspector Fanshawe was not interested. He fidgeted about in the background for several minutes whilst his companion was opening and closing one or two of the nearest lockers. Suddenly the latter turned round.

"Do a little job for me, Fanshawe?" he asked. "I don't suppose it's any good, but it's an idea."

"Say the word."

"Got your watch on?"

"Surely. If you want to know, it's exactly five and twenty minutes to six."

"I would like you," Snell said, "to go slowly up the stairs into Sir Adam's room about the pace he would go, then go down the house stairs into the passage, open the door and go as far as the bank. They are closed now, of course."

"I daresay I could get in."

"Never mind about that. Wait outside the gate exactly two minutes, then come back here and let me know how long it has taken you."

"You're kidding!" Fanshawe observed incredulously.

"Honour bright, I'm not," the other assured him.

"Righto, I'm off," Fanshawe declared, looking once more at his watch. "I'll let you know exactly."

Snell listened to the retreating footsteps, standing halfway up the stairs, and waited until he heard the front door opened and closed. Then he stepped swiftly back to the bench, drew from his pocket a pair of queer-coloured gloves, put them on with lightning-like speed and leaned over the rolls of brown paper. He pushed them this way and that, apparently recklessly, until he came to the trestle bench itself. He stooped underneath and struck the planks a hard blow with his clenched fist. A large knot in the wood was displaced by the shock. He drew it out, thrust his forefinger down the cavity, pushed, and a section of the bench slid back. Another and somewhat larger cavity was disclosed, from which he drew out a small Smith and Wesson revolver of the latest type. He held it gingerly by the barrels and with a piece of brown paper which he had already detached wrapped it up and slipped it into his hip pocket. Then he replaced the knot and the rolls of brown paper upon the bench and hurried across the room.

When Fanshawe reappeared Snell was lying at the foot of the stairs at the other end of the vault, very much in the position in which the dead man had been found.

"Just four minutes," Fanshawe called down. "What the mischief are you doing over there?"

Snell smiled enigmatically as he rose to his feet.

"I knew there was a snag in it," he remarked. "I have wasted four minutes of your time and my own. I've had enough of this place, Fanshawe, and more than enough of this cellar," he added, lumbering up the stairs. "I suppose we couldn't manage a little drink before we go back?"

The local man grinned.

"I'll show you," he said.

XVI

To those who attended the Coroner's Inquest on the following day in the spirit of paying a visit to a cinema film laden with thrills, or a prize fight between two world champions, it was without doubt a washout. The fact that no suspected criminal had yet been discovered and that no vital clues to his or her identity had been even whispered about probably robbed the affair of a certain amount of sensation. Sir Theodore, perhaps, summed up the general opinion afterwards when he described it as "a puzzling function." There was, however, certainly something of a thrill when Lady Diana Pengwill's name was called and she stepped into the box. The Coroner swung round towards her with a kindly look upon his face. He wasted no time in beating about the bush.

"Lady Diana," he said, "it appears from the evidence that there was one private letter amongst the correspondence received by Sir Adam on the morning of his disappearance which he did not open. You are aware of that fact, I believe?"

"I am aware of it," she assented.

"That private letter was addressed to Sir Adam in your mother's handwriting. Am I right in assuming that?"

"Quite right."

"You being the only member of the family on the spot," the Coroner went on, "the letter was handed to you."

"That is so."

"Did you open it?"

"I did."

"You have perhaps brought it with you this morning?"

"I have not."

The Coroner's eyebrows were gently lifted.

"Lady Diana," he continued, "you will understand that this enquiry is being held with a view to clearing up a great tragedy. A man was found murdered in the vaults of your grandfather's bank. Any correspondence he received that morning is of interest to the law. I must ask you to tell the Court what the contents of that letter were."

"You already know that it was from my mother, Lady Pengwill," the girl answered. "Is that not proof that it was a private letter and could have had nothing to do with this affair?"

"We may accept that when we have had an opportunity of reading the letter."

"That is impossible."

"Lady Diana, we have every sympathy with you and the anxiety you are naturally feeling," the Coroner went on, "but at the same time the Court feels that it has a right to see that letter and I am afraid that I must insist upon your producing it."

"That is also impossible, sir," Diana repeated. "I have destroyed the letter."

There was a little murmur in Court. Diana seemed very much at her ease but on the other hand there was a tenseness about her words which was somewhat incomprehensible.

"Will you tell me why you destroyed it?" the Coroner asked.

Diana hesitated.

"Because there was something in it," she acknowledged, "which the family would not desire to have made public."

"Again, Lady Diana, I must assure you that the Court has every sympathy with you and your family in this unfortunate happening but in the interests of the law I must require you to tell me what there was in your mother's letter which induced you to destroy it rather than bring it into Court as was your duty."

The girl made no reply. The Coroner waited for a few moments. When he spoke again his tone had lost its note of sympathy. He had become simply an official.

"You heard my question?" he asked.

"Yes, I heard it."

"Be so good as to answer it."

"I cannot," was the firm reply. "It is not my intention to inform anyone of the contents of that letter. It consisted of a few private words written by my mother to my grandfather. It is nobody else's business what she said. If it is any satisfaction to the Court, I must remind you that I am on my oath and I assure you that it could have had no connection with this tragedy."

The Coroner leaned over and whispered to the clerk. The clerk whispered back again. There was a brief pause during which a great deal of whispering went on in the Court. The Coroner's benign expression was gone. He was looking very severe indeed.

"Lady Diana Pengwill," he said, "I am addressing you in the name of the law. I have to tell you that it is your duty to answer my question. If you fail to do so it may be my painful duty to decide that you have been guilty of contempt of Court."

"I have every respect for the Court," the girl said, "but I shall not tell you what was in my mother's letter."

"You are aware," the Coroner confided, "that I can commit you to prison and keep you there until you change your mind?"

Martin Mowbray rose suddenly from his place at the solicitors' table.

"Mr. Coroner," he said, "may I call your attention to the fact that this is a Coroner's Inquest and not a Court of Enquiry, and that there is no prisoner at the present moment in the dock whose guilt or innocence could be influenced by anything that was contained in the letter referred to? That being the case, might I in all deference to your decision, sir, suggest that you would be within your rights in binding Lady Diana over to give evidence at any further enquiry there may be into these unfortunate circumstances. If such enquiry should turn out to be a trial for murder, you can then use whatever means seem good to you for enforcing a decision."

The Coroner inclined his head gravely.

"I see your point, Mr. Mowbray," he admitted. "It is quite true that the letter loses some of its significance until someone or other is charged with the crime. Under these circumstances," he added, turning to Diana, "you will remain in the Court when the case is closed and you will be bound over to appear when required either at an adjournment of this inquest or any further proceedings. You may stand down."

Diana retreated and there were some amongst her friends who declared that they saw a faint gesture of badinage about the lips and the muscles of her face which reminded them of her grandfather in one of his Puck-like moods. Nevertheless, she had succeeded in exciting the curiosity of the Court. There were a good many who wondered very much what that particular thing was which her mother had written to the missing man of so secret a nature that her daughter had refused to disclose it. Then a further ripple of sensation diverted the public interest. For the first time, the disappearance of Adam Blockton was formally admitted. The Chief Constable, in a few words, explained that it had been impossible to serve a subpoena upon Sir Adam as they were unable to discover his whereabouts. In reply to a second question, he made a statement which, told in such a fashion, sounded curiously ominous.

"Sir Adam Blockton was last seen on Tuesday morning in the neighbourhood of one o'clock at the County Club," he announced. "He had arrived there for lunch, as usual. The steward of the club spoke to him at ten minutes past one and announced that his luncheon was ready. Sir Adam nodded acquiescence and the steward retired. Sir Adam's habits of punctuality were so well known that when he had not appeared in a couple of minutes the head steward returned to the room. Sir Adam had disappeared."

"And he has not been heard of since?" the Coroner asked.

"The club, the bank, his dwelling place have been searched without result," was Captain Elmhurst's reply. "The matter passes, as from to-day, formally into the hands of the police. Any information we receive will be placed at the disposal of the authorities who are engaged in this investigation."

There was a little murmur in Court. Two days. A two days' disappearance in the heart of a town where practically every person in the street knew him by sight, where his car was known, where he could neither have boarded a train nor crept into any hiding place without having been observed. The disappearance of a man who fails to turn up at his club after a few days and cannot be heard of at home becomes a more serious affair when it passes into the hands of the police. There were rumours of a detective from Scotland Yard who was present in the Court. Interest in the unknown man grew fainter. Three quarters of the people who trooped out of the Court at half-past twelve that morning were talking not of the verdict on the body of the unknown man--wilful murder against some person or persons unknown--but of the disappearance of Sir Adam Blockton.

Martin Mowbray, waiting at the side entrance of the Town Hall, suddenly heard a familiar voice in his ear.

"Mr. Martin, can I speak to you for a moment?"

He swung round. There was enthusiasm in his tone and manner.

"Can you speak to me?" he repeated. "Isn't it exactly what I have wanted more than anything in the world for the last two days--to have you speak to me? Isn't that precisely what I am waiting about here for, because I knew that you would probably leave by this door?"

"Don't be absurd," Diana laughed. "But seriously, I do want to thank you for getting up in Court like that and putting dear old Mr. Salisbury in his place."

"Part of my job," he told her smiling. "I am one of the firm who represents your interests, you know."

"You are not going to ask me any questions about that letter, are you?"

"Nothing," he assured her, "was further from my thoughts. Can I take you somewhere?" he went on. "I am an excellent chauffeur. I will drive you home, I will take you shopping or better still I will give you lunch."

"Anyhow a cocktail would be wonderful," she murmured. "That horrid old man was beginning to get on my nerves."

"And lunch afterwards," he urged. "Come to the ladies' room at the club."

"I would love to," she agreed. "I have really nothing to do. Mother is nearly crazy about this Sir Adam business and she keeps on asking me all the time if I cannot get you or your uncle to tell her what is in the Will. I try and explain that there is no question of a Will yet and that it is absurd to imagine that Grandfather Adam is dead. However, don't let's talk about that. I'll come to lunch with you with pleasure."

They drove off to the club. Martin parked his car and conducted her into the small private room.

"No other ladies," he remarked with a sigh of relief. "I am in luck to-day! If anyone rings up, Lawford," he instructed the steward, "tell them that the room is engaged."

"Certainly, Mr. Mowbray," was the smiling reply.

"And now," Martin went on, "two of your very best Dry Martini cocktails--well shaken."

"I'll make them myself, sir," the man promised. "You shan't have to wait a minute. You might be looking at the menu while I am gone, if you would be so good."

He placed it on the table and made his usual dignified exit.

"What a marvellous butler he would make," Diana sighed. "Just the sort of man I should love to have at home. But then we never seem to keep good servants. I don't think we pay them enough."

They studied the menu together and on Lawford's reappearance pronounced favourably upon their cocktails and ordered lunch.

"Now that we are friends again," Diana said, as soon as they were once more alone, "perhaps you will tell me why you deserted me so shamefully yesterday afternoon. I suppose your uncle was right, but still, it did seem as though it might have been possible to have got that wretched draft held over or something. Poor old Grandfather Adam, supposed to be worth six or seven millions all his lifetime--if he isn't still alive--and the day he disappeared to have a cheque dishonoured! It's enough to make him turn in his grave--or wherever he is."

"The cheque," Martin told her, looking away for a moment, "was not dishonoured, and the reason I disappeared was because I took the messenger with me up to the bank he came from."

"You mean that you persuaded them to hold it over?" she asked eagerly.

"I paid it," he confessed. "I hope you won't be angry with me."

"But your uncle--"

"Nothing to do with the firm," he interrupted. "My uncle is very old-fashioned, you know, Lady Diana. I can assure you I was very glad to do it. I have money outside the firm. I had to go back with the man, though, because naturally one doesn't keep a balance quite so large as that."

She held out her hand.

"I think it was perfectly sweet of you," she declared; "but you ought not to have done it."

"If you knew how glad I was that I felt I was able to . . ." he said. "After all, it was a very small risk to take. The money will come back."

Then the service of lunch began and he fancied, as she looked quickly away, that there were tears at the ends of those beautiful eyelashes. He himself felt exceedingly uncomfortable. It was an emotional moment which only the presence of Lawford kept duly suppressed.

"Sorry I'm so silly," Diana apologised as at last the steward left the room.

"Well, you haven't had exactly a pleasant morning, have you?" her host remarked. "But do believe me, there was nothing at all unusual in what I did. It is always the duty of a lawyer to help his clients."

"Did you do that just because I was a client?" she asked, suddenly leaning over and patting his hand.

"I am afraid I didn't," he confessed. "I have the misfortune to be like most of the men in this part of the world and a good many around Mayfair, too--one of your admirers."

"Is that all?"

"You will find yourself in serious trouble in a moment!" he warned her.

"Perhaps it might be the sort of trouble I don't mind," she replied.

If he looked up he was lost. He knew exactly the sort of light that he would find in those beautiful brown eyes. He felt that they were seeking for his. Every moment he grew more tense with the struggle.

"Well?" she said softly.

He became desperate.

"Lady Diana--" he began.

"Diana," she interrupted.

"That is quite reward enough," he assured her smiling. "Diana it shall be. I am a perfect idiot, Diana, but I cannot say just what I would like to say at this moment and that's all I can tell you

about it. I suppose several poor devils have been in the same box. Some day I shall be out of it, I hope, and then I shall explain."

"You are not secretly married or anything of that sort?" she asked, with a touch of the old badinage in her tone.

That gave him his chance. He looked her full in the face.

"There has never been any other girl in my life and never will be," he told her. "It is not a matter of that at all."

"All right," she sighed. "Seems rather a pity, especially as I am off to London to-morrow."

"Why?" he asked gloomily.

"I cannot stand the atmosphere down here," she confided. "My dear aunt has made herself really ill, I think, worrying, and I am so ashamed of it all. You don't mind if I bore you with my family troubles?"

"Of course not. Do please get on with your lunch, though. I wonder why it is that only men can eat and talk at the same time."

"Talking sometimes is more interesting," she said. "However, I will do as I am told. You see," she went on in a moment or two, "my aunt is simply frightened out of her life. She is not worrying about Sir Adam's disappearance in the least. It is all these rumours about what has become of his money that are troubling her."

"Mercenary old wretch!" Martin exclaimed.

"That's what I think, but what's the good? I'm sorry for her in a way. My uncle, of course, is very extravagant, both the boys are in debt and aunt has always been looked upon as a great heiress. They have all the time been worrying her to write or go and see Sir Adam or get him out to Wrotton Park, and she daren't do it. I can't blame her because my own mother is very nearly as bad. In every letter I have had from her she has said: 'Do make some opportunity of coming across your grandfather.' I think she would have liked me to wait on the steps here and accost him when he came in one morning as though I were surprised. . . . Of course, in a day or two's time, if anything is heard of it and people begin to take his disappearance more seriously, there will be no holding them. You will have two daughters and all the grandchildren camping round your offices."

"A pleasant prospect," he remarked smiling. "The humour of it is that just at present neither we--his local solicitors--nor Sir Theodore, his town lawyer, have the least idea where all his money is."

She nodded.

"So much so," she reminded him, patting his hand again, "that if it had not been for you the poor old man would have had his cheque dishonoured. But seriously, Martin--I am going to be mercenary myself--do you really think it possible that he can have been gambling or that he has disposed of, or been robbed of, all that money?"

"My dear," he replied, "I have speculated and wondered about this matter so long that I feel perfectly addled. The only conclusion I have come to is that he could not have done it. The money must be somewhere in credits or bonds or specie, or some of all three."

"What about giving it away? He could have done that secretly, couldn't he?"

"Not to any large extent."

"He may have had a touch of softening of the brain."

"Not a chance. I can assure you that only a few days ago I was talking to him and his brain was as keen and clever as ever."

"Haven't you any theory at all about it?" she persisted.

"The only possible conclusion I have arrived at, and that is not a conclusion at all," Martin said with a certain amount of hesitation, "is that he is having a gigantic joke with us all."

"I was half inclined to believe that at the beginning," she confessed. "I've given up the idea, though. It's impossible."

"Well, remember this," he continued. "Sir Adam had a most fantastic vein of sardonic humour with a streak of downright wickedness in it. I remember years ago several queer things which he did; and curiously enough, on the morning of his disappearance, sitting in that historical easy chair in the reading room, my uncle watched him look up at the statue of his father outside and he assured me that his expression was absolutely inhuman, except for that little twist of the lips he had when he was amused, generally at someone else's expense."

"Was that on the actual day of his disappearance?"

"On the actual morning," he assured her. "It was one of his evil days, I am sure. That is why I think he will turn up again before long with his tongue in his cheek laughing at us all, and why I should advise anyone who has an eye to the future to do nothing in the way of pressing for settlement of his accounts. Try and impress that upon your mother, if you can, Diana. The first one who tries to get in ahead of the rest and appeals to the Courts for an examination of his affairs is the one whom I think will never touch a penny of the old man's money. There's some sordid advice for you!"

She nodded.

"I believe it is good advice. Very nice of you to give it to me, too, Martin, because you don't seem to like me much--do you?"

"I like you a great deal too much for my own peace of mind," he assured her.

"Tell me about it, please. How does it make you feel?"

It was really a little difficult. She had made the way so easy for him, made further resistance so ungracious. There had been times during the last two days when he had fancied her a trifle flippant in the face of a crisis. It was a weakness which seemed to have disappeared. Subconsciously he had been studying her in the odd moments of their conversation. There was a sort of frankness of expression and features which he had never before entirely appreciated. Her eyes met his pleasantly, truthfully. Once or twice, he was almost forced to admit, invitingly. For two or three seasons he had read in the society papers paragraphs about her charm, her graceful presence, her subtle gifts of personality which made her the most notable figure in circles of which he knew nothing. He had looked upon it as idle and rather smug gossip. Just now he was realising the truth of it all. He had his chance. Perhaps he was a fool to let it go. . . Whilst they waited for their coffee she leaned back in her chair.

"Mr. Martin Mowbray!"

He was forced to meet her eyes. She was smiling very pleasantly across at him but there was a touch of mockery on her lips.

"I thought that men were always so much more at their ease when they were absolutely alone with a woman in whom they were interested than when they had to make conversation at a party. When we have met in this stupid crowd down here you have always seemed so full of confidence. Why have you lost it all, or is this your natural self and your confidence a bluff?"

"Lady Diana--" he began.

"Diana, if you please."

"Diana, then," he went on. "Will you be kind and believe this? I am in a horrible mess. I do honestly and really feel tongue-tied and unnatural. There you have it," he wound up a little savagely. "I have the usual modicum of brain, I suppose, and the usual modicum of decency, and yet I cannot be natural with you at the present moment."

"It won't go on forever, then?" she asked demurely.

"It certainly won't," he assured her. "Where I can I will be quite candid. I will tell you this, for instance. I did not part with that five thousand pounds out of any respect for your grandfather or the family name. I risked it entirely to give you pleasure."

"I wanted so much to have you say that," she murmured.

"It's nothing to what I could say," he told her, suddenly recovering a portion of his confidence. "Nothing to what I hope, perhaps, some day I shall be able to say. But not just at this moment. Don't misunderstand me. I know no more about where your grandfather is than the man in the moon but I do know something about him which accounts for my stupidity this morning. Leave it at that, please."

She studied him thoughtfully. He met her eyes without flinching.

"All right," she sighed. "Scruples of some sort, I suppose. You are inclined to be a Quixote, you know. I will respect those scruples, Martin, whatever they may be. You have given me a wonderful lunch, I like to be here with you and I like feeling that I know a little more about you. Now isn't it nice of me not to be peevish?"

"You couldn't be that," he expostulated. "You are too much of a woman."

"I suppose the time may come when the necessity for this diffidence of yours will pass," she ventured.

"It most certainly will--and then look out for yourself!"

"Any idea about when?"

"When you know something which I guess at now and which I cannot speak of."

"You are making life more mysterious than ever," she complained. "Never mind; as I told you, I have loved your luncheon, I quite like your cigarettes, and Lawford does understand how to serve good coffee. Perhaps we will have another lunch here some day, shall we, as soon as the moment comes?"

"And may it be soon!" he answered fervently. "We will exchange confidences then. I will tell you what has made me such a dull companion to-day and you shall tell me why you tore up your mother's letter to Sir Adam."

"It is a fair bargain," she agreed, as she picked up her gloves.

He suddenly found her leaning over his chair. He rose quickly. There was a strange little gleam of invitation in her eyes, quite bewildering in its way.

"Will you give me one small kiss, please," she begged, "very quietly--just here?" she went on, tapping the corners of her lips. "You see, I should feel so humiliated if, having lunched alone in a private room for the first time in my life--in this most compromising centre of wild gaiety, too--I was not offered even one little fragment of an embrace."

Every one of his scruples went overboard. He drew her into his arms and he dealt with the geography of her lips exactly as he pleased.

"Excellent," she whispered as she drew herself away a few moments later a little breathlessly. "As a prelude, really it was wonderful. Come and telephone for them to bring my car round here, please; then I must go back and listen to more vapourings from my aunt. To-morrow," she added, when he had despatched a messenger to the telephone and they walked across the hall together, "I may return to London. If anything happens, do send me a telegram and I will catch the next train down again."

"I certainly will," he promised. "You shall be in at the death, if there is one."

"And let me tell you, my dear Martin," she said as they loitered on the steps and her fingers rested upon his arm, "as a luncheon companion you are enigmatic but in your own fashion charming."

"And shall I tell you what I think of you?" he asked.

"No, don't please," she begged quickly, with something which was remarkably like that old-fashioned gesture, a blush. "I won't have what you think of me put into crude words at all. Good-bye."

She flitted away. As she reached the pavement she paused for a moment and looked up at the statue of the first Sir Adam. With the tips of her fingers she threw him a kiss.

XVII

Diana, although it was the height of the season, found London a little tiresome. After three nights, which had included a dinner party, a visit to the opera and three or four supper parties, she began to wonder what was the matter with her. She was quite used to sitting up late but on the morning of the fourth day she felt equally disinclined to get up and join a large party who were picnicking on the river, to watch the tennis at Wimbledon or to keep a golf engagement. A pile of square envelopes upon her breakfast tray she regarded impatiently. For some reason or other she felt that London could do very well without her for the rest of the season.

"What is it, Anna?" she asked her maid, who had just brought up the breakfast tray and several armfuls of roses and showed a distinct disposition to linger.

"There is a person downstairs who has asked to see Your Ladyship," the girl announced.

"A person?" Diana yawned.

The maid presented a card, Diana glanced at it and swung half out of bed. There it was, neatly engraved and unmistakable:

DETECTIVE INSPECTOR SNELL C.I.D.

Scotland Yard.

"Where is he?"

"In the waiting room, Your Ladyship. I told him it was very doubtful whether you would be able to see him yet but I thought I had better bring up the card."

"Turn on my bath," Diana ordered briskly. "Put me out some morning clothes--anything will do. First of all you had better go down and tell the Inspector that I shall be ready to see him in quarter of an hour and make him as comfortable as you can."

"Very good, Your Ladyship."

Diana had been a trifle optimistic but in less than half an hour she entered her own small sitting room to find Mr. Snell comfortably ensconced in an easy chair reading the *Times*. She welcomed him almost warmly.

"Any news?" she asked eagerly.

The Inspector was somewhat disappointing. He shook his head.

"None for the moment. I took the liberty of calling because I wondered whether Your Ladyship would be good enough to help me."

"Help! Don't you know that there is nothing I would rather do?" she assured him. "Tell me what it is at once, Inspector."

"Well, Lady Diana, in thinking this case over," he said, "I have felt myself rather drawn back towards the necessity of establishing the identity of the murdered man in Sir Adam's vault."

"Yes," she murmured.

"Fanshawe did everything possible at the time," Snell continued, "but I think that one could perhaps go a little further. Captain Denham, the master of the valet who sold his wardrobe, belongs, I believe, to the Ambassadors' Club."

Diana shook her head.

"I never heard of him."

"Well, his name is on the list of members," Snell went on, "and I gather that he is frequently there. I saw, too, in one of the pictorial papers this morning, that you were dancing there the night before last."

"I sometimes go in after a show with a party," she admitted.

"I want to make my enquiries, so far as possible," Snell explained, speaking in his usual low and soothing voice, "indirectly. Sir Theodore is a member of the Ambassadors' Club. I wonder whether you could not obtain an introduction to Captain Denham and ask him a question or two."

"Tell me what you want me to ask him," she begged. "I am sure Sir Theodore would go in to supper there with me any night that he was disengaged."

"I want to know the name of that valet without disturbing him too much," Snell confided. "These sort of people, you know," he went on, "get nervous when they hear the police have been asking things and before you know where you are they have disappeared. That's why I do not wish to make any enquiries in the neighbourhood of the Albany."

Diana thought for a moment rapidly.

"I am going to a theatre party to-night with Sir Theodore Markham. I am sure he would go on to the Ambassadors' afterwards if I asked him. I could not very well pick the young man up, though, could I--even if he were there. I don't even know him by sight."

"I have made a few enquiries," the Inspector admitted. "Captain Denham seems to be very fond of going to the Ambassadors' to supper. He has been there for the last three nights and as a matter of fact they have become quite particular lately for a Night Club and they insist nowadays, I am told, upon a proposer and a seconder. Sir Theodore seconded this young man."

Lady Diana was very much interested.

"The thing is becoming ridiculously easy," she declared. "I will ring up Sir Theodore at once. Would you like to wait?"

"It would be better," Snell agreed.

Lady Diana was only absent from the room for a few minutes, during which time the Inspector resumed his study of the *Times*. She reappeared smiling.

"It is all beautifully arranged," she announced. "Not only is Sir Theodore willing to ask the young man to the Ambassadors' for supper to-night but he has a vacant place for the theatre and he is coming there, too. Tell me please exactly what it is I am to find out."

"Just the name of the valet. Nothing more," Inspector Snell replied. "Maybe I am making a mistake but directly I know the name, without making any Public House enquiries or that sort

of thing, I shall go through the records and I think we may be able to move forward a step or two. It will be very kind of you, Lady Diana."

He wrote down a telephone number and passed it to her.

"Any time between midnight and eight o'clock in the morning that number will find me," he said. "Don't mind waking me up, please, Lady Diana. I'm used to being disturbed and I shall be asleep again in a few minutes."

"Lucky man!" she smiled.

Inspector Snell took his leave. Diana felt a new interest in her crowded day.

Diana showed that she had at least learned the rudiments of the great game played by Inspector Snell and hundreds of his fellow workers. She indulged in light and entirely impersonal conversation with her neighbour at the theatre, she made herself an agreeable but somewhat indifferent companion at suppertime and though she danced readily with him as soon as she was asked, it was not until they were sitting out in a little lounge opening from the supper room that she betrayed even the slightest interest or curiosity in her new acquaintance.

"Tell me," she asked, "is Sir Theodore a very old friend of yours?"

The young man smiled.

"Well, we belong to rather different generations," he reminded her. "Sir Theodore was at Harrow with my father and I seem to have known him all my life. He seconded me for this place, or proposed me, I'm not sure which, a week or so ago. Best place in London for a dance after the theatre and never overcrowded."

Diana agreed. She asked a few more indifferent questions about his career in the army, then she repeated his name.

"Lionel Denham. Odd--it seems to me that I have heard that name recently. Why should your name seem so familiar to me? Have we met anywhere before?"

He made the obvious reply about the impossibility of his having forgotten a meeting. Suddenly she sat up with a little exclamation.

"Why, of course, I remember! You know who I am, don't you?"

"Of course I do," he laughed. "Lady Diana Pengwill. I don't suppose there is anyone in the room doesn't know that."

"No; but do you know that I am the grandchild of that dear old gentleman who has disappeared? You must have read about it in the newspapers."

"You mean Sir Adam Blockton? Of course I have. I did not connect him with you in any way, though."

"He is my grandfather."

"Good God!" Denham exclaimed. "What--the millionaire banker chap who lived like a hermit and disappeared from Norchester?"

"The same," Diana admitted.

"And a man was found murdered in the bank vaults the same day!"

"Wearing a suit of your old clothes," Diana said calmly.

Denham stared at her blankly.

"What on earth are you talking about, Lady Diana?"

"Can't you guess?" she replied. "The police came to see you about it, didn't they?"

"God bless my soul, of course they did!" Denham exclaimed. "Some of the clothes my valet had sold to Hobbs. I say, it's a small world, isn't it?"

"Ridiculously," Diana assented.

"Actually wearing a suit of those clothes, was he, when he was committing the burglary?"

Diana nodded.

"Thoughtful of him to cut the tab out, wasn't it?" she remarked. "You might have been in the police court."

"I should have had an alibi," he grinned. "Besides, John would have been for it before me."

"Who is John?" she asked.

"My valet."

"Tell me his other name?" she enquired casually.

He gazed at his questioner, obviously perplexed.

"Why on earth do you want to know that?"

Diana toyed with her fan for a moment.

"Well, it is a little complicated," she confided. "However, it is such a simple matter I thought you might have told me."

"I never call him anything but John. Come to think of it, I've forgotten his surname."

"Really? I suppose he has one."

"I should imagine so."

The conversation seemed temporarily to flag. The young man, who was desperately anxious to make a favourable impression upon his companion, was ill at ease.

"To tell you the truth, Lady Diana," he explained, "John is a remarkably good servant and very useful to me but he was in trouble once and if there is anything he is afraid of it is getting mixed up with the police in any way. He nearly went off the deep end the other morning when they came asking him questions. He gets like that sometimes--a regular bundle of nerves."

Diana sighed. She looked into the restaurant.

"Perhaps we had better go back," she suggested. "I promised to dance with Colonel Hodges."

"Don't hurry," he begged. "I wish I could help you in this matter, Lady Diana. Is there anything else I could tell you?"

"You seem to have forgotten the only thing I should like to know," she rejoined a little coldly. "Fortunately it is perfectly easy to find out the truth by enquiring in another direction."

She half-rose to her feet but he detained her.

"One moment, please," he pleaded. "I'll tell you the fellow's name, if you really want to know it."

She smiled upon him in dazzling fashion.

"That's very nice of you," she said. "You know, the Inspector came to see me only the other day. I was able to tell him several small things about Norchester. It is all so interesting, you know, and I love to feel that I am helping."

"You don't think John is likely to get into any trouble?" Denham asked.

"How could he?" she expostulated.

"I should hate to lose him," the young man admitted. "He goes by the name of John Hawkes and he is the only man I have ever had who can tie a white tie properly. His real name is Grainger."

"You shan't be robbed of your treasure," Diana assured him. "If you'd like to give me a champagne cocktail I'll stay another five minutes. I don't really want to dance with that tiresome Colonel Hodges."

XVIII

It was barely ten o'clock next morning when John, seldom to be seen in such dishabille, answered the front doorbell of his master's apartments in a striped linen coat and with some slight vagueness about his collar and tie arrangements. He stared disparagingly at the man who stood on the doorstep. Mr. Snell had been suffering from indigestion for several days and his complexion was not at its best. The sleepy droop of his eyelid over his left eye was more than ever noticeable. He was wearing, notwithstanding the fact that he was paying a call in the sacred purlieu of Piccadilly, the same snuff-coloured suit, and he carried a brown paper parcel and a badly rolled umbrella.

"What do you want?" the valet asked curtly.

The Inspector looked him over with mild criticism in his eyes.

"A word with you," he replied. "Hawkes is the name, I believe, under which you are passing at the present moment--John Hawkes, once known as John Grainger."

"And what might that word be?" the valet asked without moving.

There was nothing aggressive about Mr. Snell's action but it carried force with it. In plain words, without seeming to be in the least offensive, he pushed his way across the threshold into the hall.

"Close the door," he instructed.

"And who might you be?"

"Well, I come from Scotland Yard, but I have not come about your police permit or anything of that sort," the Inspector answered. "Nothing to do with that Masters affair at all. That's all finished and done with, I hope. I have come here on another matter. It would be in your interests that we did not discuss it in the hall."

A slow but complete metamorphosis took place in the man's appearance. He was no longer inclined to be abusive, neither had his better manners become re-established. It seemed as though he had been turned into an icicle. He opened the door of a sitting room, motioned his visitor to enter, and he himself followed, having carefully closed the door behind him.

"They say you never leave a man alone once you have laid your hands upon him," he said bitterly. "Well, what do you want of me? There was a man from Norchester here a day or two ago. Are you on the same job?"

"I am," Inspector Snell assented.

"I can only tell you what I told him. I sold the coat to Hobbs on behalf of my master with a lot of other clothes. It was not my fault that they could not identify it or describe the man who bought the suit."

"They were not very clever, Grainger. I don't think it is their business to be clever on occasions like that."

"Perhaps you will tell me," the valet sneered, "how to make them remember what they choose to forget."

"We have our methods," Snell said softly as he pulled a chair out and sat down. "You see, I don't come from the provinces, Grainger. We are rather a rougher lot up here, I am afraid, than down in Norchester! We have certain advantages, of course. We know more."

"Where do you come from, then?" the valet asked.

"I am a Chief Inspector from Scotland Yard," Snell confided, blinking a little. "You would find 'C.I.D.' upon my card. No offence to our friend from Norchester, but we do see more of these cases, you know. Now I honestly want to find out the identity of the man who purchased that suit. We have another important piece of business that we want to get on with which cannot be dealt with until this one is settled."

"Well?"

"Are you sure that you sold the suit of clothes, the coat of which the man from Norchester showed you, to Hobbs?" Snell asked abruptly.

"How could I be sure?" was the impatient reply. "My master is the most extravagant man with clothes I ever worked for. He orders a dozen suits at a time. God knows how many he had when I commenced to lift a few of them for him now and then."

"If you didn't sell it to Hobbs, to whom should you have sold it?"

"A man in the Fulham Road, and if not to him, another in the Caledonian Market. How can you expect me to remember?"

Snell unfastened the string of the brown paper parcel which he had been carrying and laid the contents upon the table.

"There's the coat, Grainger," he said. "Come on--out with it."

The valet glanced at the garment contemptuously.

"Well, it isn't much good to anyone now, since you have had the packing of it," he observed. "That is one of the suits I sold to Hobbs."

"Do you know which of the salesmen were present when you made your sale?"

"I do."

"Will you identify him if I take you down there?"

"Not willingly," was the sullen reply. "Not willingly--you must understand that--but I will point him out to you, if necessary. He was one of the ugliest little men I have ever seen--present company excepted."

"Then perhaps you would be kind enough to go and ask your master for an hour's leave."

Grainger shook his head.

"Not necessary," he growled. "My master came in this morning in such a state that he won't turn in his bed until luncheon-time. I'll come. Better get the thing over."

"Admirably said," his visitor declared.

Grainger disappeared for a few moments, during which he made a brief but improving toilet. The two men travelled eastwards in a taxi. They were unfortunate in that they did not find many subjects of conversation of mutual interest.

"Sure you are going to remember the little man who took your business in hand?" Snell asked once.

His companion looked at him contemptuously.

"I shall remember him for the reason I have told you," he replied. "You wait."

They entered the emporium. Grainger led the way to the further end of the place. A small man in a shiny morning suit came forward to greet them. He was not only ill-dressed but he was of shabby appearance.

"Well," he asked, "what is it?"

"I sold you a suit of clothes with twenty or thirty others about a month ago," Grainger announced. "Here's the coat of it."

He produced the coat, which he had taken from his companion coming down. He laid it upon the counter and even as he did so he found himself smoothing out the creases and making a more respectable-looking garment of it.

"Now then," he continued. "You may have to rack your brains, young fellow, but you'd just as well do it now as later. You've got to remember the person to whom you sold it."

"I've got to, have I?" the man scoffed. "That's no way for a servant to talk."

"It isn't the servant's questions you will have to answer," Grainger snapped. "It's this gentleman's."

"And who might you be, sir?" the salesman asked, turning to Snell.

The latter fumbled in his pocket and produced a card.

"Scotland Yard," he whispered confidentially. "Don't you forget that, my friend. Now look at that coat."

"I see it."

"Try and remember to whom you sold it."

The man hesitated. Snell leaned towards him.

"It's Scotland Yard you are answering," he reminded him. "There are many times when we can make it hard or easy for you. You know that quite well. To whom did you sell that coat?"

"He gave no name," the salesman replied. "They never do give names when they buy clothes here. He changed the suit in the office there and walked away with this one."

"What did you do with the suit he left here?"

"We've got it in stock."

The young man turned away and pushed back the doors of a sliding cupboard. He drew out two or three garments and replaced them, then he laid one on the counter before them.

"Brown imitation homespun," he remarked. "Not bad material. Very warm. Bad cut."

Snell took hold of the coat and looked inside. He also looked inside the coat pocket.

"You fellows don't make it too easy for us, do you?" he remarked as he examined the place where the name had been cut out.

The salesman grinned. He had unpleasant-looking teeth and he had no scruples in showing them.

"Of course we don't make it too easy," he agreed, "but still, there it is. It is part of our job to cut out the name or initials from any suit of clothes we purchase."

Snell's left eyelid seemed to become raised. He was looking straight into the salesman's eyes and it was the sort of look of investigation which it was hard to face.

"How much do you remember of the man who was wearing that suit of clothes?" he asked slowly. "Take your time. How much?"

"That suit fitted him like a glove. That ought to tell you all there is to be told about his figure. He was tallish and slim, walked with his shoulders back and his head in the air. Might have been a soldier to look at him; but my, he was tired! He was a young man gone grey early--in the face, I mean--not the hair. Ordinary-coloured hair, clean linen, but a shabby tie. He carried a cane. Now, Mr. Inspector, if I were talking for my life I couldn't tell you more than that."

"Was he fair or dark?"

"Inclined to be fair. His cheeks had sunken a bit and he needed a shave. When he left here smoking a cigarette he was quite the toff."

"Wait a moment," the Inspector said. "What about his linen?"

"He bought some odd things we had--all the best. I'll tell you what he asked for--he asked for a Zingari tie. What does that mean--a sort of cricket club, isn't it?"

Snell nodded his approbation.

"You are improving immensely, young man. I am beginning to take quite a fancy to you. You go on like this and you'll be all right. You interest me. Rack your mind now. Is there anything else you can tell me likely to help me to get at that fellow's name and business in life?"

"Nothing," the salesman decided after a moment's reflection. "He spoke like a gent. And yes--there is one more thing. He said, as he paid up: 'Now I'm going to have my hair cut and a shave before I take a little journey.' He asked me where to go and I told him. I said: 'Well, you are only just across the street from the Milan. They will do you proper and it will be just opening time for a cocktail at the bar when you have finished.'"

"You think he went there?" Snell asked.

"I am sure he did," was the confident reply. "He turned down the street and hurried towards the Strand. There's no one else on the way. That's where he went all right."

Snell parted from his companion outside the door.

"Don't know how you manage it," Grainger muttered. "You seemed to get all you wanted out of him."

"Except the name," Snell sighed. "I did want the name, Grainger. Very badly. You are not likely to remember it, are you?"

"I never heard it."

The Inspector sighed again. He hung his umbrella over his arm and turned away.

"If ever you should hear it, Grainger," he confided, "it might be worth a little notice taken off that card of yours and it might--yes, I am sure it would be worth a twenty-pound note."

Grainger shook his head regretfully.

"He never told me the name, sir, and there's no way that I know that I'm likely to hear it, but if a miracle should happen that word on my paper would not come amiss. I hope--"

"You have done yourself no harm, Grainger," Snell interrupted, "but you might have been a shade more civil at the commencement of our little conversation."

The Inspector was not disposed to hurry himself at the Milan. He indulged in a shave, he had his hair trimmed and shampooed, he bought a bottle of hair lotion and exchanged a few remarks with the manager. When he had paid his bill he drew the latter on one side.

"I know I am asking you a difficult question," he said, "but do you remember, just before midday it would be and probably on Monday of last week, a young man coming in here having a shave and haircut who was not one of your regular clients? He was wearing a dark blue suit--one of those new patterns with a little stripe in it--it was a Savile Row suit and very well cut but it was not quite new. He wore a blue linen shirt and he might have been wearing a Zingari tie."

The manager shook his head.

"Monday week, sir," he expostulated. "That's a good time ago in a busy place like this!"

Mr. Snell, who since his haircut and shave was much improved in appearance, drew his companion a little farther away from the door.

"Mr. Myers," he said, "let me tell you this. My name is Snell,--Chief Inspector Snell of Scotland Yard,--and it is always good policy to keep in with the police. The young man I have just been trying to describe to you came to a bad end and we are investigating the matter. What I would like you to do is to describe him to your assistants one by one and if there is one of them can tell me his name or any of his remarks as to what he was going to do with himself for the rest of the day, it would be extraordinarily valuable information for me."

The manager looked behind.

"They are getting pretty slack just now, sir," he said. "We shan't have many in until half-past twelve. I'll just question all of them except the two who were not here that day. If there is any news where shall I find you?"

"I'll go into the bar--no, not in the bar, the little lounge just at the top of the stairs--and wait," the Inspector announced. "If you have any news at all come up and find me. If it is one of your young men who won't object to the compliment it would be worth a sovereign or so to him if he can help us."

"I will do the best I can, Inspector."

Snell took his place in a corner and waited. He ordered a glass of sherry and smoked a cigarette thoughtfully. In about a quarter of an hour the manager reappeared. He was followed by one of the assistants, whom he brought over at once.

"This young man believes that he served the person you were speaking about, sir," he confided. "I will leave him to answer any questions you desire. You will excuse me now, I'm sure. I have one of my old clients waiting for me."

The Inspector found an even more retired corner.

"Tell me about this man whom you waited on," he said. "It was Monday of last week, I believe, when he came in."

"The governor gave me his description, sir," the assistant said. "I feel sure I waited on the gentleman you described. He was wearing a very well cut suit--blue with a stripe. He laughed at something I said and told me frankly that he had just bought his suit ready-made from a tailor close to. I felt certain he meant Hobbs. Looking at him, sir, and even listening to his talk, I couldn't help coming to the conclusion that he was like a great many other young gentlemen we get here--whom we shave and whose hair we cut, and they seem all the time half-dumb and yet find it wonderful. You can guess what I mean, sir. It's men who have just been let out of prison and gone and bought clothes ready-made and then come in and want a thorough course of treatment here. Then they feel they can start life again. Well, this one gave me that idea, sir."

"He didn't by any chance tell you his name or his plans?" the Inspector asked.

The assistant smiled. He produced his tablet from his pocket.

"There you are, sir," he pointed out. "He bought a bottle of hairwash. We sent it over for him to St. Pancras Station."

The Inspector read the name without moving a muscle.

Mr. George Bradstone.

XIX

Inspector Snell rose at once to his feet as the door of the morning room of Belgrave House was suddenly opened and a very attractive-looking lady, dressed for walking in a beautifully cut plain dark coat and skirt and with a Pekinese dog under each arm, swept into the room.

"Inspector Snell, isn't it?" she greeted him graciously. "You will forgive my shaking hands. You see these little dogs are so eager for their walk that it is all I can do to hold them. I am Lady Pengwill. You are waiting, I hear, to see my daughter."

"If she can spare me a few minutes," the Inspector murmured.

"Of course she can," was the emphatic reply. "We would spare every minute of our time if we could help in any way towards solving this extraordinary mystery. You cannot realize how upset we all are. I hope you have brought us some good news."

The Inspector, who had remained standing, shook his head regretfully.

"I am afraid that we are making very slow progress, Lady Pengwill," he admitted.

"What distresses us so much, as you can imagine," she went on, "is where all this enormous sum of money has gone to. Millions and millions, you know, and for the moment, at any rate, everything seems to have disappeared. People cannot make away with money like that, can they, Mr. Snell?"

"Quite impossible," the Inspector assured her hopefully. "The money must be somewhere, Lady Pengwill, and I have no doubt that before long we shall find it for you."

"Do hurry up, please," she begged. "Really, my husband and I are getting quite distressed. I suppose the police know everything so I don't mind telling you that my father makes my sister, Lady Tidswell, and me, a quite considerable allowance payable only once a year and I did venture to write to the bank not very long ago reminding him that this was a terribly extravagant season and asking if it was not possible for us to have our allowance a little sooner. But I daresay you know all about this. It was the one letter which was not opened, I believe, on the morning he--er--disappeared."

"I have heard there was a letter," the Inspector murmured.

"And nobody seems to know anything about the money at all," Lady Pengwill went on eagerly. "That is what is so queer. I write to the solicitors in Norchester and ask them whether I can rely upon having the money for December the first and they can tell me nothing. I ask the same question of Sir Theodore, whom I know is my father's executor and whose firm are his London solicitors, and he knows nothing. It is a terrible state of suspense to be left in, Mr. Snell. I am sure you can understand that."

"Precisely," the Inspector acquiesced drily, "and of course the fact of your father's disappearance must of itself be a great source of anxiety to you."

"Naturally," Lady Pengwill agreed. "Well, I won't ask you questions. I'll leave you to Lady Diana. She has more brains than I have. But my dear Mr. Snell, you will do your best, won't

you, to clear this matter up quickly. There is the murdered man, too, they found down in the cellar. I had forgotten about him for the moment. Most unpleasant."

"Yes, there is the murdered man," he assented with subtle but quite imperceptible irony. "But of course the money is the chief thing."

"How quick you are to grasp things!" Lady Pengwill murmured, smiling appreciatively. "It is some time before December the first but if Sir Adam is not found before then or the money does not come, I cannot really tell you, Mr. Snell, what will become of us."

Her Ladyship's expressive little face was wrinkled with apprehension. Her eyes were moist with tears.

"I must hurry away now," she went on with a final sigh. "These dear dogs do get so restless if they cannot get out by eleven o'clock. If you would like to see my husband for anything he is in the library, Mr. Snell. He has to make a speech to-night in the Lords but he is really too upset to work properly."

"I will not trouble His Lordship," the Inspector said. "Your daughter can tell me all I want to know. Lady Diana has been very helpful already."

"I am very glad to hear it," her mother declared. "Good morning, Mr. Snell," she concluded, waving her hand as she turned towards the door. "Bring me some good news soon. I cannot tell you how grateful I shall be."

The Inspector, who was a little clumsy at getting there but who was just in time to open the door, bowed as Her Ladyship passed out with a dazzling smile. He heard a brief greeting between mother and daughter in the hall and in a moment or two Lady Diana appeared.

"So you have been talking to Mother," she remarked.

"For a few minutes," the Inspector acquiesced. "She seems very upset."

"Tell me, is there any more news?"

"We are moving on," the Inspector admitted cautiously, "and I must admit, Lady Diana, that the trifling success I have met with just lately is entirely owing to your efforts. With the man's full name I was able to look up some records and I found out--well, something which put me in a quite independent position with regard to him. I paid a visit to the Albany, and a very satisfactory one, too. Grainger himself took me to the man who bought the various suits and I was able to discover the identity of the murdered man."

"But this is marvellous!" Diana cried.

"Well, it is movement," the Inspector agreed. "I discovered that he had been in prison for twelve months. I found out where he had been employed and that, Lady Diana, I can assure you was most interesting."

"Tell me about it," she begged.

"He was employed by the firm who put in those wonderful locker safes in the bank, the Averil and Benz Company of Providence, Rhode Island."

"Go on, please."

"He was a travelling representative of the firm's. He was sent over by the company with a view to opening up a connection on this side somewhere about a year ago. On the steamer he seems to have lost his head completely. He got in with a gang of card sharpers who were detected at the end of a long session of cards in flagrant cheating. At Southampton he was met by the police and handed over by the purser to them. He was tried in the ordinary way and sentenced to a year's imprisonment."

"What an extraordinary story!" Diana gasped.

"He was discharged," Snell continued, "just about ten days ago. The day after he came out he bought this secondhand suit at Hobbs', he went to the Milan and had his hair cut and all that sort of thing, bought a bottle of hairwash which was sent to St. Pancras Station addressed to George Bradstone. He travelled down to Norchester and what happened to him there we already know. According to the instructions he received from his firm before he left the States, he was to have paid a visit to Blockton's Bank in Norchester immediately upon his arrival in this country. There had been some complaint to the firm with regard to the safes which he was to investigate. That was why he had been supplied with a master key and some information about the safes which he probably committed to memory and destroyed. I should say that there was no doubt whatever that instead of presenting himself to Sir Adam as an envoy from the firm of Averil and Benz he decided to commit a burglary on his own account."

"So that really, instead of being a victim of murder," Diana observed, "he was shot by someone who found him in the vaults and realised that he was there for purposes of robbery."

"So far as we can go without any evidence from Sir Adam," Snell agreed, "it does look as though that were the case. I telephoned last evening to Providence and they told me that Mr. Averil, the head of the firm, was on his way over here. I sent a wireless to him on his steamer. He is arriving in Southampton almost immediately and we may expect him any time in Norchester to identify the person whose body lies in the mortuary."

"Well, that's part of the mystery solved," Diana exclaimed. "Inspector, you're wonderful!"

"My dear young lady," he protested, "that has been all very ordinary straightforward work, but remember we may have disappointments to come. Anyhow, as you say, a third of the mystery is solved. Mr. Averil will be in Norchester very shortly now and I still have certain ideas connected with his visit. That is why I propose to return, so as to be there when he arrives. What we have discovered is interesting, Lady Diana, but you must remember that the main problem remains just as far from solution as ever."

"You mean--"

"I mean the disappearance of your grandfather. I am going to devote my whole attention to that now because any mystery there is with regard to that murder will solve itself. I shall leave for Norchester at noon."

"I am so thankful to hear that," Diana declared.

"I thought I should like to be on the spot for several reasons," the Inspector went on. "I understand that Sir Theodore has made application to the Courts here and although there is no question of Sir Adam's decease being presumed at present, they might consent to his Will being read in the presence of representatives of the family. This is simply with the idea, as Sir

Theodore has always urged, that the Will of a very eccentric man like Sir Adam might contain some hint as to what has become of him."

"That sounds very reasonable," Diana agreed.

"The authorities are always rather slow in taking action in such matters," Snell continued, "but Sir Theodore is doing his best and he hopes that in a very short time he, in conjunction with the firm of Mowbray in Norchester, will have permission to summon a meeting of the relatives. I expect he has told you about this."

"We have discussed it," Diana admitted.

"In that case I understand that the reading of the Will is to take place in Norchester. I imagine that some representatives of your family will be present."

"Oh, Mother will be there all right," the girl declared drily. "Father, too, I should think. You will see them all, as soon as the lawyers are ready to talk about the money. But that is not quite the point, is it? I feel as I think you do, Inspector. I want to know what has become of that old man. He was not so bad, really. I know it is absurd of me in these days but I cannot get away from the feeling that something terrible has happened to him."

"The disappearance of the money--the temporary disappearance, I mean," Snell corrected himself hastily, "rather points that way. On the other hand, if he has come to any harm such as having been abducted or murdered and robbed, who is there likely to have been on the spot in Norchester capable of carrying out the scheme and keeping the whole thing so marvellously secret? The detection of crime, nowadays, you know, Lady Diana, has become rather copybook-like. In an ordinary way, whenever a big coup has been brought off we know exactly where to look for the probable criminals, for their probable hiding-place and for their probable means of getting rid of the booty. In this case we are growing more helpless every day. I had a long conversation with the Chief Commissioner this morning, and we agreed upon one thing. There is no criminal organisation working in England at this moment, to our knowledge, capable of spiriting a man away from a place like the Norchester County Club, acquiring the whole of his fortune and keeping him hidden. I hope I am not boring you?"

"Not in the least. How could you be? Go on, please."

"What I wanted to point out was," Snell went on, the lid closing down a little farther over his left eye, "that I think if we are to come across any solution of this business we shall come across it in Norchester. I told the Chief so. I showed him exactly how far I had gone with my local enquiries, and he agreed with me. I am going back there to-day and I am rather sorry that you will not be on hand."

"Don't be too sure about that," she laughed. "There is one person there who can help you, Mr. Snell, as I expect you know. That is Martin Mowbray. He has brains, and though his uncle is the head of the firm he is beginning to leave nearly everything to Martin."

"I quite agree with you," the Inspector admitted. "I look upon Mr. Martin Mowbray as being a most intelligent and even brilliant young man. I shall telephone to him the moment I arrive. Captain Elmhurst, too, the Chief Constable, seems to have a good grip of the case. I shall have a talk with him this afternoon. All the same, I am disappointed that you will not be there."

He glanced at the clock and rose to his feet.

"I am catching the midday express," he explained.

"And don't be surprised to see me at any moment," she warned him. "I shall be down with the rest of the crowd, anyhow, if Sir Theodore succeeds with his motion. I wish I knew what lines you were going to work on."

"And I wish I could tell you, Lady Diana," he rejoined. "But do you know, this is such a simple and yet such an extraordinary case that I imagine if I began to talk about the possibilities that have passed through my mind you would think I was a lunatic."

"They could not be as far-fetched as my dreams," she grimaced. "I dreamt only the other night that the statue of his father at which Sir Adam was always jeering turned on him at last, marched into the club through the window and crushed everyone to death who was in the room!"

"Well, my imagination has not gone quite so far as that," he admitted, as they walked together towards the door.

"Where will you stay in Norchester, Inspector?" she asked.

"Write me if you have anything to say care of Captain Elmhurst at the Town Hall," he begged. "Mr. Martin Mowbray was good enough to tell me that I might go out and stay with him next time I came, but I have funny ideas when I am on a case. I like, for some part of the day, and certainly at night, to be in a sense living with it."

"I can quite understand that," she agreed as she led him down the hall towards the entrance. "Martin Mowbray's bachelor house is a perfect gem of a place, though--real Queen Anne--with beautiful gardens, tennis court and a swimming pool. All the same, it is quite ten miles from Norchester and that might not suit you."

He smiled as the taxi which the butler had summoned drove up to the door.

"Not quite," he admitted.

She watched him enter the vehicle and waved her hand. Her mother, coming in from her walk, found her there still looking after the taxi.

"Your friend the detective seems to have given you something to think about, Diana," she remarked hopefully.

"Well, to tell you the truth, I believe I am just beginning to appreciate him," Diana confessed.

Snell drove straight to the Town Hall on his arrival in Norchester and was fortunate enough to catch Captain Elmhurst, who was on the point of packing up for an afternoon's tennis.

"I'm glad to see you back again, Snell," the latter declared. "Anything doing in town?"

"I have made a little progress in one direction," Snell acknowledged, "but I am afraid it is not likely to yield quite the results I had hoped for."

Elmhurst took him by the arm and led him into his office.

"Sit down and tell me about it," he insisted. "I don't mind confessing that this blasted affair is getting on my nerves."

"Well, it seems as though we shall be able to clear up a portion of it before long," Snell confided. "I know the name of the murdered man and I think it is pretty clear why he was discovered in the bank cellar."

"Capital!"

"His name or the name he was passing under was Bradstone, and he came down here the day after he was released from prison."

"What charge?"

"Cheating at cards on an American liner. He was a representative of the firm of Averil and Benz, the manufacturers of those locker safes, and he was on his way to England to visit the customers and attend to some complaints which had been received from Blockton's Bank."

"You have been finding out things, Snell," the Chief Constable remarked. "Good work! Tell me some more."

"I have talked with the firm by telephone and I have cabled to Mr. Averil, who is on the way over here. It is pretty clear what this fellow Bradstone had been planning out whilst he was in gaol. He had the master key of the safes and he was down there for burglary. He got into the bank all right, but in the very act of descending the stairs into the vault he was shot."

"Very glib, Mr. Inspector," Elmhurst commented with a smile, "but by whom and where's the weapon?"

"I have the revolver," Snell replied. "I found it in a very ingenious hiding-place while I was poking about that carpenter's bench where Sir Adam used to tie up his parcels. It is a beautiful weapon, cleaned recently but with traces still there of the first barrel's having been fired."

"Good work," Elmhurst acknowledged. "But we are still up against the central difficulty--who shot Bradstone?"

"I don't think," Snell said, his left eyelid drooping a little, "that there will be any difficulty about answering that question very shortly. There are distinct finger-marks upon the butt of the revolver. I have compared them with some very poor impressions I was able to get of Sir Adam's, and it is an absolute certainty that they are not his. The person whom I really suspect is a little difficult to deal with but the opportunity to get his fingerprints will come. I shall

have them, Captain, in the course of a few days; and then I shall be able to answer your question. Will you do me a favour, sir?"

"Of course I will."

"I am rather ashamed of myself, in a way," Snell went on, "but what I did I did in the cause of justice. I have nothing to say against Fanshawe. He is an excellent man in any ordinary case he might have to deal with but he is at times--just a little loquacious."

"Perhaps you're right," Elmhurst agreed. "He is in the case, though, and I don't see how he is to be got rid of altogether."

"Don't try," Snell begged eagerly. "We will work together all right and he shall have his full share of the credit that is due to him when we clear things up. But I have a small confession to make. I came to the conclusion that it was better to keep what I knew about the revolver to myself until I had got the other fingerprints, and I played a trick upon him the other evening. I wanted to be left alone in the vault and I sent him away on a fool's errand to see how long it took to get to the bank door from the vault through Sir Adam's quarters. As soon as he had gone I discovered the little hiding-place in the bench, found the revolver and tucked it away before he came back."

Elmhurst fingered his upper lip for a moment.

"I don't see that I can blame you, Inspector," he acknowledged. "You, after all, are the superior officer and we are looking to you to clear the case up. You must use your own methods. I promise that I won't say a word to Fanshawe. As you know, he has had to leave the case for a few days. The matter he is dealing with is a purely local one, but it is of some importance; and I think it could be easily arranged, without hurting his feelings or his prestige, that he drops out of this business altogether, if you consider it best."

"We might leave that, sir," Snell suggested, "until we see how long he is away. My chief concern is that even when we get the formal identification of the murdered man it will not help us in the least towards finding Sir Adam or the money. Nothing fresh down here, I suppose?"

"What can there be fresh?" the Chief Constable exclaimed a little irritably. "Fanshawe had some wild idea that we ought to find out what Haskell--one of the two clerks, you know--is up to. We heard he had gone off to Scotland on a golfing holiday, which sounded a bit opulent. Anyhow, we are making enquiries but I don't think there's anything in it. His fortnight's holiday was due and he just took it."

"Is the other young man still here?"

"He turns up every morning but there's nothing for him to do. If I were the Mowbrays I would close the bank but they won't listen to it. Martin comes down for an hour in the morning and sits in the office and the clerk outside works on football pools and cross-word puzzles. There hasn't been even a whisper about the old man nor a sign of the money."

"You remind me of Lady Pengwill," the detective observed with a grim little smile.

"Never met the lady."

"Nor did I until this morning. She was very voluble about the terrible state of distress they were all in but I found out that they were not thinking about the old man at all. They were wondering whether their December the first cheque for their allowance would materialise!"

Captain Elmhurst nodded.

"Well, her sister is very much the same way," he confided. "Lady Tidswell is crazy about the money. She rings us up every day and it is always with the hope of hearing if news has come from some foreign bank that the old man may have had dealings with. They had half a million each when they were married, too."

"From Sir Adam?"

"From Sir Adam, of course."

"It's a lot of money to get rid of."

"Extravagance and bad investments will soon play the devil with even half a million," Elmhurst declared. "Anyhow, now that you are here, Snell, give us an idea of what the next step is to be."

Snell's eyelid had drooped lower than ever. His tone was deprecating, almost apologetic.

"You may feel inclined to smile at me, sir," he confessed, "but whenever I have a case like this or anything like it I have a fancy to spend a short time on the exact spot. I am feeling like that about this affair. Sir Adam disappeared from the Norchester County Club just across the way, didn't he?"

"That is so."

"It seems outrageously impossible," Snell went on, "but I cannot get away from the idea that some one of the people who are still there must have an idea what has become of the old man. I cannot help feeling that if we just sit down and wait, keep our eyes open and listen, some day or other we shall get an inkling as to what has become of him."

Elmhurst shrugged his shoulders.

"I won't argue with you," he remarked. "It all seems terribly open country, though. Not a suspicious character or a suspicious circumstance about the place. Martin Mowbray and I have talked it threadbare. Everything goes on exactly as it did before. Everyone seems just as anxious as we are ourselves to find out what has become of that old gentleman. I can't help wondering what you are likely to get by hanging round here, really, but I have not the slightest desire to stand in your way."

"In your position I should feel exactly as you do," Snell confessed, "but you must remember the old saying: 'Familiarity breeds contempt.' You are utterly and entirely familiar with the place. You cannot therefore believe in anything unusual happening there beyond that one gruesome incident. If I am asking too much, now, please say so. There are, I understand, bedrooms at the club."

"Of a sort--yes, there are," Elmhurst admitted. "I slept there once when the family were all away and it was not so bad."

"I should like," Snell confided, and at that moment his left eyelid absolutely covered his eye, "I should like, if it were possible, to be made a temporary member and to have a bedroom

there."

"What--to stay right in the club?"

"Yes."

"I don't see why not," the Chief Constable agreed, after a moment's reflection.

"Of course," Snell went on diffidently, "the members might feel that they did not care about having a detective officer accepted as a guest of the club staying there, and if there is any feeling of that sort you must tell me."

"My dear fellow, how could there be? Yours is an honourable profession. Besides, there is scarcely a member who, if he thought you were doing any good by being on the spot and concentrating your thoughts, as it were, upon your job--why, there is no one who would not be glad to have you around. I'm a little late for my appointment but I'll take you over at once, if you like, and arrange it."

"That would suit me excellently," Snell assented. "My taxi is still at the door with my bag."

The two men made their way to the club, which, as usual, was deserted at that hour. Captain Elmhurst ordered tea and asked for the Visitors' Book. He entered Snell's name and sent for Lawford, who came in immediately. The latter bowed to Elmhurst and recognised Snell with a respectful smile.

"Lawford," the Chief Constable explained, "Mr. Snell is staying down in Norchester for a week or ten days. Can you find him a room here?"

"Certainly, sir, with pleasure," was the unhesitating reply. "It is fortunate that Mr. Harwood went away yesterday. The best room is vacant. It has a bath and is of quite a reasonable size."

"Well, there we are, then," Elmhurst declared, signing a chit for the tea and lighting a cigarette. "If I hurry away, Snell, I am sure you will forgive me. I will tell Martin Mowbray you are here and I daresay he will look in and see you later in the evening."

"We will try and make the gentleman comfortable," Lawford promised. "I will have your bag sent up at once, sir," he went on, turning to Snell. "We have a small house dinner from half-past seven--or if you would like to order something special--"

The Inspector waved his hand.

"I am sure the house dinner will do excellently for me, steward," he said.

"Johnson will look after you, the boy who is usually about in the hall," Lawford suggested. "He will unpack your things and I hope if there is anything you would like in the room or anything we can do to make you more comfortable, you will say so."

"Very kind of you indeed," Snell murmured.

Elmhurst hurried off and the Inspector settled down to make himself at home. He finished his tea, filled his pipe very deliberately and seated himself in the now famous chair with a pile of illustrated papers on the table within his reach. For a time, however, he smoked without reading. His eyes were fixed upon the statue outside. It occurred to him dreamily that from where he sat the eyes of the statue, which seemed to be looking straight through the window, must, if only they had been gifted with a moment of human vision, have seen all that had

happened on that Tuesday morning. They must have seen Lawford announcing luncheon and taking his leave. They must have seen whoever else might have entered that room within the next few minutes. They must have seen the old man in the chair disappear. It gave Snell, who was a man of many emotions, a distinct thrill to sit there and reflect upon those things. For the first time, he experienced a feeling of confidence. He was there. He was going to stay there. Even if it was with the supernatural he had to deal, and Inspector Snell did not believe in the supernatural, he was going to find out how that little old gentleman had been decoyed from the room and in what part of the world he lay hidden.

It was one of Inspector Snell's peculiarities that he liked so far as possible to live in the atmosphere of his surroundings. On a previous visit to the club in the evening he had noticed several men in dinner coats. When he had packed his bag before leaving London he had been careful to include a similar article of attire. He sat now, at about half-past seven, in a comfortable easy chair watching Johnson, the red-haired hall porter, fitting studs into his shirt.

"Anything much doing in the club after dinner?" he asked the young man.

"Very little, sir," the latter replied. "There's a few of them comes in for a game of billiards or snooker sometimes and they did start a bridge evening. It's never gone very well, though, especially at this time of the year. Most of the members live in the country and they like to be out in their gardens when they get home."

"I'm like that," Snell confided. "I have only a strip of garden and I look after it myself. Get a lot of fun out of it, too. You sleep in the club, I suppose, Johnson?"

"Yes, sir."

"Downstairs?"

"In the basement, sir."

"Rather a large basement, isn't it?" Snell asked.

"It was, sir. They blocked up some of it last time they had the workmen here."

"I like more fresh air, myself," the Inspector confessed.

Johnson continued his task in silence. Snell watched him thoughtfully.

"I have rather a bad memory for faces, Johnson," he observed. "Was it you who were on duty in the hall the day when Sir Adam disappeared?"

"That's right, sir."

"I remember you now, of course. I asked you a few questions, didn't I, about the car that was standing outside."

"You did seem curious about it, sir."

"Well, I'll tell you why," Snell explained. "My idea was that Sir Adam might have left the club in a car and it was the only one hanging about at the time."

The young man smiled. He looked at the shirt, now complete with studs and links, then he fetched some braces from a drawer and shook out the Inspector's trousers.

"I can't ever make out, sir," he said, "why no one else took any notice of that car. If I had been Captain Elmhurst I would have shown a lot more interest about it."

"Tell me why, Johnson?" Snell asked encouragingly.

"Well, for one thing, sir," he confided, as he attached the braces to the garment he was carrying, "it was a very high-powered motor. I never heard a sound when it drew up. And for

another, the lettering on it was all strange. To this day there is no one in the yarn warehouse next door who seems to have seen it."

"That seems queer," Snell remarked.

"It is queer, sir. Mr. Donnithorne himself, who is the yarn agent, he doesn't own an auto," Johnson continued, "no more does his partner. They're both positive that no one called upon them in a car of that description during the morning. Then what I says is--what was it doing outside? There was a foreign-looking chauffeur to it and all."

"I will make enquiries about it," Snell promised.

"And this is worth remembering, too, sir," the young man went on as he gave Snell's shoes a final rub and looked round for the shoehorn. "The moment all that hullabaloo started I thought about the car and I looked outside where it had been standing. It was gone. Of course it may have been waiting there for a gentleman in one of the offices down the Welford Road but it doesn't seem likely."

"You didn't notice that strange lettering, I suppose?" Snell enquired.

Johnson shook his head.

"I didn't take any interest in the car, sir, except that I remembered it being there. Is there anything more I can do, sir?"

"Not a thing, thanks. You had better hurry along down. They will be wanting you to serve dinner.

"I will come up again if you ring, sir."

Snell completed his toilet and descended to the billiard room. He ordered a cocktail and the evening paper. They were brought him by the billiard marker. Afterwards he strolled across to the window and looked down into the street below.

"What were you doing, Charles," he asked, "when all that fuss occurred last week?"

"About Sir Adam, sir?"

"About Sir Adam."

"Well, I was up here brushing the table and didn't know anything about it at the time."

"Did you notice the car outside that Johnson has been telling me about?"

"Can't say that I did, sir," the youth admitted. "I may have glanced out of the window once or twice casually but I didn't notice a car. I saw Sir Adam drive up at the usual time but his Rolls-Royce went off at once."

Snell took down a cue and made a few shots with the touch of an expert. The youth watched him admiringly.

"Would you like a game, sir?" he asked.

Snell shook his head.

"I'm going down to dinner directly. We may have a game afterwards, perhaps. I really looked in," he added, as he put his cue back in the rack, "because Johnson was talking to me about that automobile and I wanted to see whether it would have been visible from here."

"I could not have helped but see it if I had looked down," the marker admitted, "but I can't remember even going to the window."

"Obstinate young man, Johnson, I should think," Snell observed.

"Very likely, sir."

A pageboy knocked at the door and looked in.

"Mr. Martin Mowbray is downstairs, sir," he announced. "He wants to know if he should come up or if you are ready for dinner."

"Tell him I'm on my way down," Snell replied.

There were very few diners at the club that evening and Snell and Martin Mowbray were completely isolated in the corner which the former had chosen. Notwithstanding the emptiness of the place, Lawford, as immaculate as ever, stood at his desk or now and then slowly promenaded the room, glancing at the plates and exchanging a word or two with his three or four clients.

"I wonder you are able to keep a man like that down here," Snell observed.

"Too good for his job, you mean?"

The detective assented.

"I should say he was quite up to West End form," he remarked. "Seems a singular lack of ambition to stay here all the time. Have any of the members taken any special interest in him?"

Martin Mowbray grinned.

"The worst of you sleuths," he said, "is that you never can put the cards upon the table."

"No need, is there?" his companion asked a little wearily, his eyes half-closed and fixed upon his plate. "I have asked to be allowed to stay here just to study the place and its inmates, Lawford included, at close quarters. I expect Captain Elmhurst guessed that when I made my proposition. I am quite sure you did when you heard that I was here. You must have guessed it when I asked for the plans of the club."

"Did you get them all right?"

"I got them all right, thank you. They are very poor plans but there are points of interest about them. Have you ever been all over the place, Mr. Mowbray--cellars, basement, everywhere?"

"A dozen times," the young man replied. "I am on the kitchen committee."

"Clean, well found and that sort of thing? No locked up dungeons or anything of that kind?"

"Not a trace of anything mediæval," Martin assured him. "You were asking just now whether any member had shown any particular interest in Lawford."

"Yes, have they?"

"Never Sir Adam," Martin declared. "We have a Christmas Club list which my uncle always heads with a fiver. I give the same. So do half-a-dozen others in the club. Sir Adam just puts his initials there, hasn't the face to write his name out, and gives one pound. I don't honestly

believe that he has ever given Lawford a tip in his life, and I shouldn't think that there was a member here who gave more trouble."

Lawford, passing near by in one of his promenades, paused to fill their glasses with wine.

"A good bottle, I hope, Mr. Mowbray?" he asked.

"Excellent. Been down to the cricket grounds yet?"

Lawford's face lost its air of calm indifference.

"I was there yesterday evening, sir," he said.

"Anything hopeful?"

"A young bowler, sir. Comes from Twyford right out in the country. He is a little erratic, but Field is interested in him and thinks he's going to shape marvellously. I--You will excuse me, Mr. Mowbray," the steward went on. "It is scarcely my affair, of course, but I did think of suggesting to one or two gentlemen that they help with the fund to keep him on the ground and give him a trial with the Colts and perhaps for one of the minor matches. He is quite young and if he were only sure of making a living at it he would be much more enthusiastic. He has his mother to support and he is a conscientious young fellow."

"What is his position?" Martin asked.

"He is working as a carpenter. Gets about thirty-five shillings a week. The club would give him a pound a week to go on the ground staff and more, of course, if he turned out all right, but he would have to give up Twyford and live in Norchester. I thought if one or two of you gentlemen--"

"You can put me down for a fiver," Martin interrupted. "I will go down and see him one afternoon with you, Lawford. If he's really got it in him I will see that he gets a rise early in the season. It's no good taking too much notice of these Colts matches. The lads are always over-eager."

Lawford seemed genuinely grateful.

"It is exceedingly kind of you, sir," he said. "The young man's name is Morris. I put on the pads myself with him for quarter of an hour the other night and I can assure you, although the wicket was nothing to help him, he was turning them half a foot easy. He put in a fast one without giving me the slightest warning or changing his action and bowled my middle stump out of the ground."

"Very interesting."

Lawford passed on with a little bow.

"Quite a human touch," Snell observed. "Ever been thoroughly over our shop up at the Yard, Mr. Mowbray?"

"Never."

"We have a collection of odd things representing the hobbies of famous criminals," Snell told him. "You perhaps do not know, sir, that Peace was quite a cricketer, and that young fellow who had such an extraordinary escape from the gallows--Forsetter--he is still almost scratch at

golf. He is allowed to play over the Governor's private links every now and then.. .. He's saved a little money, I suppose, Lawford?"

"I should think so," Martin replied. "And I must warn you of this, Snell. There will be an insurrection amongst the members if you tap him on the shoulder one day, for some of them would rather be murdered in their sleep, I think, than lose Lawford."

"I don't think they have any need to worry," Snell observed. "He seems to me the model steward and citizen."

"He is a model husband, too. Has a very good-looking wife. No children, though."

"Is his wife the cook?"

His companion nodded.

"She's the cook, all right," he admitted, "but there's nothing of the *intriguante* about Mrs. Lawford. Cinema once a week, cold supper that night instead of dinner, a fortnight at Blackpool in the summer and a trip to London twice a year when the sales are on. The Christian Science hall here twice a day on Sundays."

"Christian Scientist, eh?"

"Yes, you're getting to know all about the family, aren't you? You must not take that too seriously, though. I talked to the dear lady one day and she is not by any means a fanatic."

The Inspector sighed.

"I should love to have supper in the kitchen one day with those two."

"That you never will have. They have their supper in their own sitting room and the kitchen maid waits on them. Snug little place it is, too. Now and then they have a party, always giving notice first to a member of the committee. They entertain one or two of the principal tradespeople--generally bridge afterwards, I believe."

"What about the red-headed youth who waits on me--Johnson, I think his name is?"

"Well, he's been here since he was a pageboy, at least ten years, I should think. He's a trifle dull sometimes but he's perfectly steady and a good worker."

"He is the young man," Snell reflected, "who spoke about a large car outside the warehouse next door on the day of Sir Adam's disappearance."

"Quite right," Mowbray assented. "I know Elmhurst got Fanshawe to ask a few more questions about it. The yarn people themselves knew nothing of any visitor that morning and certainly had no callers at that time."

"I have been talking with Johnson about it," Snell confided. "He sticks to his story--a large car, powerful, with foreign lettering, there when Sir Adam came into the club and gone as soon as the alarm of his disappearance was started."

Martin remained indifferent.

"I'm afraid you won't make anything out of that car, Snell," he said. "For one thing, no one else, not even the people in the yarn warehouse, seem to have seen it, and then you have to bear in mind that Johnson is not the brightest of young men. If Sir Adam made his escape in

that he would have had to pass through the hall, down the steps and on to the pavement. Well, there were members dribbling in all the time. Someone would have seen him for certain."

"I expect you're right," Snell admitted. "I was not taking Johnson's statement too seriously, I can assure you. By the by, where is the back entrance to the club? I can't see it marked on the plan."

"It used to be the principal one," Martin told him. "It is just round the corner in Pemberton's Walk. That little bit of the old house that's left, fronting this way, with the oak door."

They ordered their coffee in the reading room. Snell, who seemed sleepy and languid, strolled about glancing at the pictures, here and there furtively tapping the very solid wall.

"Have a *fine*?" the young lawyer invited.

"I'm too sleepy already," Snell confessed. "Mr. Mowbray," he went on, relapsing into an easy chair, "may I ask a question which is just a little outside the orbit of my interests for the moment, only indirectly connected with them, anyhow?"

"Dash it all, man," Martin expostulated, "you are a Chief Inspector of Scotland Yard. That's good enough for anyone. Ask any questions you like and drop that inferiority complex, for heaven's sake."

"How about the finances--Sir Adam's estate? Have there been any developments there whilst I was away?"

"Very few," the other answered. "If you are thinking of that cheque for five thousand pounds, our agents in Paris are making enquiries and I expect that will come out all right. The man to whom it was payable, Walter Ruffin, is a perfectly respectable dealer in bonds, and he has offered to show me his books and prove the debt at any time I choose. Incidentally, we have heard that there have been rumours of a well-known English banker transacting business through an agent on the stock exchange in Bucharest. Then it really does seem as though we were on the track of some dealings in New York but they were all for bearer bonds and we have no definite information yet."

"And about that little matter of opening the Will?"

"Sir Theodore has made his application to the Lords of the Treasury, or whatever these Johnnies call themselves. He has applied for permission to have the Will read to the family in case it gives us any indication as to the whereabouts of the estate. The Will itself was drawn up a great many years ago by a member of our firm who is now dead. The document which was found in Sir Adam's desk labelled 'Copy of Will' will also be opened if the application is granted."

"It should be granted," Snell reflected, "but of course it might interfere with investigations conducted upon other lines."

"Exactly what do you mean by that?" Martin Mowbray asked.

"Rather stupid to-night, I'm afraid I am," the Inspector apologised. "What I meant was this. Supposing Sir Adam is being held by--well, kidnappers--the announcement of the Will having been read might lead to Sir Adam's release but it would certainly lead to the disappearance of the estate. Then again, if Sir Adam has been murdered, as seems the most likely thesis at

present, the estate would be dumped on the market and I should think probably dissipated. There would be a panic sale of all bonds and the securities generally."

Martin Mowbray was thoughtful for a minute or two.

"You are not altogether in favour, then, of this step which Sir Theodore proposes to take?"

"It is a little out of my line," Snell confessed. "I only see things, perhaps, with the vision of a detective. It seems like a frontal attack when a rear or a flank attack is still being pressed."

"I don't know about being pressed. How far have we got, up till now?"

Once more Snell counted on the fingers of his hand.

"It is only eight days," he said, "since Sir Adam disappeared. It is not a long time."

"It seems a long time to those hungry relatives," Martin observed.

His companion smiled slowly. His rather thick lips seemed to find difficulty in parting but it was distinctly a smile.

"I have only met one of them, apart from Lady Diana," he said. "The Countess of Pengwill. She was not very interested in the murdered man. She did not seem to care very much where her father was or what had become of him, but she was full of shivering anxiety as to the whereabouts of those millions."

Martin chuckled.

"That's the Countess down to the ground," he declared. "She and her sister had half a million each from the old man when they were married--the one to Pengwill and the other to Tidswell. My uncle believes that it is entirely through the Tidswells that Sir Adam went so cranky and refused permission to any member of the family to enter the bank. Tidswell swaggered in there one day--it was the year he was Lord Lieutenant--and asked the old man point blank for an overdraft of a hundred thousand. Sir Adam showed him the account where he was already three thousand overdrawn and said if he wrote another cheque upon the bank even for five pounds it would be dishonoured. Then he called in Dyson and out went the Lord Lieutenant."

"Humorous old dog, Sir Adam," Snell meditated.

Martin glanced at his watch.

"Sorry," he said, "I must be off. I promised to look in and see my uncle if I was in town to-night and he goes to bed early. You know where to find me, Snell--or Elmhurst, or my uncle at any time. We shan't interfere with you. The only thing is--go easy with Fanshawe when he comes back. He's a decent chap, although he is not up to this type of case."

"I have already written to Inspector Fanshawe," Snell confided. "I told him that I had come down here to have a further consultation with him, and Captain Elmhurst, and begged him to call in and see me on his return."

"Very thoughtful of you. He will appreciate that. Well, good night, Snell," he added, rising to his feet. "I hope you will sleep well. Anyhow, I am sure you will be more comfortable here than in any of the hotels."

Snell strolled to the front doorsteps and watched his companion drive off in his coupé. He stood there for a moment enjoying the air. In the semidarkness the statue opposite seemed to

be looming unreasonably large against the shadowy background. Lawford, who had followed the two men out, spoke to him respectfully from behind.

"I sometimes wonder, sir, whether that old gentleman up there had any strange adventures in his life."

The Inspector nodded thoughtfully.

"Do you know, Lawford," he confided, "something of the same idea came to me just now. For a graven image of marble or granite or whatever it may be made of, I never saw a statue which seemed to me to change as that does. Once, in the daytime, I fancied that I caught him smiling at me. Now to-night he seems to be twice the size--gazing at us and at the club in positively amazing fashion. One could almost imagine that the late--mayor, wasn't he?"

"That's right, sir."

"Had a sort of grudge against his position."

"It's one of the finest situations in the town, sir. By all accounts he deserved it, too. My father used to say that the old gentleman saved the place millions in rates and that he had the brains of a Chancellor of the Exchequer."

Snell reclimbed the steps.

"It seems a pity," he sighed, "that he had an eccentric descendant like Sir Adam to give us so much trouble."

Detective Inspector Snell indulged in a final whisky-and-soda in the reading room. He sat there for almost an hour with a magazine upon his knee. Then he mounted to his bedroom and slowly removed the greater part of his clothing. He fetched the small alarm clock, which had been placed upon the dressing case, to the side of his bed. For several minutes he hesitated, then he set it for three o'clock, locked his door, lay down upon the bed and covered himself with an eiderdown.

Lawford himself, neat and as carefully dressed as ever, served Snell with his bacon and eggs and coffee in the morning. He produced also a roll of the morning papers and pointed to one paragraph with a sigh.

"I notice that the public are beginning to blame the police already for not having found Sir Adam," he observed. "After all, it is only a matter of nine days since the poor old gentleman disappeared."

Inspector Snell glanced round the empty room and Lawford, accepting the hint, leaned a few inches closer over the table.

"So far as I am concerned, Lawford," he said, "you must remember that the police have far greater responsibilities with regard to a definite crime than the, I hope, temporary disappearance of an elderly gentleman of eccentric habits. Our efforts at the moment are directed towards solving the mystery of the murder of that unknown man in the bank. When we have finished with that we can deal a little more confidently with the other matter."

"That seems quite reasonable, sir, when one looks at it in the proper way," Lawford admitted, and one might have fancied there was an undernote of relief in his tone. "The murder of that man in the vaults of the bank and him never being identified--that's what I call a mystery indeed. It will take some brains, sir, to solve that."

"It's got to be done," the Inspector declared. "I sometimes think that criminals don't pause long enough to reflect upon how seldom they are able to bring off a crime of any sort without being detected. In Scotland Yard we have a manuscript written by a very brilliant young scholar who is in Dartmoor for the rest of his life but who is allowed the use of the library. He calls it *Does Crime Pay?* and he's been able to show pretty clearly that it doesn't. He has petitioned the Home Secretary to let him have it printed and distributed amongst the prisoners."

"An excellent idea, sir," Lawford agreed. "Shall you be in to lunch to-day, sir?"

"I think so," Snell replied. "I am going over to have another look at the bank premises this morning. Do you know anything of the man Dyson who is still door porter there, I believe?"

"A very respectable person, sir. Otherwise I don't know much about him. They say that he has been a little queer in his head, though, since this affair."

The Inspector smiled meditatively as he filled his pipe.

"Looks as though we should all have a headache or two before we clear up the trouble," he observed, as he left the room.

Snell found the iron gate of the bank unfastened and Dyson was waiting on the other side of the mahogany door to answer his greeting. The Inspector glanced at him casually as he entered. His voice and expression were still those of a tired man.

"Mr. Martin Mowbray is in the bank parlour, sir," he announced.

Martin was seated in Sir Adam's chair, his elbows upon the table, his head supported by his two hands, studying a typewritten letter spread out before him. He greeted the Inspector in

somewhat absent fashion.

"Got hold of something?" the latter asked quietly.

"I am not sure," Martin replied. "I have just come across this letter from New York. It is from the firm who fixed up those locker safes--Averil and Benz Company they call themselves, of Providence, Rhode Island. It is addressed to Sir Adam. It is quite an ordinary communication--simply a request to be allowed to supply another client with a set of locker safes as fitted to this bank twenty years ago. You will see the firm go on to say that they recognise that Sir Adam bought the patent but as it expires next year they don't suppose he would make any objection. Evidently the old man didn't have his correspondence copied, for here's a note of his reply, in his own handwriting: 'Wrote and told these people I'd see them damned first.' Then there's a cable from this same company, which was delivered here half an hour ago," Martin went on, "saying that a member of the board of the Averil and Benz Company is on his way over and will call upon Sir Adam."

"That," Inspector Snell announced, "is without a doubt in reply to the telephone conversation I had with the firm."

Martin looked across at him in amazement.

"What do you mean--telephone conversation you had with the firm?" he demanded.

The Inspector blinked for several moments.

"Just an idea of my own, Mr. Mowbray," he confided. "Part of my job was to discover what had become of the money which should have been stored in those safes. Another part was to discover the reason for the murder in the vault."

"Well, I get that," Martin admitted. "Go on."

"As regards the murder in the vault we are making progress," the Inspector continued slowly. "We shall soon be in a position to assume that the murdered man had special knowledge concerning those safes and the day after he was released from prison he came down to Norchester with the idea of turning that knowledge to practical use. His murder destroyed the chance of our finding out any information he might have had which we hadn't. That's why I telephoned to the makers of the safes in Rhode Island and afterwards wirelessly to the representative who is on board the *Homeric* and that's why we may expect a visit from him at any moment now."

"Well, I'm damned!" Martin exclaimed. "And I was beginning to wonder, Snell, whether you were not just a little bit of a fraud."

Snell enjoyed the joke in his own peculiar way. He laughed very softly and very quietly.

"I'm ready to talk, Mr. Mowbray, as soon as I know anything, but it's a weakness of mine to keep my mouth closed until I have something to say. Do you mind opening up the vault?"

Martin threw back the carpet and the Inspector turned on the light. The two men stood side by side looking down at the row of locker safes, the doors of which had been duly closed. They certainly presented a very solid, not to say impregnable appearance.

"What is the special patent about those safes? I wonder," Snell reflected. "Over ten thousand pounds the old man paid for the patent alone, apart from their fitting."

"Well, it's rather a wonderful lock," Martin reminded him, "and they're supposed to resist every form of damage--fire, bombs and all the rest of it. I can't see what advantage it was to the old man, though, to buy the patent."

"Said anything about this to Dyson yet?" Snell asked.

"Not yet. I only came across the letter a few minutes ago. Directly I opened the cable I took down an old file and found it at once."

"If you haven't mentioned it, I shouldn't," Snell suggested.

"You are not by way of mistrusting poor old Dyson, I hope?" Martin remarked.

"Not the least bit in the world," was the careful reply. "It is not the man himself I would mistrust. It is his capacity for silence, if you know what I mean. He doesn't look well to me. He looks just in that nervous state when he might talk at any moment to anybody."

"Hasn't much to talk about, has he?"

"No, but we are opening up a new line of investigation which might lead to discoveries at any moment."

"The lockers?"

"The patent."

Martin's smile was a little incredulous.

"Let's go and open one of them," Snell suggested. "Say Number Three."

Martin mounted the stairs, unlocked a drawer of the desk and produced the long key. He brought it down to the cellar. Snell took it into his hand and examined it carefully.

"The idea of having one key to deal with all these lockers in the way it does," he remarked, looking at it closely, "would justify the patent, I suppose, without anything further. Still, let's have a try."

They moved aside the metal covering to the lock, pushed the key into its place and turned. The door opened quite easily. Snell went down on his hands and knees and examined the sides, the shelves, the floor and the rest of the interior. Then he got up, shook the dust off his clothes and relocked the safe.

"Absolutely solid," he admitted. "Not a give or a joint anywhere. Never mind. We can afford not to hurry about this part of the business."

"You are very mysterious this morning," Martin protested. "Why can we?"

"What I mean is this," Snell explained, letting the tap in the small basin run on his hands for a minute and drying them on a towel. "This part of the investigation deals entirely with the murder and Sir Adam's lost fortune. I don't mind confessing, Mr. Mowbray, that I think success in any one of the three problems we are tackling will practically solve the other two. That is why it seems to me a matter of the greatest urgency that we should devote all our efforts towards finding out what has become of Sir Adam. The other problems have to do with dead facts. There is just a chance that Sir Adam may be still alive."

"Considering the poor start we made," Martin remarked, "I should say we were quite justified in working backwards. That is to say, hunting for the fortune and the story of the murder first, in the hope that it will lead us to Sir Adam."

"That is the reply of a man with sound detective instincts," Snell admitted. "We may be driven to working entirely upon those lines. In fact, for the moment that is exactly what we are doing. Do you mind passing over that letter from Averil and Benz again?"

Martin passed it over. The detective read it through carefully. Slowly that left eyelid was uplifted. His lips were pursed as though he were about to whistle.

"Notice the date?" he asked.

Martin glanced at it and gave a little exclamation.

"A year ago!"

"Precisely."

"What has happened to this man that he didn't present himself?"

Snell glanced at the letter again.

"This affair may be of no importance at all," he said, "or it may be a very great help. I would suggest that we ask Dyson whether he has any recollection of the man calling within the last year."

Martin rang the bell and the porter made melancholy appearance.

"Dyson," Martin said, "a year ago the people who made those safes down in the vaults wrote and said they were sending a man over to see Sir Adam, with a view apparently to his releasing his claim on the patent under which they were made. The name of the firm is Averil and Benz of Rhode Island. Now, do you remember an American gentleman calling?"

Dyson was silent for a moment. The news seemed somehow or other to make him vaguely uneasy.

"No American gentleman has called here in banking hours for the last twelve months, sir," he said firmly. "I'm quite sure of that."

"Sir Adam has not shown the safes to any caller?"

"He has never done such a thing in his life, sir."

Martin waved the man away.

"Now this, I should think, is the moment for us to send a cable," he proposed. "I see that the people have a cable address--ABENZ NEW YORK. We'll start with that."

"If we are to send another cable at all," Snell suggested, "I should let them know that the bank is not at present functioning but ask them what has become of their representative and say that we should be glad to discuss the matter referred to in their previous letter; and if you don't mind, I should particularly like Dyson to take that cable."

The cable was written out. From his place in front of the window Snell watched Dyson with the cable in his satchel walking down the street.

"Queer thing," he meditated half to himself, "but the people who saw most of Sir Adam all seem to have had a sneaking liking for him. There's Groome, who died from the shock; there's Dyson, who looks as though he had lost a stone in weight already and seems perfectly miserable; and there's the steward over at the club, Lawford, who speaks of the old gentleman as though he had been one of the most amiable people in the world."

"Dyson is the man I cannot understand," Martin confided. "I never heard Sir Adam address a kindly word to him. He ordered him about as though he were a dog, yet the fellow behaves as though he had lost his greatest friend and benefactor."

"He may be worrying about the difficulty of getting another post," Snell suggested.

"It can't be that," Martin replied. "I have already given him a hint that he doesn't need to worry, that there will be something coming for him in the way of a pension from the estate."

"I suppose there will be an estate?" Snell reflected.

"Some of the money will turn up," Martin declared. "Then there are these bank premises, you know, and the furniture--"

"And those safes," Snell observed. "They must be worth something. Didn't I understand that you found some money to pay a cheque?"

"The premises are worth more than I advanced," Martin replied quickly. "I only found a matter of five thousand pounds and property in Norchester to-day is fetching--well, very high prices indeed. While I think of it, Snell, here are the additional plans of the alterations to the club you asked for. Shall I have Dyson take them over to your rooms for you?"

"If you don't mind I would rather keep them here, Mr. Mowbray."

"That is to say you don't want to take them into the club?" the young man asked curiously.

"Well, I don't want to hold them out in front of me and go from room to room," Snell admitted. "They would think I was off my head and they don't think much of me as it is. Lawford's attitude is almost sympathetic."

"If the plans can suggest to you anything about Sir Adam's disappearance," Martin said, "I should have thought you would have wanted to study them on the spot."

"Yes," the other agreed. "Quite so. Yes. But I think I will be able to manage. If you have no objections, Mr. Mowbray, I should like you to order Dyson to come every morning at nine o'clock and have this place opened up for me. He can lock the doors afterwards. I should like to spend a little time here. If there is anything in the plans which suggests an idea to me I can make a rough draft in my pocketbook and pry about the club. Lawford is a very good fellow, civil all the time and that sort of thing, but I believe he feels at the back of his head that Sir Adam's disappearance is a reflection on the club. He seems to have developed a certain amount of curiosity, too, about my movements. It is odd how often I find him just at my elbow. If I were to take plans in and ask him to inspect the whole building from cellar to roof I don't think that he would like it. I really don't think, Mr. Mowbray, that he would like it."

"You haven't got any ideas about Lawford, have you?" Martin asked.

Snell shook his head.

"No ideas whatsoever," he declared. "The only thing is that when you are face to face with a blank wall of impossibilities you've got to go over that wall with your fingertips as though you were looking for a chip in the mortar. You have to use your imagination and it's one of the drawbacks of our profession, Mr. Mowbray, that it is rather cramping to the imagination. I am going to stay here now, if I may, for an hour or so and look over these plans."

Martin glanced at his watch.

"I shall have to be off directly," he announced. "Perhaps you wouldn't mind staying till Dyson comes back."

The detective nodded.

"Does Lawford ever have a holiday?" he asked.

"He goes away for a fortnight in the summer and he can always have some time off if he wants it."

"Fine-looking chap," Snell meditated.

"A great cricketer," Martin assented, "if he had gone in for it seriously. He was quite up to County form. We played him twice, the season I was captain three years ago, and long before that he could have worked himself into a regular place in the eleven if he had tried. He was always afraid it would interfere with his work here, though. Sir Adam was one of those who was most down upon it."

"I don't think Sir Adam was very keen upon people enjoying themselves. See you at luncheon-time, then, Mr. Mowbray."

Martin took his leave. The detective moved into his place and rolled out the plans before him. To all appearance he was completely absorbed when the first knock at the door came. On the second occasion he looked up.

"Come in!" he invited.

Dyson presented himself cap in hand. He glanced round the room as though in search of Martin Mowbray.

"Are there any instructions, do you know, sir," he asked Snell, "about keeping the bank open?"

Snell pushed the plans a little on one side.

"Sent the cable, Dyson?" he enquired.

"Yes, sir," the man replied.

"How much was it?"

Dyson stood quite still for a moment and there was a queer expression on his scared face.

"I--I don't quite remember, sir."

"Think," Snell enjoined. "You must have some idea."

"I'm sorry, sir. Yes--it was somewhere around a sovereign."

"Do you keep your petty cash like that?" Snell asked. "Somewhere about a sovereign! You don't know how much it was because you never sent it."

The man was speechless.

"Open your satchel. Give me the cable."

Dyson obeyed with shaking fingers. He undid the strap and hesitated.

"I sent the cable, sir," he insisted. "It's my memory that's funny."

"Give me your satchel. If you don't, I shall come and take it. Be careful, Dyson!"

The latter seemed on the point of either collapse or some act of violence. He produced the cable and laid it on the blotting pad. He edged a step nearer and leaned forward just at the time that Snell's right hand shot across the table. Dyson stared at the short-nosed stubby weapon, his eyes lit with real terror.

"You haven't a chance at that sort of game," the Inspector warned him quietly. "You see, I am an old hand. You would be a dead man before you got near any sort of weapon you may have. Besides," he went on, and his voice seemed to get softer and more persuasive, "can you tell me any reason why I should not march you round to the police station and have you charged for the murder of that person who was shot here the other night?"

"You couldn't do that, sir," Dyson faltered. "I didn't shoot him."

"Who did then?"

The man was silent.

"If you didn't shoot him who did?" Snell repeated.

"I don't know, sir."

Snell laid his gun on the table within easy reach. His eyes never left the straight, menacing figure in front of him.

"Dyson," he continued, "would you like to tell me the truth? It might be better for you. I don't like to hear of innocent men being hanged, but it has happened before now. It may happen again. You don't seem to me like a killer. You may be one of a small conspiracy. I cannot tell. I am not one of those detectives," Snell went on, speaking very slowly, "who when they start out to discover who killed a man, and to bring him to the gallows, don't mind so much so long as someone swings for it. I am not like that, Dyson. I want to be sure that it is the right man who suffers. I am not so sure as I should like to be about you. That is why I am giving you this chance to tell me the truth."

Dyson seemed to be struggling for words. There were drops of sweat upon his forehead. He stumbled towards the desk and leaned against it. Suddenly, as though by some prodigious effort, he sprang forward. He seemed to have become a wild creature. His right hand struck out madly at Snell, reached his collar, burst it asunder and tried to close upon his throat. His breath was coming fast, his face was the face of a maniac. Snell's fist worked like a piston-rod. He leaned over the table and struck his antagonist on the point of the chin. The man's collapse was almost instantaneous. His other hand struck the table. The stationery rack went in one direction and Snell's revolver and the architect's plans in another. Dyson himself fell backwards with a deep groan. Snell moved swiftly round the desk and looked down at him. Then he picked up his revolver, slipped it into his pocket, collected the plans and replaced the stationery rack upon the table. He loosened Dyson's collar, felt his pulse and heart and stood

once more upright. Afterwards he glanced in the mirror, rearranged his own collar and torn tie, had one more look at the unconscious man and picked up the telephone, a temporary installation of which had been put in that morning.

"Chief Constable's office at the Town Hall. As quickly as possible, if you please."

In less than a minute Captain Elmhurst's voice came over the line.

"Hello! Who's that?"

"It's Snell," was the calm reply. "Can you hear me, Captain Elmhurst?"

"Yes, I hear."

"Listen. Is there anyone in your room with you?"

"Only my clerk."

"Well, I'm Snell and I'm in the bank parlour. This place is becoming rather like a frowzy chamber of horrors. I have had a little disagreement with a man here--Dyson, the bank porter."

"The devil!"

"I want you to send down the police surgeon. I don't think the fellow's badly hurt but I want to be sure. Perhaps you might come along, too, sir, if you will and I'll explain."

"I'll do just as you say," was the quick reply. "Steward is on the premises now."

"I shall expect to hear from you, then, in about quarter of an hour."

"You will see us before then," Elmhurst promised.

Snell hung up the receiver. He looked back at the disordered room and shook his head slowly. Then he set to work with meticulous care to restore the place to its former appearance. He picked up the cable which was lying on the desk and thrust it into his pocket. Then, after another glance at the unconscious man, he mopped up a few spots of ink that had been spilt and laid the plans upon a clean sheet of blotting paper in front of his chair. As soon as everything was in order, he sprinkled a little water upon the unconscious man's face, felt his pulse, strolled out into the hall, unlocked the door and pushed the gates a little wider open. He was back in his place studying the plans when the automobile stopped outside.

XXIII

Captain Elmhurst, followed by Dr. Steward carrying a professional black bag, hurried into the bank parlour. Snell rose to his feet and pointed to the figure upon the floor.

"There has been a little trouble here, I am sorry to say," he explained in his usual sleepy tone. "Dyson is knocked out, I'm afraid. He will come to, with a little attention. His pulse is stronger now than it was."

The doctor sank on his knee and leaned over his prospective patient. Captain Elmhurst, too, regarded him for a moment in astonishment. Then he turned to the Inspector.

"Do you mean to tell me that Dyson is mixed up in this business?" he exclaimed. "Why, I always thought he was the only person old Sir Adam really trusted."

"He's in it, up to a certain extent," Snell confided. "I tested him somewhat prematurely, perhaps, and he went for me. We were alone here and I had to knock him out."

"Dyson!" Elmhurst repeated wonderingly. "Well, that's a queer business. He served his full time in the Army, has a row of medals, and he is one of the leading lights in the British Legion here. No possibility of any mistake, eh?"

"I think not," Snell replied "Mr. Martin Mowbray and I arrived at a certain conclusion this morning in the course of our conversation and as soon as that happened we wrote out a cable and gave it to Dyson to take to the Post Office and despatch. He had been rather silent and awkward all the morning. When he came back I asked him a question as regards the cost of the cable and he was completely floored. He told me something ridiculous and I found that I had stumbled upon the truth. He had kept the cable back."

The surgeon rose to his feet.

"An ordinary knock-out," he pronounced, "but the fellow isn't in the best of shape. He ought to lay up for a day or two. I should send for an ambulance and have him taken to the infirmary, if I were you."

Snell made no immediate comment but he was obviously perturbed.

"What's the matter with that?" Elmhurst asked. "The poor fellow doesn't look as though he'd be good for anything for a day or so."

"There is nothing the matter with it at all," was the thoughtful reply. "It is exactly what I should wish, under certain conditions."

"Well?" Elmhurst interrupted a little impatiently.

"I believe," Snell explained, "that this place is being watched at the present moment. The removal of Dyson on a stretcher in a police car would be a catastrophe. I should like it to remain for the present absolutely a secret that he is down and out. If it were possible I should like him sent in a non-official vehicle to the police hospital and kept strictly guarded there. Could the doctor help us, I wonder?"

The doctor, who had no interest in crimes or mysteries of any sort and was utterly devoid of curiosity, opened his black bag and peered into its contents.

"I can give him a stimulant," he proposed, "which will enable him to walk with a little assistance within the course of an hour. There are plenty of beds vacant in the police hospital and you can telephone from here to have one prepared. He had better have a nurse to sit with him for the rest of the day. He's had a shock and I take it that you don't want him to become in any way mentally deranged."

"That," the detective admitted, "is the last thing we want--not until we have him in the frame of mind to answer one or two questions, anyway."

The doctor prepared his draught, raised the man's head a little, held it in the crook of his arm and forced the mixture between his teeth. Then he placed a cushion under his head and stood up.

"Best I can do," he announced. "You will remember, Captain Elmhurst," he went on, turning to the Chief Constable, "that I am wanted down at Wharf Street as soon as I can be spared. You don't want me to send a special nurse down, I suppose?"

"Not if you can avoid it, please," Snell begged.

"There is no real necessity," the doctor declared. "No fear of his passing out or anything of that sort. His trouble, when he gets any, will be mental. By the by, are you sending word to his people?"

"Leave that to me, please," the Inspector insisted. "It's a case for isolation, this. I don't want the man to come to any harm, of course, but I just want to put him where no one can get at him for a matter of forty-eight hours. I think by that time we may be seeing a gleam or two of daylight."

"Don't frighten him, if you can help it," the doctor said indifferently. "You know something of the scientific side of it, I am sure," he added, with a glance at Snell's not too powerful-looking arm, "and you understand the psychology of a knock-out punch on the exact spot."

"I've heard something about it in my gymnasium days," Snell admitted with a grin.

The doctor took his leave. The two men looked down at Dyson. He was breathing regularly now and there was a healthier colour in his cheeks. Captain Elmhurst lit a cigarette, and following his example Snell began slowly to fill his pipe.

"When you've been thinking hard about a difficult case, sir," the detective said, "the slightest gleam of light seems like a wide-open window. I can't tell you that my job is in any way finished, however, because, I'm sorry to say, the whereabouts of Sir Adam remains as great a mystery as ever. Leave it at that, will you, Captain Elmhurst? I look upon you in exactly the same way as I do upon my Chief at Scotland Yard and when I report progress to him to-night I'll send you a copy."

"That's quite all right, Inspector," the other replied. "What can I do for you now? You'd like me to order a car, wouldn't you?"

"I'd like you to do a little more than that, if you will be so kind," Snell begged. "It may seem foolish but it's just an idea. You know there's a back way out from the bank?"

"I suppose there is. I have never seen it though."

"It's there all right: just two high stone walls and a passage. Well, I want you, say in a quarter of an hour, to send two cars round here--an ordinary police car to wait outside the bank door and a taxicab to pull up at that stationer's shop a few doors down. The taxicab driver must be told to keep his flag down and wait for two gentlemen. The police car is to stop outside the bank and there should be five minutes' difference between the times of their arrival."

"Great Scott, Inspector!" Captain Elmhurst exclaimed. "Are you trying to make a detective of me?"

"Well, it's quite simple, sir, isn't it?" Snell replied with a smile. "Later in the day I'll tell you if we have any luck."

"I should think, after all," Elmhurst remarked as he put on his hat and took his leave, "there must be odd moments of interest about this profession of yours when you get fairly going."

Inspector Snell was a man of method. He believed also in making the best use of every second in times of crisis. With Dyson still unconscious and breathing stertorously within a few feet of him, he opened the door of Sir Adam's private lavatory and, spreading out a small leather case which he had drawn from his pocket, he smeared over a square of plate glass with some ink shaken from a small bottle, completing in a few moments some simple preparations for an enterprise which he had been contemplating for several days. Crossing the floor of the parlour once more, he went down on his knees by the unconscious man's side, raised his right hand and pressed the fingers carefully upon the ink-smeared plate. Afterwards he substituted a block of plain white paper for the glass, pressed the fingers once more firmly upon it and finally rose to his feet. He returned to the lavatory, placed the result of his labours in a drawer, reached for his hat, and, with a glance at Dyson, who was still either asleep or unconscious, he opened the door of the bank parlour, let himself out into the street, and crossing the pavement spoke to the uniformed driver of the police car which was waiting there.

"Listen carefully," he enjoined. "Get away from here now as quickly as you can. Take the first turn to your right and the first to your right again. That will bring you to the back entrance of the bank. Wait there for a quarter of an hour. Then go back to where you came from. You will have finished your job. If anyone asks you any questions look at them carefully so that you can identify them afterwards, but make no reply. Is that clear?"

"Perfectly, sir."

"Good. The first turn to the right," Snell repeated, stretching out his arm, "round to the right again and wait for quarter of an hour."

"Precisely, sir."

The Inspector stepped back into the bank, closing the gate and the door behind him but not locking them, although he went through the pantomime of doing so. Then he returned to the bank parlour and stood a few feet in the background gazing intently out of the window. He watched the police car start up, crawl for a few yards and take its turn to the right. He leaned a little forward, his eyes sweeping the road and the pavement on the other side of the street. Suddenly a faint smile transformed his face. Exactly what he had hoped for was taking place. He turned around and approached Dyson, leaned down and shook his shoulder.

"Wake up, man!" he enjoined. "Here, let me give you a hand."

Dyson opened his eyes, stared at the Inspector for a moment, and then with very little assistance staggered to his feet. Snell handed him his cap.

"Pull yourself together," the latter continued firmly. "I'm going to take you home."

"I can walk, sir," Dyson muttered a little thickly.

"That's right," Snell declared encouragingly. "Now, come this way."

They passed through the bank. On the doorstep Snell placed the key in his companion's hand.

"Lock up," he ordered. "You can leave the gates."

Dyson did as he was told--an absolutely mechanical turn of the wrist was all that was needed. On the pavement Snell waved his hand to the taxicab man, who promptly drove up. He pushed Dyson in and took the place by his side.

"Turn round to the left at once," he directed. "Drive on until you come to High Street, then make your way from there to the police hospital. You understand? Get going."

All the time, Dyson sat dazed and dumbly acquiescent. Snell relit his pipe. Presently they drove into the yard of the small infirmary. Two orderlies were waiting.

"Take this patient up to the room that Captain Elmhurst has reserved," the Inspector instructed. "Tell the nurse he's to be taken care of and to rest."

"Orders all given, sir," one of the men replied.

Dyson alighted readily enough but as though he were still in a dream. Snell watched him disappear with his arms round the shoulders of the two orderlies. Then he permitted himself a faint chuckle of satisfaction.

"Lunchtime," he soliloquised, glancing up at the clock. "County Club, chauffeur."

XXIV

Almost immediately after he had climbed the broad steps and passed through the swing doors into the vestibule of the club, Inspector Snell knew that something out of the ordinary was happening. There were twice as many hats as usual upon the pegs, and amongst the Homburgs and bowlers affected by most of the members were several silk hats of incredible glossiness. Martin Mowbray, in place of his habitual tweeds, was wearing a dark suit and a sombre tie. His uncle, with whom he was talking, was attired in the frock coat and stock of the Victorian epoch. Sir Theodore, too, was wearing clothes of a severer cut than is generally to be found in a county club. Martin broke off in his conversation with his uncle and hastened towards Snell.

"No wonder you're looking a little bewildered, Snell," he remarked. "This is just what has happened: Sir Theodore had an interview with a very distinguished judge last night, and was given the decision of the board with regard to his application for having the Will read. The board naturally refused to presume Sir Adam's death, but under the circumstances they were willing to advise Sir Theodore to get the legatees together and read them the Will which is in our possession. There are a few legal stipulations and conditions which are really quite unimportant, but the reading of the Will is to take place at three o'clock this afternoon. The Earl and Countess of Pengwill are here; Lord and Lady Tidswell; Jack Tidswell, the elder grandson; Lady Diana--and I think that's all, except the two executors, myself and one of Sir Theodore's partners."

"Well, I hope it may set their minds at rest, even if it doesn't help us," Snell said thoughtfully. "I should like to see you afterwards sometime during the day, Mr. Mowbray."

"I'll telephone as soon as this show is over," Martin promised. "That's Pengwill talking to my uncle," he pointed out. "He's all nerves. Terrified for fear the old man has either got an awful confession to make in his Will or has indulged in some ghastly gesture. Tidswell is almost as bad. Six or seven millions. It's a hell of a lot of money, of course, if it really exists."

"If it really exists," Snell repeated.

"My God, don't let any of them hear you suggest that it doesn't!" the young man implored. "I don't believe there's one of them would turn a hair if the poor old chap were discovered dead, but the very mention of the money being missing would send any one of the two families off into an ague. I don't know which are the worse--the Tidswells or the Pengwills. The only person who preserves her dignity through it all is Lady Diana. We all had a little talk at the office and she seemed to stagger everybody when she remarked quite calmly that she would rather know what had become of old Sir Adam than what had become of his millions.. .. I must be off now. We are going into the private room and I can see Uncle making a move."

Snell watched the little crowd disappear, then he took his place in the luncheon room at the most retired table. There was a buzz of conversation everywhere. Once more, interest in this local tragedy seemed to have revived. There were a great many curious glances in his direction. The Chief Constable came in a little late and made at once for his table. He looked round the room before he took the place next to Snell and asked him a question.

"All serene?" he ventured.

"Everything went according to plan," Snell assured him. "We've made a move, sir. I can't quite tell where it's going to lead us but somewhere in the right direction, I hope."

"You know they're all in the private room? Come down to gloat over the old man's millions."

Snell nodded.

"I saw Mr. Martin Mowbray in the hall as I was coming in. Seems a pity they couldn't have waited a little longer."

Captain Elmhurst thoughtfully sipped the glass of sherry which had just been brought to him.

"I'm not so sure," he reflected. "If I were one of them and heard about that row of empty lockers and the lawyers had to tell me that they didn't know where the stuff was, I should certainly vote for the Will being opened. There may be a list of his securities in there. In the old days, before the fashion for short Wills came in, that was always the case."

Lawford, quite unruffled, looking in fact as though he rather enjoyed the extra bout of work, approached the table.

"I hope that they are not keeping you waiting, Captain Elmhurst?" he asked anxiously. "And you, Mr. Snell? We have a large party in the private room to-day--very distinguished people. They are not lunching exactly, but they are ordering in refreshments of various sorts and they do not wish for anyone in the room except myself. Henry's a good lad, but he is a little slow, and I'm a waiter short, too. I sent my best man out on an errand and he hasn't returned yet. Have you given your order, Mr. Snell?"

"Grilled sole," the detective confided. "I knew it would take a little extra time. Don't bother about me, Lawford. I'm in no hurry."

"I have ordered the lamb and here it comes," his companion remarked. "Don't worry about me either, Lawford. We're doing very well."

The steward took his leave with a little bow. Elmhurst watched him disappear with a glance of admiration.

"I believe that man would sooner die than ask a question," he observed.

Snell acquiesced thoughtfully.

"He is a perfectly trained servant," he admitted. "I know of two things that he must have felt a little curious about. This meeting of Sir Adam's relatives, for one."

"And the other?"

"Well, I believe he would rather like to know what's become of the waiter he sent out on an errand."

"The significance of the missing waiter eludes me," Elmhurst confessed, without any particular show of interest, "but I don't suppose there is a soul in this room who isn't curious about that Will they are reading. You're a stranger here, Snell, and you can't quite realise what the name of Blockton means in these parts."

"It isn't my job," the detective observed, "to go in for too much speculation about things. Still, the disappearance of a well-known man who chooses to take his fortune away with him is always certain to provoke curiosity."

Elmhurst smiled a little cynically.

"I believe what those people are afraid of," he remarked, "is that he got rid of the fortune before he disappeared. If so I don't suppose they are likely to learn much from the Will. You got Dyson away from the bank, I suppose?"

"Thanks to you, sir," Snell replied. "I knew that the place was being watched but I wanted to prove it. When the police car drew up outside the bank I went out and gave the driver careful orders and pointed to the turn which leads to the back entrance in Holles Street. He understood and off he went. The watcher strolled across the road and followed him. As soon as the coast was clear I got Dyson out, put him in the taxi and drove straight to the police infirmary where your people are taking charge of him."

"And the watcher?" Elmhurst asked.

"Johnson, the hall porter and waiter from here. The same young man, incidentally, who thought he saw a big car waiting outside the warehouse next door the morning Sir Adam disappeared. I made a few enquiries about that car myself and not a soul in the yarn agents' saw a sign of it."

Elmhurst shook his head seriously.

"You will never get anyone to believe, Snell," he said, "that any member of the club staff is mixed up in this. I don't believe it myself."

"Perhaps not, sir," Snell replied. "In a case like this I just have to plod along and take note of the things I see. When we have strung them all together they may produce surprises."

"You won't find Lawford figuring amongst them," the Chief Constable declared confidently.

Snell sighed. The light flowing into the room through the tall windows scarcely reached him in his dark corner, yet he blinked for a moment and there was a distinct fall of his left eyelid. It was certainly hard to believe at such moments, his companion meditated, that he was a man of intelligence.

"Well, I daresay not," he admitted thoughtfully. "Certainly he has not the appearance of a man likely to interfere in a dangerous business. A more contented-looking person I never saw."

"He's a good fellow," Elmhurst agreed. "Might have been a fine cricketer, too, if he had stuck to it. Ever seen his wife?"

Snell shook his head.

"Not once," he confessed. "I don't think she comes into the club."

"She was in the old man's household when Lady Blockton was alive and they had to run some sort of an establishment. Parlourmaid, I think. She's damned good-looking, still."

"Wonderful cook," his companion murmured. "If it was not for this indigestion which always troubles me so, I should like to order a little dinner for Fanshawe and myself when he returns. I have to have everything grilled, though," he reflected sadly.

"Celebration dinner?" Elmhurst enquired.

"Well, yes, in a way," Snell acquiesced. "I don't think that this case will last very much longer. I feel, you know, I don't know why, I feel that we are getting near the end of it even though

that end is hazy as yet, to say the least of it."

"What's the low-down on this fellow Dyson?" the Chief Constable asked.

"I hate setting out an unfinished job," Snell confided. "I have scarcely anything but circumstantial evidence about Dyson at present, I must admit, but I have succeeded in getting his fingerprints this morning and I am rather hoping for something from them."

"You know how much that class of evidence is being mistrusted nowadays?" the Chief Constable reminded his companion.

"I do indeed," Snell assented. "I would never take a case into Court upon circumstantial evidence alone. I value it chiefly because it is sometimes the finger-post to evidence of an altogether different character. I am not taking it for granted, for instance, that Lawford knows anything about what is going on because he sent one of his waiters out to watch the bank this morning. At the same time it helps me to look for something more definite."

"Apart from the fact that to suspect Lawford of complicity in the affair is ridiculous," Elmhurst remarked, "there is no proof that the waiter didn't go out on his own or stay out after he had done an errand for Lawford."

"You are probably quite right," Snell admitted gloomily.

"I see he's back again on duty. You wouldn't like to ask him a question, I suppose?"

Snell glanced at his companion reproachfully.

"I have sometimes admitted to myself--pretty often, in fact," he confessed, "that I am a dud detective, but I do not think it would ever have occurred to me to ask that young man just now where he had spent the morning. I was once told," he went on, "by an angry client, that I should do better as a scarecrow in a turnip-field than at Scotland Yard. But a scarecrow, at any rate, even though it had a mangel-wurzel for a head, could never be accused of imbecility like that."

"A bit touchy this morning, aren't you, my friend?" the Chief Constable remarked.

"I have the feeling," Snell confided, "of a man who has slightly overshot his mark. I am waiting for three things this afternoon--a message from Mr. Martin Mowbray, a telegram from Southampton, and a summons from Dyson. If they should arrive, as I am inclined to expect them, and if they should contain the information, which is possible, then the disappearance of Adam Blockton and the murder of an unknown man in the bank vaults will no longer be mysteries."

Elmhurst, who was still not sure that he believed in his companion, leaned back in his chair and lit a cigarette.

"Sounds as though you had been travelling," he remarked.

A pageboy from the hall entered the room, looked around for a moment and made his way to Snell.

"You are wanted on the telephone, sir," he announced.

"Who is it?"

"I think he said he was a doctor, sir, speaking from some infirmary. I was to say that it was important."

"I'm coming straight away," Snell replied.

He followed the boy to the telephone box and took up the receiver.

"Snell speaking."

"Inspector, you know who I am--the doctor down at the prison infirmary."

"Nothing wrong with your patient, I hope?"

"On the contrary," the doctor replied, "he seems to have pulled himself together marvellously. The nurses left him for a few minutes and when they returned he was sitting completely dressed and waiting patiently. He asked for me. Fortunately I was down below and went to him at once."

"Very interesting," Snell murmured. "I don't suppose my hand is quite so heavy as it used to be."

"The fellow's perfectly all right now, at any rate," the doctor reported. "I have examined him again and I cannot honestly say that there is the slightest thing wrong. He begs to be allowed to go back to the bank and resume his duties. He promises that if at the end of the day you are not satisfied he will be at your disposition but he would like to be there on duty at two o'clock as usual."

Snell reflected for a moment.

"What do you say, Doctor?"

"There is not the slightest reason why he shouldn't return, so far as regards his condition," was the prompt reply. "He is quite able to carry on with his work. Of course, so far as regards his mentality, I should have to keep him under observation for days before I could say anything definite about that, but at present there are no signs whatever of anything wrong with the fellow."

"Pack him off then," Snell decided.

"That's understood, is it?" the doctor persisted. "I am to let him return to the bank?"

"Understood."

Snell resumed his seat and his luncheon.

"It was the doctor about Dyson," he said. "He seems to have made a complete recovery. Got up and dressed himself and wants to go back on duty."

"What did you decide?" Elmhurst asked.

"To let him return if he wants to. He can't do any harm and there's just one thing more I want to say to him."

Elmhurst nodded.

"No good keeping him shut up if he's fit to be about," he remarked indifferently.

Lawford, with his usual swift yet seemingly unhurried walk, approached the table. He leaned towards Snell.

"Mr. Martin Mowbray would like to speak to you in the hall, sir," he announced. "He won't keep you a moment. He has just received a telephone message which he thinks you ought to know about. I told him you were lunching with Captain Elmhurst and he begged that the Captain should come out with you."

Snell laid down his napkin and followed Elmhurst from the room.

Martin Mowbray was standing just outside the door of the private room. He came forward to meet them at once.

"The message is really more for you, Elmhurst--the official part of it at any rate," he confided. "Someone from London has just arrived--came down in a plane, I think. He asked to be allowed to view the body in the mortuary. He announced himself as able to identify it."

"Is he waiting there?" the Chief Constable asked.

"He asked to see the Inspector of Police who was concerned with the case. I thought that you two would have about finished lunch--"

"Lunch be hanged!" Elmhurst exclaimed. "I will take you in my car, Snell. You look pretty peaky, Martin. How are things going?"

"You would look peaky if you had that crowd to deal with," the young man grunted.

"I don't want to ask any improper questions but is there anything helpful to pass on? These millions--are they a myth?"

"God knows!"

The sound of an upraised voice from the room reached them--an angry, disappointed voice.

"They are crucifying the old man," Martin confided. "I must go back to the rescue."

He disappeared. Elmhurst led the way out to his car.

A middle-aged man who was seated in the armchair of Captain Elmhurst's private room in the Town Hall rose to his feet as the two men entered. He held out his card.

"Averil is my name--Frederick J. Averil," he announced. "Firm of Averil and Benz. We are manufacturers of office safes under a patent of our own. We have a plant down at Providence, Rhode Island, and offices in New York. Office furniture we started with: now we have a number of side-lines. I got your wireless on the steamer and I have come down right away as you asked."

Captain Elmhurst waved him back to his chair.

"I am the Chief Constable here," he said. "This gentleman is Inspector Snell of Scotland Yard. It is he who is responsible for the communication you received. We understand that you are able to identify the man who is lying in the mortuary."

"Yes, I can identify him all right although he has changed some," was the confident reply. "He was continental representative of our firm until about a year ago. We started him off for London last May to see some firms who were interested in our safes and from that day to this we have never heard a word from him although we wrote to the hotel he was to have stayed at, wrote to the firm whom we thought of making our agents, and even advertised in the papers. It is only just lately that we found out what became of him."

"Very interesting," Snell murmured.

"I daresay you will think so when you have heard the whole story," Mr. Frederick J. Averil declared. "Say, I don't want to be a nuisance in any way, but I am one of those men who talk best if they are smoking something or other if it is only dry. D'ye mind?"

He held out a cigar case.

"Not in the least," Elmhurst acquiesced, shaking his head. "Sorry I have nothing of the sort to offer you here in the office."

"That don't matter a couple of shakes," the visitor replied, biting off the end of a cigar which he had drawn from the case and lighting it. "Well now, about this fellow, Bradstone," he went on, blowing out a cloud of smoke. "It would be a long story to tell you, how we came to know all that we do know now. I'll just tell you the result and you can find out anything else you want to know through your own headquarters here. We always knew that this young man Bradstone was a sporty sort of chap, played poker when he was travelling and kept tabs on the ponies, but we guessed he was honest because we never found him anything else. We booked his passage on the *Homeric* that left New York May the twentieth last year, and as I told you before, from the date we saw him off and handed him our new catalogue and posted him up about things generally, we never heard a word from him and I never set eyes on him until they showed me the body out in your mortuary there. Gee, it was not a pleasant sight!"

He smoked thoughtfully for a moment or two.

"Well, a week or so ago we found out at last what had become of the chap," he went on. "He fell in with a bad lot on board that ship, got gambling, owed more than he could pay, cheated in a poker game and stole a couple of thousand dollars from the Purser's office one night. He was handed over to the police at Southampton, charged, sentenced and judged without our hearing a word of it. He must have walked out of prison, Captain, about the day before he paid you chaps a visit down here."

"And with what object, do you suppose," Snell asked quietly, "did he come straight down here?"

"Why, they had given him a letter at the works from Blockton's Bank, asking for a representative to call, as the old gentleman who owned the bank was finding a little trouble with the safes. He came down right away but now I hear how he was found I can figure out what he was up to all right. He was the only man in this country except the old banker, Blockton, who could open those safes, and I reckon he was for making a haul. You evidently had a night watchman or someone whom he did not expect to come across and he got what was coming to him. And there's what I can piece together and probably the true story of George Bradstone, gentlemen."

"I wonder," Snell speculated, "whether he did rob the vaults?"

"Well, if that's what he was after it's a sure thing that he didn't get away with it," the safe manufacturer pointed out. "I saw the oddments that were found on his person--a bunch of skeleton keys and a key which would have opened your safes same as the one you have got, I reckon."

"This identification," Snell confided softly, "is most interesting to us, Mr. Averil. We very much appreciate your coming down on this matter. Now, since you are here, can you spare us just a little more of your time?"

"The rest of the day, if you like," Mr. Averil agreed. "No more. I must be back in London at nine o'clock to-morrow morning."

There was a knock at the office door. A constable entered and conferred with his Chief for a moment. Elmhurst rose to his feet.

"Excuse me for a moment," the latter said, turning to the transatlantic visitor. "Snell, tell our friend exactly what the position is. We have nothing to hide. He may have a suggestion to make. I shall be back in two or three minutes," he added as he left the room.

"Jumpy sort of person, your local Chief," Averil remarked. "What's happened to him now?"

"I should think, from what I overheard," Snell replied, "that he is telephoning to the lawyers. You see, we are all passing through rather a critical time down here."

Mr. Averil grinned.

"I was reading in one of the papers coming along that there had been queer happenings."

"That's why I am here, of course," Snell explained. "Not only has Sir Adam Blockton, who was the head of the bank, suddenly disappeared and been missing now for over a week, but every one of those strange-looking safes which your firm appears to have put in for him, and which were supposed to contain the whole funds of the bank and Sir Adam's fortune--well,

now we have opened them they are empty! We have had to call a meeting of all the relatives--the meeting is still going on, I believe--and you can imagine there is plenty of trouble about."

Mr. Averil was a person of direct speech.

"Well, I'm damned!" he exclaimed incredulously. "Empty, are they, those safes? Well, I should wonder!"

"They're absolutely empty," Snell repeated. "On the other hand there are evidences in the vaults of a number of parcels having been made during the last few months in which, presumably, bonds and the paper assets of the bank have been taken away. We discovered this after we found that the locker safes were every one of them stripped bare. Now, in rummaging about amongst the papers, and I have had a free hand for some time, I came across the receipt for the cheque for fitting these lockers. The cheque came to something like sixteen thousand, five hundred pounds. Isn't that an enormous sum, Mr. Averil?"

The latter's eyes twinkled. He held his cigar between his fingers, his mouth was slightly opened, his expression was one of astonishment.

"You mean to say you don't know all about those safes?" he asked.

"We none of us know anything about them except that they were a special principle of locker safes--burglar-proof, fire-proof, made on a patent of which there is no explanation."

"I'll give you the explanation all right," Mr. Averil promised. "Take me along to the bank with you."

"I cannot do that for the moment," Snell objected. "You see, Scotland Yard is not so far interested in the disappearance or theft of those bonds. It is the murder of that young man and the disappearance of Sir Adam we are concerned in. The disappearance of the money might be a personal--"

"Personal nix!" Mr. Averil scoffed. "You wait till I show you something."

"Yes, but we must have the lawyers there, too," Snell said patiently. "That side of the matter belongs to them. Captain Elmhurst is telephoning them now, I know. Then we shall only be too glad to take you to the bank and have you show us anything there is to be shown."

Captain Elmhurst made his reappearance. He entered the room with a smile upon his lips.

"The meeting at the club, Snell," he announced, "seems to be in disorder. Martin Mowbray is on his way round. He will be here directly."

"And Mr. Averil here," Snell said, "thinks he may be able to point out to us something connected with the safes which will be helpful."

"My car is waiting," Elmhurst declared, taking down his hat from the peg. "We will meet Mowbray outside and get along."

The three men had barely reached the pavement before Martin drove up.

"This is Mr. Averil from Providence, Rhode Island," Elmhurst introduced, as Martin descended. "He is the manufacturer of the safes. We are all going round to the bank to have a look at them."

It was still within office hours when they drew up outside the deserted-looking building. Dyson, back again on duty, tall and unbending as usual, opened the swing doors as the three men arrived and saluted respectfully.

"Recovered, Dyson?" Snell asked.

"Quite, sir," the man replied. "I must offer my apologies for what happened before luncheon."

"That's all right."

They all passed through into the hall. The young man behind the counter looked up from his imaginary task with a flicker of interest. Elmhurst led the way through into the bank parlour, which Dyson opened for them.

"Unbolt the trap door, too, Dyson," the Chief Constable ordered. "We are going into the vaults."

Dyson stood motionless. He had the air for a moment of one who is either stricken with sudden deafness or who is about to refuse. He looked from Elmhurst to Snell. They were both regarding him fixedly. He hesitated no longer and did as he was bidden. Elmhurst felt for the switch and pressed it down. The place was illuminated with a thin, ghostly light. Martin, with the master key, unlocked four or five of the safes and swung the doors open. They were empty. Averil stood with his hands in his pockets whistling softly to himself.

"That will do," he said at last. "You say they are all empty. I'll take your word for it. Close the doors again, please."

Martin did as he was requested. He was feeling a little irritated. The American, who was watching all the time, had developed a curious expression which even Elmhurst, a man of more equable disposition, felt to be annoying. Snell, in the background, looked on and said nothing.

"I suppose," Martin remarked, "even your marvellous patent, Mr. Averil, does not stop a man from robbing himself if he wants to."

"Not a hope," Averil admitted, lighting a fresh cigar.

"Well, that's what it seems to us has happened," Martin continued, "and although we are able to show you the safes I don't see how you or anyone else can help. I have gone into the practical side of it and it would be perfectly easy to stow away six or eight or even twenty millions' worth of securities in those lockers. It is also equally easy to wrap them up in parcels and move them somewhere else when you have a secret entrance here from the bank parlour and a secret exit up into Sir Adam's house. What is this wonderful patent connected with your safes, Mr. Averil? Have they learnt the trick of returning stolen goods to their rightful possessors?"

"Not quite that," Averil replied. "Look here, gentlemen, both of you--Inspector Snell there in the corner, too. You are all facing something that seems pretty tragic to you. With me it is a matter of pounds, shillings and pence. You saw the receipt. You know what was paid to me for installing those safes."

"We do," Martin assented.

"What do you think of it as a charge--best steel, fine mechanism, all that sort of thing, a marvellous key system, but not so very many of the safes--sixteen thousand, five hundred pounds?"

Martin was sufficiently irritated to find pleasure in his reply.

"I think it is damned robbery!"

"So it would be," Mr. Averil acknowledged unruffled; "but then, you see, over ten thousand of that was what we charged for the patent."

"Show us what patent there is about those things beyond their very ingenious lock," Martin challenged.

"I guess not," was the cool reply. "I have not made the little bit of money I have made in life going around giving my secrets away to other people. I'll tell you what I'll do. If you and Captain Elmhurst and that other gentleman in the corner will go upstairs into the bank parlour and if you will let down the trap door and give me your word not to appear again until I summon you, I will let you see exactly what my patent is."

Elmhurst was suddenly interested.

"We agree, Mr. Averil," he said. "How long are you going to keep us?"

"Ten minutes, if all goes well. Ten minutes, anyway. I'll holler for you."

"Come and knock at the bottom of the trap door," Martin Mowbray suggested.

Inspector Snell coughed wearily. The atmosphere of the place was certainly a little heavy.

"Would there be any objection," he asked, "if one of us mounted that other little flight of stairs you see and sat in the room to which it leads?"

Mr. Averil grinned.

"Inspector Bucket!" he jeered. "I congratulate you, sir. A marvellous eye for the obvious. Get up there at once. I will knock at both trap doors. I'm ready. Hurry up, please. I want to begin my little job."

They were delayed for a few minutes whilst Martin produced the keys of the door opening into Sir Adam's apartment from the ordinary Milner safe which stood in the office and handed them over to Snell. Mr. Averil, standing with his hands behind him, watched the detective climb the stairs and disappear. He watched the departure of the other two into the bank parlour. Then, satisfied that he was alone and unobserved, he approached the row of safes.

"What's this chap up to?" Martin asked his companion as the trap door fell into its place behind them.

"God knows!" Elmhurst replied, filling his pipe with thin nervous fingers. "I hate those damned cellars more than any place I have ever been into on earth," he went on savagely. "I'm not an imaginative person but I always feel that they are haunted by some devil or other."

Martin lit a cigarette, pushed his hand further back in to the recesses of the safe and drew out a small revolver. He looked into the breach and slipped it into his pocket.

"You've got a touch of nerves, Elmhurst," he remarked. "So have I. Worse than you, I think. For the last hour or so I have heard nothing but five or six greedy people jabbering and cursing about these lost millions in at the club. Down there, in that filthy place below, there is that row of empty lockers--the lost millions again. The place stinks like hell, too. It is enough, really, to send a man of ordinary mental balance a little off his head. Even Snell looks half-doped. There's a missing man, six millions gone astray, and a dead man,--all connected somehow or other with that cellar,--and it seems to me that since we have started looking for the first two and trying to understand the third, we ourselves have all gone a trifle groggy."

"You're right, Martin," his friend grunted. "You and I are like that, anyway. I'm not so sure about Snell, though. I think the fellow is a clever actor. He always looks most bored when he believes he is on the point of finding something out."

"What the devil has he found out up till now?" Martin demanded.

"I believe," Elmhurst confided, knocking the ash from his pipe, "that Snell has something up his sleeve at the present moment. Haven't you noticed that pudgy eyelid of his has crept upwards? He was looking almost intelligent a few minutes ago."

"What's this American chap going to show us, do you think?" Martin groaned. "Old Sir Adam's corpse, I shouldn't wonder, standing up like a mummy in one of those tin canisters. Oh, damn it all, let's talk common sense!" he broke off.

Elmhurst rose suddenly to his feet. He held his pipe away from his mouth and leaned forward listening.

"What in God's name is that row?"

They leaned over the trap door. From down below came the sound of a slow, thunderous knocking, something that seemed like the beat of a machine or the ticking of an enormous clock. A moment later came a rap at the trap door. Martin was the first to throw it open and descend, Elmhurst close behind him. Averil was on his way to the other side of the vault. He climbed up the flight of stairs leading to the bank house and knocked. A second or two later Snell appeared and paused, rooted on the third step, watching the opposite wall. Calm and triumphant, Mr. Averil stood with his hands in his pockets and his cigar at an acute angle between his teeth.

"Fifty thousand bucks my old dad got for this patent," he declared, "and it was worth it. Do you see what's happening, you guys?"

They all gazed at the grey coffin-shaped receptacles, which were slowly revolving inch by inch in the spaces where the apparently solid safes had been. All the time that steady beating of machinery was sounding from somewhere close at hand, a level methodical beating of metal against metal driven by some unseen force.

"They built the first of these," Mr. Averil confided with a wave of the hand towards what was happening, "in a great hangar on a deserted flying ground out West. I was a boy and I went to see it. It worked, then, all right, but I never believed anyone could make any practical use of it. You see what's happening. We are three-quarters through with it now. There's a gigantic spring I wound up in a spot you would never guess at and every one of those safes is revolving. In less than three minutes you will hear a click and they will be back in their places again, only it will be the other side of them you will see. They are double-fronted, of course.

There will be a keyhole for you to try in a minute, Mr. Mowbray. The same key. Take my advice, start at the other end this time. Open one of those safes as soon as you hear the click and they are in order. For the love of Mike don't put your hand in the space until you hear the click!"

Snell was watching, still in the background--a dumb, absorbed figure. Elmhurst was seated on a wooden case holding his head between his hands but furiously intent.

"You will hear the click in a few seconds now," the manufacturer told them. "Gosh, that's wonderful! They're all coming into alignment as level as a die. Watch! Watch, I tell you. Say, this is some miracle!"

The beating of the hidden machinery, without the slightest warning, ceased. Simultaneously there was a queer metallic click like the fusing into their places of steel joints. Then silence. There were seventeen fronts to seventeen safes all looking exactly as they had done half an hour before, except that the metal round the keyholes, which were now exposed, was tarnished.

"Now, open one of them," Averil challenged.

Martin Mowbray's fingers were obviously trembling as he inserted the key into the lock of the safe opposite to him, the one farthest from the bank parlour. The door opened as smoothly as though its hinges had just been bathed in oil. Martin's head and hands disappeared for a moment in the safe. A few seconds later he turned round with a great bundle in his hands. There was an electric light shining just above his head and he held them out.

"Thousand-pound notes!" he cried hysterically. "More than I could carry away!"

There was a sound like the sharp report of a rifle. Notwithstanding the tension of the moment, they all turned their heads. The trap door of the bank parlour had been raised and let fall. They watched the descending figure, watched with amazement that held them all for a second or two spellbound. It was Dyson who was standing there in the circle of light made by one of the overhead lamps--Dyson in his long brown coat and official hat, with a row of medals from one side of his chest to the other. In the centre of that little pool of illumination he stood drawn to his full height, a crestfallen, haggard creature no longer, a vigorous, alert man for those few moments. His voice had its old military bark.

"Drop those notes!" he shouted. "Up with your hands! I'm going to shoot the lot of you! Thieves! That's what you are--thieves! Burglars--prying robbers! Out you go!"

No one moved. Very slowly they saw Dyson's arm creep upwards. Very slowly, too, they saw Snell's figure from the dark recesses of the vault creeping along by the side of the wall. The threatening hand was raised almost to the horizontal. Martin felt a curious inability to move even a limb. He still hugged the bank notes. He still stared. All the time he was thinking of two things--Dyson was mad and Dyson was the finest revolver shot amongst non-commissioned officers in the British Army. In a few seconds--damn it, why couldn't he move? . . . And Snell, what was Snell up to? He was creeping nearer and nearer. If Dyson saw him he was a dead man. . . .

The cry of a human being in agony rang through the place. Snell had timed his leap to an inch. His knees were in Dyson's back, his fingers were round his throat. Dyson showed signs of collapse but Snell's grip never slackened.

"Come and help me tie him up!" he called out. "This man has fooled us once to-day. He has the strength of the devil. If he once gets away--"

But Dyson never got away.

XXVI

Martin Mowbray, a little wild, more than a little dishevelled, staggered rather than walked into the hotel sitting room to which Diana's menage had summoned him later that evening. She looked at him in amazement.

"Whatever has been happening to you?" she exclaimed.

"What nearly happened," he replied as she led him to a chair, "was sudden death. I used to think that life in a country town was inclined to be dull. I have changed my mind forever."

"Tell me about it," she insisted. "Quick! Or do you want a drink first? I have been amusing myself mixing these things while I waited for you."

She shook him a cocktail and poured it out. He drank it greedily.

"No man," he admitted with a faint smile, "should feel all knocked to pieces through having escaped sudden death but I confess that when I received your message not so long ago I was shivering all over."

"Have another?" she invited. "And what on earth do you mean by sudden death?"

He shook his head.

"Not for the moment, thanks. I am a different man already. But honestly, Diana, I have just escaped death by the merest fluke, thanks to that crawling little bounder in the ginger suit--Snell. He saved my life. He saved the lives of all of us. The man's nerve was magnificent."

"Mr. Mowbray--Martin!" she exclaimed. "What are you talking about?"

"It is the truth," he assured her. "The long and short of it is that Dyson went stark, raving mad with a loaded revolver in his hand, just as we had solved one of these ghastly mysteries. Even after Snell had half-throttled him it took five of us to hold him and get him away to the asylum."

"Where were you?" she cried. "What brought it on?"

"We were in the bank cellars," he told her, "and what brought it on was just this: He got the idea that we were there to rob Sir Adam."

She laughed a little hardly.

"Rob Sir Adam! Of what?"

"Oh, some five or six or seven millions--whatever it may be."

"But is there going to be any money?" she asked gloomily. "You know I really am beginning to wonder whether those are not phantom millions."

"Not on your life," was the confident reply. "I have been wondering that myself at odd times--not now. I have seen some of it. The money is all right. We have found it. Some of it passed through my hands only an hour or so ago."

"Martin!" she cried. "You don't mean it?"

"But I do," he assured her. "We have carted a few sacks of it up to the offices already. I was busy stowing away thousand-pound Bank of England notes when your telephone message came. Jove, I shall never forget it! Dyson, although he was still bound hands and feet, was yelling like a madman and my fingers were trembling so that I could scarcely grip the receiver."

She stared at him incredulously.

"You're not serious, Martin! It can't be true!"

"It is absolutely true," he insisted. "Of course, it sounds like a fairy tale, but it isn't. We have had Averil, the manufacturer of those locker safes, down at the bank. He is not giving the patent away, of course, but when we showed him those empty lockers and talked about the disappearance of Sir Adam's huge fortune, he nearly had a fit. He made us go up into the bank parlour and stayed by himself down in the vaults. Presently we heard a rumbling down below which seems to have come from some enormous piece of clockwork machinery. All those lockers were double-fronted, and when he wound up the machinery with a key they turned completely round! When the machinery had stopped and they were all in place and we opened one of the lockers on the reverse side, we found it chock full of bonds and notes! We have ten policemen guarding the vaults at the present moment. We have not finished going through the new line of safes yet but I myself have counted two million pounds' worth of War Loan and there is another heap of it, so if the old man has sent some away there is still plenty left. Then there are huge rolls of thousand-pound notes and there are bearer bonds with cumulative interest from nearly every country in the world. The long and short of it is, Diana, the money is found!"

"Aren't you a marvellous person, Mr. Martin Mowbray?" she exclaimed.

"Nothing to do with me," he answered. "It was the little man in the ginger suit who got on the track of the safe maker and brought him down."

"And Sir Adam?" she asked eagerly.

"Not a sign of him," Martin confessed. "The murder mystery is pretty well solved. The money is found. Of Sir Adam we have no single trace."

"Extraordinary," she murmured. "Now, tell me about Dyson, please."

Martin drew a long breath.

"That is the real tragedy of the whole show, so far," he acknowledged. "Dyson came down into the vault just after we had found the money and he went clean off his nut. He had put on his official coat, which is always hanging up in the bank, with all his medals, and he strode down into the place looking like a fiend. Clean off his nut--a tearing, raging madman! He had a gun in his hand and I thought we were all done for. I don't suppose you have ever heard it, but Dyson was supposed to be the finest revolver shot amongst non-commissioned officers in the Army. It is my belief that Snell saved the lives of every one of us."

"Tell me about it," she begged. "Go on, please."

"There's not much more to tell. We were all in a little group in the vault staring at the safes, when Dyson came down the stairs, except Snell, who had only just descended the flight from Sir Adam's apartment. He tumbled to it like a flash as soon as he saw Dyson. He crept along

the wall in the shadows and got behind him. Then, just as that gun was going up--and I tell you Dyson's arm was like a ramrod of steel--not a quiver--Snell crept up behind and played a Chinese garrotter's trick on him. He literally sprang onto his back, got his knees forward and his arms around his throat. The fellow was utterly helpless. He struggled, of course, and for a few seconds he seemed to have the strength of a dozen men. It wasn't any good. Snell's fingers never budged from his throat. He dropped the revolver and of course we all came into it then."

"Horrible!" Diana murmured shivering. "Somehow or other--I suppose it has all been pretty terrible, but this seems to be the first moment that anything like real tragedy has blazed up, the first moment since I looked down into the vault and saw that dead man."

"That's pretty well accounted for now," Martin explained. "Averil identified him on the spot. He had been with the firm and they sent him over to England to see Sir Adam--something about buying back the patent, or else Sir Adam had written complaining about the mechanism of the safes. Anyway, as we both know, he got into trouble on the steamer, was sent to prison, Snell traced him out, sent a wireless to Averil, who was on his way over, and the whole thing is pretty clear now. He came down here to rob the safes. He had the master key and he knew how to set the machinery working. Someone must have heard him down in the vault. The only question is--who shot him?"

There was a knock at the door and a pageboy from the hotel entered.

"You are wanted on the telephone, Mr. Mowbray," he announced. "I have put you through onto the landing outside."

"You will excuse me?" Martin asked, rising to his feet.

She nodded assent.

"Hurry."

Martin spent a few minutes outside. Diana smoothed her hair before the glass. Presently he returned.

"I don't think it is anything more than matters of detail," he reported, "but they want me back again before they close up. I think I had better hurry away, if you don't mind."

"How long shall you be?" she asked.

"Less than an hour," he promised. "I'll just see what they want, have a few words with Snell, go to the office and change and be back here at eight o'clock."

"And I," she said, "will be really domestic. I will order dinner for you."

XXVII

Martin was rather better than his word. In three quarters of an hour he was back in the hotel sitting room. Diana led him to the sofa.

"Nothing fresh," he reported. "I want you to tell me now what happened after I was obliged to leave the meeting."

"Heaps," she assured him. "I have had a few thrills on my own account. I can scarcely describe that half-hour after your uncle had read the Will."

"Nothing very pleasant, I gather," he remarked with a smile. "My dear old uncle began to tell me but he was simply dithering. I couldn't make head or tail of it all."

She pointed to the sideboard.

"I seem to spend half my life waiting on you already," she smiled. "Now you can go and shake the cocktails, bring over that box of cigarettes and I will do some talking."

He obeyed readily. Diana leaned back in her place, sipped her cocktail and began.

"Well, to begin with," she said, "I never saw such venom on the faces of ordinary human beings in all my life. My aunt, who had been calling me her pet and her favourite niece earlier in the day, really looked as though she were going to drag out one of those hideous pins from her drooping Victorian hat and stab me! As for my uncle, who kisses my hand like a courtier every night before he allows me to go to bed, he slammed the table right in front of my face and declared that the whole affair was damnable!"

"Nasty-tempered fellow, Tidswell can be," Martin observed.

"When your uncle, a few minutes later," Diana continued, "read out the clause that if anyone disputed the Will on any grounds whatsoever their share of their inheritance should be forfeited, I really thought that my father was going to have a fit. I was simply chased out of the place, you know, Martin. I couldn't go home. I couldn't dream of going to Wroton Park. I came here, took a suite of rooms for the night and telephoned to you to come and protect me."

"You couldn't have done a saner or more wonderful thing," he declared.

"Well, you are my solicitor, you know," she reminded him. "You stood up in Court and defended me only the other day."

"I have a strong feeling," he assured her, "that Providence meant me to be--"

"Well?"

"Your guardian."

"Is that all?"

"Remember," he warned her, "you made me drink this second cocktail! If I say anything--"

"Stop!" she insisted. "If you are going to say nice things to me and then try to get out of them afterwards because you were doped with alcohol I will not listen to another word. You must sit up and listen to my troubles. Of course, I suppose it's hard on all of them," she went on, as

he refilled her glass, "but it has nothing to do with me. You know the contents of the Will, I suppose?"

"Yes, I know them," he acknowledged.

"Three millions for me," Diana continued. "Poor little Diana! The rest of the estate your uncle seems to think will work out at about three million pounds. That is to be divided into twelve shares. Aunt Anna gets five of them--surely that isn't so bad?--and Mother is to get five. The rest is to pay death duties and a few legacies, but you know all about them."

Martin nodded.

"Poor old Dyson was to get a thousand," he remarked, "and all the club servants are remembered--especially Lawford. He gets five thousand, I think."

"Well, never mind about that just now," Diana insisted. "Listen, I want to ask you something."

"Go ahead."

"The day I lunched with you, when you wouldn't kiss me--did you know that I had been left all this money?"

"Yes, I knew," he told her.

"Is that why you wouldn't kiss me?"

"Of course it was," he answered. "Very good reason, too, I should think. Now I will ask you a question, young lady. Did you know of that clause in the Will in which Sir Adam decreed that if it could be proved that any one of his relatives at any time had approached him for a loan or an advance on their allowance, any sum of money bequeathed to them was to be withdrawn and go back to the estate?"

"Wasn't I a cat?" she murmured penitently. "I did know it, Martin."

"How?" he asked.

"Grandfather himself told me," she confided.

"When?"

"Oh, ages ago. It was before he gave up Lowesby Hall and we were all over there one day."

"How did it come about?"

"I wanted something, it was only a trifle, something to do with a tennis set, I think. I didn't want to play any longer with one of my cousins because he was teasing me, but I began by saying: 'I want to ask you a favour, Grandad.' He stopped me right away and curiously enough I have never forgotten his words. 'Diana,' he said, 'don't go on. I hate to be asked a favour. I shall put it in my Will that if anyone ever asks a favour of me and it becomes known that they have done so--either of money or anything else--then they are not to receive a single penny.'"

"Isn't that like the old boy?" Martin muttered.

"Well, I shall never forget it," she went on. "He wrinkled up his little face and looked at me like a monkey. Then I told him it had nothing to do with money and he was all right again."

"Well, I don't quite see--" Martin began.

"It's simple enough," she explained. "I opened that letter of Mother's to him--you all agreed that I might do that--and I found out that she was asking him to advance her allowance and lend Father five thousand pounds. I promptly tore it up. Seems to me I saved the family about a million. Was it a crime, Martin?"

He smiled.

"You did what any sensible girl in the world would have done," he assured her. "All the same, I'm jolly glad to know the truth about that letter, Diana. It has worried me more than once."

"And now, to come back to ourselves," she said. "Are you never going to kiss me as long as you live because I possess or may possess three million pounds?"

He came a little nearer to her. She decided that he had the most attractive smile and the most delightfully honest grey eyes she had ever seen.

"Diana," he said, "those things have to count, you know. Your three millions are going to make you one of the richest young women in England. I ought to consider myself lucky, I suppose, because I am able to make six or seven thousand a year--and I did kiss you, after all, you remember."

"But you won't go on kissing me?" she asked, moving a little closer to him.

He leaned down.

"There's just one way out of it, Diana," he whispered. "You could kiss me."

Some time later, when Diana had rearranged her hair before the mirror of the hotel sitting room and they were once more seated side by side upon the sofa, they became reasonable again.

"So you are really in the position of the young woman who ran away from home," he remarked.

"Well, my dear Martin," she said, "what would you have done? Everyone in that wretched room at the club was loathing me, except, of course, your uncle and Sir Theodore. Aunt Tidswell was shockingly rude to me, Mother wasn't speaking to me and at last I could not stand it any longer. Dear old Theodore stays here and he brought me down with him just while I made up my mind what to do. He will be in himself, presently, I expect."

"If we were only living in that super-civilized country, America!" he sighed. "I might ring up a Justice of the Peace, marry you while they are getting dinner ready, and drag you away from those unsympathetic and exceedingly ill-tempered relatives."

"We can have dinner, at any rate," she laughed. "I shall telephone to Wrotton Park--my maid is there--and have her bring my clothes. I won't go back again. I won't go near the house. As for Mother and Father, they can do what they like. I expect they will decide that in view of those three millions I had better be forgiven!"

"I am all for your staying here," he declared enthusiastically. "And look here, Diana, don't you go counting on those three millions too soon. You may find that you will have to start life with a poor country solicitor, after all. I don't feel at all certain in my mind that Sir Adam is dead."

"Shall I tell you something?" she asked, taking his hand in hers.

"Tell me anything you like."

"I don't really very much care. I have always wondered what these little efforts of love-making would be like and they are much more delightful than I ever dreamed or imagined. Three million pounds don't seem anything like so important. I would like not to be a burden on you, Martin, otherwise I don't mind if I ever see that money or not. I used to think I was a little different from other women. I have come to the conclusion that I'm not. I think we are all the same--when the right man comes along."

Diana returned from the looking-glass a few minutes later but this time she did not resume her seat. Two of the waiters were in the room laying the cloth and dinner was presently served. During the meal they talked a little disjointedly about the events of the afternoon.

"Of course, Mummy was not so bad really," Diana reflected. "I must see her if she calls before she goes back--or Dad. I expect they are on their way back to town, though, before now. They are getting on in life, you see, Martin, and it's rather trying for elderly people to be always short of money."

"Don't forget," he reminded her, "that if Sir Adam really has disappeared for good they will get another million or so."

"Of course," she murmured. "I hadn't forgotten that. Aunt Anna will have quite a great deal, too. The trouble of it is that they can think of nothing but my three millions. Directly they get that out of their minds they will feel better. I don't want to do anything rashly, Martin--we will talk it over later--but I daresay we might do something for the boys."

"I think you ought to," Martin agreed. "I cannot see that that old man had the right to single you out in this fashion except that you are far the nicest of the lot."

"Flatterer!" she smiled across at him.

"It is almost too obviously the truth," he rejoined. "Sir Adam always had good taste. When he used to buy pictures he never bought a wrong 'un."

"I love his Corots," she said, "and I think nearly all those odd pictures he bought in his younger days in Italy, copies of old masters, most of them, I think that they are beautiful."

"Incidentally," Martin remarked, "I met a great collector who came down to look at them years ago. He dined with my uncle and me afterwards and he told us that there was not a single one of those that was not worth three times as much as Sir Adam paid for it. What I liked about the old boy, too, was that he never mentioned money in connection with a single picture he ever bought. It seemed as though in his mind they belonged to another world."

"How interesting!" she exclaimed. "I daresay there was a great deal about him that we didn't really understand. I shouldn't have thought that he had a single ideal in his life."

"There is one thing," Martin said gravely, "that we must guard against--you, especially, Diana. We only got this permission to look at his Will in case it might help us to find where the money was. We have found that now, all right, but the Courts won't accept Sir Adam's disappearance as being proof of his decease for a long time to come. The old gentleman might turn up again at any moment."

"I only hope he will," Diana agreed. "It made me sick this afternoon to hear how everyone took his death for granted. What do you think yourself, really?" she asked curiously.

"I don't allow myself to think," he acknowledged. "I am a lawyer, you see, and the last thing a lawyer ought to harbour in his mind is a presentiment. Anyhow, we will talk about it later."

She leaned across the table and patted him on the cheek.

"I don't think we will," she whispered.

XXVIII

In a very comfortable but ornate sitting room somewhere in the lower regions of the County Club three people were seated at a round table playing cards. In a high-backed chair, dressed in a dinner suit which was the facsimile of one which still reposed in his rooms at the bank house, sat Sir Adam. Opposite to him was a woman of pleasant appearance wearing a well-cut black gown--a woman possibly forty years old, who had preserved without difficulty or the aid of cosmetics a very agreeable exterior. By her side, still wearing the clothes in which he had served dinner to one or two loiterers, was Lawford. His whole attention was apparently concentrated upon the cards he was holding. Sir Adam's bright eyes were fixed upon him. There was a trace of that sardonic smile at the corner of his lips.

"Now, come on, Lawford," he exclaimed in his rather shrill falsetto voice. "Your wife has made it two shillings. What about you?"

"I shall raise it another sixpence, sir," Lawford declared at last. "Half-a-crown."

Sir Adam's smile faded. He became thoughtful. He drew out his underlip and studied his cards once more.

"Mrs. Lawford," he said finally, "I hate to be ungallant but I am forced by circumstances to raise you the limit, that is, another shilling. Three and sixpence to 'see' me, if you please. Three shillings and sixpence, Mrs. Lawford. What do you say to that?"

"I have never once caught you bluffing, Sir Adam," she observed respectfully, "and a one-card draw is a serious affair. I think, though," she added, looking at her small heap of counters and drawing out two, "that I shall 'see' you, Sir Adam."

Lawford threw in his cards. Sir Adam sat upright in his chair, a gleam of anticipatory triumph in his eyes.

"What a pity that red-haired chump of yours is not here, Lawford," he grumbled. "There *would* be only three of us! Mrs. Lawford, I am very sorry to take your money but what do you think of this?"

He laid down four fours. Mrs. Lawford indulged in a slight grimace.

"Well, what I think is that I have lost my money, and there's the shilling fine," she said, throwing down her cards. "I was not bluffing, either. I had a small full house."

"Not good enough," Sir Adam declared, rubbing his hands together. "Not good enough, Mrs. Lawford. That will be three and sixpence, your stake; and a shilling fine for fours is four and sixpence. I shall want that half-crown of yours, Lawford, and a shilling fine, if you please."

They passed the money. Sir Adam gathered it in. He looked at his little pile with satisfaction.

"I am sorry Johnson is not here, sir," Lawford remarked, shuffling the cards.

"So am I," Sir Adam grunted. "That would have meant another shilling."

"I simply could not take him off duty," the steward continued. "Sir Theodore was still in the club when I came down."

Sir Adam chuckled. Lawford commenced to deal and the former picked up his cards one by one.

"There are so many pleasures denied to us in life," he grumbled. "Why could I not have been there whilst they discussed my Will? I have an idea, Mrs. Lawford," he went on, "that they said very rude things about me--all except Diana. That girl is worth the whole lot of my wife's or my own relations put together. I have not lived in the world much for the last twenty years, Lawford, but I know what men and women are like. She's a good girl, Diana. Those others are a set of money-grabbers."

Lawford placed the cards between his wife and Sir Adam. Sir Adam cut, Lawford thrust out an ante of threepence and Sir Adam, after some consideration, straddled.

"I have had a good win," he said, "so I will give you all a chance. A shilling to play.. .. Were there any remarks in the club, Lawford?"

"No one knew exactly what was going on, Sir Adam, and of course not a soul was in the room at any time. We could hear their voices sometimes, sir. I heard Lady Pengwill's, for instance, more than once and Lady Tidswell seemed very much upset."

Sir Adam chuckled, but tapped upon the table.

"Don't take my mind off the game," he begged. "The time has come with me, Lawford, when I can think of only one thing at a time. I straddled. It is the dealer's bet. Mrs. Lawford, what about it--you're dealing?"

She looked at her husband.

"One card, please."

She gave it him and turned to Sir Adam. Sir Adam was very thoughtful indeed. Twice he seemed to change his mind, then at last he discarded two.

"I will take two."

He picked them up one by one and placed them in his hand without remark.

"The dealer," Mrs. Lawford observed, "takes one."

"And," Sir Adam reminded her, "the dealer bets."

Mrs. Lawford hesitated. She added threepence to the shilling in front of her.

"Two shillings," Lawford announced. "I'm raising you ninepence, my dear. What about you, Sir Adam?" he added respectfully.

Sir Adam threw in his cards with a disagreeable little grunt.

"I wish that fellow Johnson would hurry up," he said. "Three makes a poor game of poker."

Mrs. Lawford "saw" her husband, and having the better two-pairs drew the money. Sir Adam pushed across his shilling grudgingly.

"I wonder--" he began.

He stopped short. There was a very quiet but distinctly audible tapping upon a small section of the mural panelling. Sir Adam held his head on one side and listened in astonishment.

Lawford rose slowly to his feet. He was evidently petrified. Mrs. Lawford watched her husband in some concern.

"Is it my fancy," Sir Adam whispered, "or is that knocking at the private door, Lawford?"

"It is the private door, Sir Adam," Lawford admitted, and the little colour which he possessed had faded from his cheeks. "I don't understand it. Save myself, no one has used that passage--no one has a key to the concealed entrance."

The knocking was repeated, this time a little louder.

"Shall I open the door, Sir Adam?" Lawford asked. "I am afraid if anyone has got as far as that, the existence of the room must be known to him."

"Most annoying," was the muttered reply. "Well, open it if you must, Lawford. I am in your hands."

The steward still hesitated.

"If the person who is there has found his way so far," he repeated, "he must know of the existence of the room. Tell me, Sir Adam--what are your wishes with regard to an intruder?"

Sir Adam seemed to have relapsed into a motionless and inanimate figure. His eyes were half-closed. For a moment or two he seemed to be indulging in deep reflection. Then he opened his eyes.

"What is there to be done, Lawford?" he demanded mildly. "Nothing in the way of melodrama. You would not suggest that, I am sure. The person who has found his way to that door must be admitted."

For the third time the summons came. Lawford was half way across the room when they heard a click from the invisible keyhole. Slowly a panel was pushed from the other side. A man stood upon the threshold and took a step into the room, closing the door behind him. He looked around apologetically. There was a rather dazed look on his face and his left eyelid had drooped so that his eye was almost concealed.

"I'm sorry," he said, "but this had to come. Will you introduce me to the lady and to Sir Adam, Lawford?"

Lawford was not the man to lose his head. He obeyed at once.

"The lady is my wife, who assists me in the management of the club, Mr. Snell," he said. "Sir Adam, this is Inspector Snell of Scotland Yard. He has been down here now for eight or nine days investigating the matter of the--er--accident in the vault, the--er--temporary disappearance of papers from the bank safes and your own--you will pardon me, Sir Adam--your own disappearance."

Mr. Snell bowed to the lady, he bowed also to Sir Adam and approached a little nearer to the table. The latter looked at him in frank wonder. Mr. Snell's ginger-brown suit was a little out of shape and his hair was very unkempt indeed. He conformed to no one's preconceived idea of a Scotland Yard sleuth.

"God bless my soul!" Sir Adam exclaimed. "And you are the man who has found me, are you?"

"It was not difficult, Sir Adam," Snell told him; and the pleasantness of his voice did something to redeem his exterior. "As soon as I had the plans of the original building and compared them with the plans of the renovations, I began to see how easily a secret passageway might be arranged."

"But tell me," Sir Adam asked, "what gave you the idea that I might be in the club all the time? Why didn't you believe like the others that I had disappeared in that motor car Lawford had waiting outside the warehouse next door?"

Snell smiled.

"To tell you the truth, sir," he explained, "I made a few enquiries myself about that motor car and I didn't find the information I received from the warehousemen or the clerks of the adjoining establishment exactly convincing. I never had very much faith in that motor car. Almost from the first, the probability of your being still in the club suggested itself to me. It was what you might call the detective instinct."

"Did you know," Sir Adam enquired, "that Lawford had this passage arranged for me seven years ago?"

"I was not sure about the date, sir," Snell replied, "but I thought it might have been done somewhere about the time that the renovation and rebuilding of the club took place. Directly I had the plans it became simply a question of cubic measurement and a reasonable amount of architectural prescience."

Sir Adam's grimace was the gesture of an under-bred schoolboy.

"I cannot think why they put a man like you on to such a job," he said peevishly. "Tell me, was any reward offered for my discovery?"

"I fear not, Sir Adam," Snell replied. "If you would like to offer one yourself, sir, I shall be very glad to claim it."

Sir Adam grinned.

"Not one penny," he rejoined in a tone of disgust.

"A reward has been suggested, sir," the Inspector told him, "in fact, Mr. Martin Mowbray was very keen about it."

"At what amount did my relatives value my body dead or alive?" Sir Adam enquired.

"I think the amount was to have been a thousand pounds," Snell confided.

"For a thousand pounds cash I should have disclosed myself at any time within the last twenty-four hours," Sir Adam sighed fretfully. "However, what are you going to do about me now, Inspector? Can we not come to some arrangement? I am exceedingly comfortable where I am."

"There is only one course open to me," Snell replied. "I am an employee of Scotland Yard and it is part of my duty to return you to your relatives and to your normal position in life."

Sir Adam reflected. He leaned back in his chair, produced his pipe from his pocket and began slowly to fill it.

Snell coughed apologetically.

"Sir Adam--" he ventured.

"Eh?"

"I have answered all your questions. Would you permit me to ask you a few?"

Sir Adam lit his pipe.

"No harm in asking."

"Why did you disappear?"

There was a peculiar smile on Sir Adam's thin lips. He jerked his thumb upwards.

"Ask the old gentleman outside."

"The statue?"

"Yes."

Snell stroked his chin.

"I don't think he would tell me."

"Neither shall I."

"People think you were afraid of something," Snell suggested cunningly.

"More fools they!"

"Why did you prepare this hiding-place?"

"Always meant to come here some day. Best spot on earth. I hate my relations--I hate the bank. I say, Mr. Inspector--"

"Yes, sir?"

"Here I am and I admit that you have discovered me. You say that there was to have been a reward of a thousand pounds paid out of my estate. What if I handed you two thousand pounds in brand-new thousand-pound notes? I've got heaps of them here and over at the bank if you knew where to find them. What if I paid you that for failing to discover me and you pulled a long face and went back to Scotland Yard and looked for some other elderly gentleman who was missing?"

Very slowly that left eyelid slipped up a little higher. One saw then that a smile was a very transforming thing to Inspector Snell. His eyes twinkled. Sir Adam's eyes also twinkled in response.

"Is it a deal?" the latter asked.

"It is not, sir," the Inspector regretted, shaking his head. "No, Sir Adam, that cannot be done. But I will promise you this--I will see you through this little affair in any way agreeable to yourself if you will answer a few more questions."

"Let's hear the questions," Sir Adam suggested.

"Where is all the stuff you brought away from the bank--the notes and bonds and securities which you and Dyson used to spend your evenings making into brown-paper parcels?"

"Where do you suppose it is?" was the contemptuous reply. "In my bedroom here. The whole lot would have been here by now if that burglar hadn't blundered in."

"I mustn't forget about that burglar. Who shot him?"

"Dyson. Who do you suppose did? I told him to."

"When?"

"Pretty inquisitive, aren't you, eh? Never mind. It was about ten o'clock the night before I disappeared. Dyson was just leaving when we heard the trap door fall in the parlour. We opened up my end and there he was coming down the steps with a bunch of keys in his hand. Dyson had brought his gun. The man's hand went into his pocket as though he had one of his own. 'Shoot him!' I said. And Dyson did. Killed him dead," Sir Adam chuckled. "Served him right, too."

"And you moved in here the next day?"

"Didn't fancy it over there any more," Sir Adam grunted.

"You left a lot of stuff behind," Snell reminded him.

"Quite safe," Sir Adam grinned. "I'm the only one who knows the patent of the safes and we had just about cleared out all that was visible. Shan't answer any more questions."

"I shall endeavour to show my gratitude," Snell announced. "I will hold my tongue for the immediate present, concerning my discovery. I will allow you to make your re-entry into the world in your own way. You can do so as though it were an entirely voluntary action."

Sir Adam was silent for a moment or two but there was a happy twinkle in his eyes. He reflected more deeply. The twinkle grew brighter. His features relaxed.

"That is a serious proposition?" he asked.

"I am a man of my word," the Inspector assured him.

Sir Adam glanced at the clock.

"Lawford," he said, "the hour has arrived for my evening drink. Give me my whisky-and-soda. Perhaps the Inspector would join me."

"I should be delighted," was the prompt response.

The Inspector accepted a generous whisky-and-soda and a cigar. He bowed to Sir Adam and Sir Adam bowed to him. Lawford, at a gesture from Sir Adam, opened a pint bottle of champagne--Veuve Clicquot '21--which was standing upon the sideboard. Mrs. Lawford's glass was also filled. They all three bowed to one another.

"I have an idea!" Sir Adam exclaimed suddenly. "Inspector, your arrival was opportune. Do you happen to be acquainted with this little game we are playing--poker?"

"I have wasted more time than I should like to admit playing poker," Snell confessed.

"Join us," Sir Adam begged with enthusiasm. "Three is a ridiculous number. Lawford, place a chair for the Inspector. Count out some chips. Three-penny ante, one straddle, half-a-crown limit. Does that suit you, Mr. Snell?"

"A most interesting game," the latter replied, drawing his chair closer to the table and producing the money for his chips.

"My deal, I think," Sir Adam announced. "Your ante, Mrs. Lawford. Your straddle, Inspector--that is if you feel like it."

Snell felt like it and obliged. The game proceeded. It proceeded until midnight. Then Lawford rose unwillingly to his feet.

"Sir Adam," he said, "you will excuse me, sir, but your room is ready. We have never played after midnight."

Sir Adam sighed regretfully.

"Your husband is right, Mrs. Lawford," he agreed. "You will excuse an early party, Inspector. You played the game well, sir. Your presence, although unexpected, has given us great pleasure. I think that you owe the bank four shillings."

"Four shillings it is," Snell admitted, passing the money over.

"If you don't mind," Lawford suggested, "I should like to take you back into the club by the normal route."

"As you please," Snell acquiesced. "To tell you the truth, notwithstanding all the help I had from the plans, it took me a long time to puzzle them out. Of course the one-two-three cross-and-slide panel we have known about at the Yard for several years now. That was easy. But there were other points about the work which were distinctly good, Lawford. I pray that you will always remain on the list of the lawkeepers."

"You need have no fears on that score, Inspector," the steward assured him. "I have too much respect for the law ever to transgress. I must acknowledge, though, that ever since you asked to have a room allotted to you in the club I have been uneasy in my mind. I did my best to conceal my apprehensions--I didn't even mention them to Sir Adam--but I have been worried, Inspector. At three o'clock this morning, when you came down to the reading room, I was listening. I very nearly showed myself then but it didn't seem worth while. If you were on the right track we were done for, anyhow."

"Just a word before you go," Sir Adam begged. "Come over here, please. Let me tell you this, Mr. Snell. You are a decent fellow and with practice you would soon make a very fair poker player."

"Thank you very much, sir."

"Look here," Sir Adam continued, "you made me a sporting offer when you disturbed our little game here. You said that since I was discovered and since you would have to announce the fact if I did not make a voluntary reappearance, you would allow me to do so in my own way?"

"Certainly," the Inspector agreed. "Provided you do not unduly delay the matter."

"To-morrow?"

"Quite agreeable to me."

Sir Adam held out his small thin hand.

"When my Will is properly read out under the usual conditions, Inspector," he confided amiably, "you may find a slight token of my regard. Good night, Inspector. Give me your arm, Lawford. Good night, Mrs. Lawford. Sorry to have robbed you all. Four and sixpence I won, I think. Sixpence your wife owes me, Lawford, on that last hand."

"I will place the amount upon your dressing case, sir," the steward promised.

XXIX

It was Mr. Walter Clumberleyes, a highly respectable insurance agent and stock broker of Norchester, who, on the following morning, started the reign of terror which for a brief period of time completely broke down the sedate and tranquil atmosphere of the County Club. He approached the door of the reading room at about five minutes to one, having the pleased air of a man who has accomplished a good morning's work and is looking forward to a few minutes' contemplation of the daily paper before he deals with his cut from the joint with vegetables, cheese and whisky-and-soda. He reappeared from the room within thirty seconds with a demoniacal howl upon his lips which rang through the whole place and up to the roof--the cry of a man in mortal terror. His rubicund complexion had paled, his air of assurance vanished, his rather important walk become a staggering travesty of progress. He reeled into an umbrella stand, caught his foot against the edge of a mat and fell over on his side. A member who was hanging up his hat when the violent impetus of Clumberleyes' backward progress nearly sent him flying turned angrily round.

"What the devil--" he began and then stopped.

The small pageboy, who was halfway up the broad staircase in terrified flight, hung onto the banisters and looked down.

"He's got a fit," he called out at the top of his voice. "That's what he's got. It's Mr. Clumberleyes. He's got a fit. Hear him!"

Mr. Clumberleyes staggered to his feet, neglecting to gather together the remnants of his smashed pince-nez. He was still breathing hard. Two members hurried out from the lavatory still drying their hands on towels. They rushed over towards their breathless friend.

"What on earth is the matter, Clumberleyes?" someone asked. "Are you ill?"

Clumberleyes pointed to the door of the room from which he had just made so dramatic an exit. It was absolutely apparent that for the moment he had lost his power of speech. One of the two men, with a towel still in his hand, strode bravely across the hall and opened the door of the reading room. He stood there peering in. Five seconds later he had slammed the door and was zigzagging across the hall in bewildered fashion.

"My God, did you see that?" he cried out to no one in particular.

"Did we see what?" his companion demanded. "What's wrong with you, Mason?"

Mason could only point dumbly at the reading room. His friend pushed past him. He, too, opened the door gingerly and looked in. A carefully dressed, shrunken-looking old gentleman was seated in the easy chair which had become notorious during the last ten days, with a pint of champagne by his side, a glass in his hand and a wicked smile upon his lips as he turned his head. Once more the door slammed. They all crowded round the last man who had staggered out, but he seemed to have retained more possession of his senses than his predecessors.

"Is everybody mad here?" Frank Hewitt, a prosperous boot manufacturer demanded. "What's happened to the room?"

"Go and see," the last person who had ventured in gasped.

Mr. Hewitt was a big man and he knew no fear. He pushed past them and opened the door. He looked at the little figure in the chair and his jaw fell. The grin had become almost diabolical. A quivering hand held up the glass of champagne. Mr. Hewitt was a man who never hesitated. He half-fell, half-sprang back. Once more the little group was broken up. Mr. Clumberleyes, who had had the most time to get over the shock, made a great effort to pull himself together.

"I don't believe in ghosts," he cried, "and I have broken my pince-nez. That's either the Devil sitting in old Sir Adam's easy chair, or it's Sir Adam himself."

Everyone made a movement as though towards the door. Everyone paused. They all looked hopefully towards Martin Mowbray, who had just run lightly up the steps and was gazing at them in amazement.

"What's wrong?" he asked quickly.

"It's the old man come back--or the Devil."

"What--Sir Adam?" Martin exclaimed.

"Go and see," someone suggested.

Martin hung up his hat, opened the door of the reading room and closed it again behind him. The shock was almost as great to him as to the others, for there was no doubt at all about Sir Adam's presence or that there was something portentously sinister about the contortion of those lips. Nevertheless, he disregarded every suggestion of the supernatural and walked on towards the chair.

"Sir Adam!" he exclaimed, studying to control his voice. "Glad to see you back again."

Sir Adam seemed a little disappointed.

"So I can't frighten you like the others," he remarked. "You are the first man who has not had one glance at me and bolted out of the room squealing. Yes, I am back, Martin. Doesn't it look like it?"

He imbibed a sip of his wine and set down the glass.

"Martin," he went on, and for a moment there was something almost pitiful in the fading of that smile, "I have come back. It is not quite the fun I hoped. Listen, pass me that pen and ink and a sheet of paper."

Martin did as he was bidden swiftly. Someone opened the door an inch or two and then closed it again.

"Come right up to me," the old man begged. "Hurry! Take this down:--

I--ADAM BLOCKTON--of sound mind, hereby add as a codicil to my Will a legacy of ONE THOUSAND POUNDS to Inspector Snell of Scotland Yard who had the wit to discover me and the good sense to grant my simple request.

Sign it as witness, Martin."

"You sign first," Martin enjoined, thrusting the pen between the shaking fingers.

Sir Adam did as he was told. Martin signed as witness.

"Is that legal--all right--binding?" Sir Adam asked eagerly.

"Of course it is," Martin told him. "I'll guarantee that, Sir Adam. We ought to have another witness, but no one would ever dispute it. Why are you in such a hurry?"

Sir Adam looked out of the window.

"Nasty look in the old man's eye this morning," he whispered. "I don't think he's glad to see me back."

"He's all right," Martin reassured him. "Here, let me fill up your glass. You haven't half drunk your wine. It'll do you good."

Sir Adam's fingers were trembling.

"No," he said, "I don't think I'll drink any more, Martin. Tell me, was there much of a row when your uncle told them about my Will?"

"A hell of a row," Martin acknowledged.

"And Diana--was she glad?"

"She's only human. She was disgusted with the others. She couldn't help being pleased for herself. She's not a hypocrite, you know, sir."

"She's about the only human being I really respect, except my friends downstairs," Sir Adam muttered slowly. "You can tell her that from me, Martin. Do you know what is going to happen to me?"

"You're going to finish that wine and come and have lunch with us all, sir," Martin declared. "We're not going to bother you about your disappearance. We're only glad to get you back again."

Sir Adam slipped a little farther down in his chair. Martin always fancied that the thin fingers grasped his faintly.

"I'm going to die, Martin," he groaned. "That's all. See that the funny little man with the crumpled brown suit gets his thousand pounds."

"I'll see to it," Martin promised. "But look here, sir--"

Even as he spoke he knew that it was hopeless. Sir Adam had completed his disappearance.

THE END

[The end of *Sir Adam Disappeared* by E. Phillips Oppenheim]